

# Southwestern outlasts Roxana 28-24 in hard-fought battle

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**ROXANA** — It had been a tough go for both **Piasa Southwestern** and **Roxana's football teams** during the 2016 campaign. Both had been eliminated from Illinois High School Association playoff contention by the time they met up for the season finale Friday night.

In a hard fought and hard hitting game in which both teams played very well, the Piasa Birds held off the Shells, 28-24 at Charlie Raich Field. It was the kind of a game that was a good as anyone would wish to see

“I’ll tell you what, for two teams that weren’t going into the playoffs, I think we gave everybody a little bit of entertainment tonight,” **Southwestern coach Aaron Fricke** said. “We knew it was going to be close the whole time; every year, they’re a strong football tea, but it was. It was a heck of a battle.”

“That was a good football game, definitely,” said **Roxana head coach Pat Keith**. “We couldn’t get some key first down that we needed, they played well defensively at the end, so yeah, we didn’t get the result we wanted, but I’m still proud of the kids.”

The game's opening drive set the tone for the evening's proceedings, as the Birds took the opening kickoff and drove 67 yards in seven plays. Junior quarterback **Caleb Robinson** hit senior wideout **Michael Nolte** for a 22-yard completion, and later Lucas Kaiser for 32 as the key plays. Kaiser went up the middle from two yards out to give Southwestern a 6-0 after just over three minutes. A two-point conversion pass was broken up in the end zone to keep the score where it was.

The Shells first possession started out very promising, as Joey Johnson and Wyatt Kirkpatrick on big runs that took the ball deep inside Birds territory. But two losses and a false start penalty helped stall the drive, and Southwestern eventually took over on downs.

After forcing a punt, the Shells' offense resumed their powerful running game in the next possession. Kirkpatrick went 13 yards up the middle on the third play, followed by a well-executed counter play that sprang Johnson for 22. Junior quarterback Marcus Hartnett hit Riley Ripper for 19 yards when Ripper made a big catch, and Michael Cherry went for 12 around left end. Johnson went around the opposite side for a four-yard touchdown to tie the game, then gave Roxana the lead on a two-point run 8:17 left in the first half to make it 8-6. The drive took 80 yards in 11 plays, taking 3:52 off the clock.

It was important for the Birds to respond quickly, and they did after forcing a Roxana three and out. A 17-yard run by junior Davante Simmons set up one of the game's most important plays. Nolte took a handoff and went off tackle for a 65-yard touchdown run with 3:18 left in the first half. Kaiser ran in a two-pointer to give Southwestern a 14-8 lead, one that they would never relinquish.

"I think at the beginning of the game, getting the first touchdown was big," Fricke said, "because when we start out letting the other team score first, our heads drop. So we got that momentum early, and I think that when we responded when they took that lead 8-6, had that long 65-yard touchdown run, that got everyone excited on the sidelines."

The momentum kept going the Birds' way on Roxana's next possession. Southwestern recovered a fumble on their own 22, the game's only turnover, and with 2:22 left in the first half, started a 78-yard drive that extended their lead. Robinson hit Kaiser with a pass good for 22 yards over the middle, then avoided being sacked to gain 10 on a nice run. On a fourth and five situation, Robinson hit Nolte with a six-yard pass on the sideline, then hit him again up the middle for 12. The duo connected for a third time for 28, and Robinson hit Kaiser over the middle for a five yard TD pass with 13.4 seconds left. Robinson himself went up the middle for the two-point convert to make the halftime score 22-8.

If anyone thought the Shells would stoop playing hard after that, they were sadly mistaken. Cherry took the second half kickoff back to the Southwestern 24, and from there, a determined Shells offense went to work. Despite losing Johnson to an ankle injury on the first play from scrimmage, Kirkpatrick and Chase Nasello picked up the slack brilliantly with nice runs, and Hartnett hit Cody McMillan, one of the seniors playing his final game for Roxana, on a 16-yard touchdown pass. Despite a false start flag on the two-point try, Kirkpatrick jaunted around the left side for a successful convert, and it was 22-16 with 8:58 left in the third.

“I challenged our kids at halftime not to quit,” Keith said, “and our kids played their butts off.”

On the next possession, Simmons started the Birds’ drive with a 28-yarder up the middle; later Robinson hit Kaiser on a 12-yard pass play. Robinson then somehow escaped being sacked by the Roxana defense and hit Nolte for 18 yards, and climaxed the drive when he hit Jack Little on a 14-yard toss, Little making a nice over the shoulder grab for the touchdown. A two-point pass was incomplete, but the Birds increased their lead to 28-16 with 3:56 left in the third.

The Shells, to their credit, kept coming. Cherry went up the middle for 12, Nasello did the same for 10, and Kirkpatrick ran off tackle for 11 and up the middle for nine on four consecutive plays, then Hartnett called his own number on a naked bootleg around left end for a 14-yard touchdown. Nasello went up the middle for the two-pointer to make it 28-24 only 1:49 from three quarter time.

The Shells had three chances to take over the lead in the fourth quarter, each on long drives. The Birds’ defense, however, held each time, despite Roxana’s offense making good plays. The last stop came with 3.8 seconds left when a Hartnett pass went incomplete, preserving the win for Southwestern.

“We just couldn’t score that last touchdown to get us over the hump,” Keith said, “but I’m very proud of my kids.”

The Birds, who end the 2016 season at 4-5, will lose a total of 15 seniors, but will return the most numbers of underclassmen in the history of the program, something that Fricke is looking forward to.

“Absolutely,” Fricke said when asked about the returnees helping the program take a step forward. “This year, we started three, four sophomores on the offensive line, our quarterback’s a junior, almost all of our receivers. We have some studs that we’re going



to miss next year, no doubt. But throughout this season, we played a lot of underclassmen, and significant playing time in big games, so that's going to carry over into next season.

"I'm so excited for these kids tonight, I'm about to start crying again," Fricke said with a laugh. "because I'm so happy the way they held on at the end. Boy, I'll tell you what, I'm so proud of them."

The Shells lost only four seniors from their team that finished 2-7 on the year. The underclassmen gained very valuable experience that will help them in their 2017 season.

"Yeah, definitely I think that'll help," Keith said. "Those guys didn't have any experience coming in this year, so they have a year of experience, and yeah, we're going to miss those four seniors for sure. But hopefully, we'll have a great off-season lifting and doing things in the summertime and the off-season in the winter and spring, and we'll come back ready to play."



