

Whipps' pick helps lead Southwestern to season opening 22-6 win over Roxana

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ROXANA — It was an unexpected defensive struggle for most of the game. And of course, it turned on a big defensive play.

Tanner Whipps returned an interception 96 yards for a touchdown late in the third quarter that turned the game around for Piasa Southwestern, helping spark the Birds to a 22-6 win over Roxana in the season opener Friday night at Charlie Raich Field.

The first half ended up scoreless as defense ruled the day.

“You know what? The first half was one of the craziest defensive battles that I’ve seen,” said Southwestern coach Aaron Fricke. “Because we usually haven’t held teams to a small amount of points. And we brought in a new defensive coordinator this year, and he’s totally changed the culture. And tonight, it was on display; the defense carried us that entire game.

“Fortunately, the offense at the end did their part,” Fricke continued, “We grinded the ball down the field.”

Roxana’s defense also played well, but the offense did have some struggles with untimely penalties.

“I don’t think we played very good offensively for us,” Shells coach Pat Keith said. “We didn’t play as well as I thought we could of. I thought our defense played really well for three-and-a-half quarters.

“And I’ll be honest, that ball that got returned for a touchdown was a bad call on my part,” Keith also said. “We were driving the ball, obviously, running the ball pretty well, had a penalty, it was third and 12, we threw the pick for the touchdown. That was a big tide change of the game, I thought.”

That first half was a very tough defensive struggle, as both the Birds and Shells gave up ground very grudgingly. Both teams were able to move the ball fairly well at times, though, but the defenses stiffened. Southwestern had the best chance to score late in the half, after an interception was returned to the Roxana four. The Birds fumbled on the next play, however, and the half ended scoreless.

The third quarter started the same way, with defense ruling the day. On Roxana’s second possession of the half, the Shells used a very good running game with Michael Cherry and Chase Nasello carrying the load. But after a penalty that made it third and 13 on Southwestern’s 16, Whipps stepped in front of Marcus Hartnett’s intended receiver,

picked off the pass, and had clear sailing 96 yards for the touchdown with 8.3 seconds left in the term. A two-point conversion run by quarterback Dakotah Corby was good, giving the Birds an 8-0 lead.

The pick six was Whipps' first career interception, and it couldn't have come at a better time.

"The funny thing is, we talked about it in the huddle," Fricke said, "A couple of years ago, he started since he was a sophomore. He had a game where he dropped three interceptions, and has never caught one since. His first career interception as a senior, as a three-year starter, ends up being the biggest play of the game, takes it all the way back for a touchdown. That was amazing."

To the Shells' credit, they went on a nine play, 62-yard touchdown drive on the very next possession. Wyatt Kirkpatrick and Cole Liley took turns carrying the ball with good runs, with Cherry completing the drive, scoring on an eight-yard jaunt down the far sideline with 7:58 left in the final term. A two-point run failed, leaving the score 8-6 in favor of Southwestern.

"For our kids, the good thing about them is that we kind of got knocked down a little bit, we came back and scored on that last scoring drive to come back in it. Didn't get the two-point conversion, but a nice scoring drive. I was pleased with that"

Undaunted, the Birds came back with a drive of their own, going 80 yards in 12 plays, mostly on the ground. Bobby Smith and Davante Simmons shared the work on the drive, aided by Caleb Robinson. Smith scored on a seven-yard run with 2:17 remaining, and a two-point conversion pass was good to up the lead to 16-6

After another interception, Southwestern put the game away with Robinson going around end three yards into the end zone in the final minute. The kick was no good, making the final 22-6.

"Like I said, the defense played really well," Fricke said, "Some penalties at the beginning, some red zone turnovers, but you got to work through the kinks in week one, and I think that was obvious from both offenses."

For the Shells, who host Pana next Friday night, there's plenty of work ahead for their offense, but all the mistakes made are correctable.

"Definitely," Keith said. "We shouldn't have off-sides penalties with our receivers and our backs, and that's part of the problem. . .but I was pleased. We played hard. We just got to get better."

The Birds host Litchfield next Friday, and for Fricke, the opening win is a milestone for him.

“Since I’ve been here, we’ve never won week one,” Fricke said. “never started 1-0. And it was weird to come back here where we left off, and it was tough. Playing these guys, it going to be like that every time. So, I’m very proud of the kids and the way they stayed in that game.”

