

Dominating second half sees Carrollton top Sesser-Valier in first round

by John Hough, Sports Writer
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SESSER - Nick Flowers could tell his team was going to bring it in the final two quarters of the game during halftime.

After all, his playoff record in the past seven years suggests he's a master at finding ways to win ball games early in the playoffs.

Three touchdowns and a shutout by the defense in the second half propelled the Carrollton Hawks to a 37-14 first round victory over the Sesser-Valier Red Devils in Sesser on Saturday afternoon in the IHSA Class 1A playoffs.

"In the second half I felt like from the get-go we dominated both sides of the ball and special teams," Nick Flowers said. "I saw in the boy's eyes at halftime that we're going to be a four-quarter team today and we're going to take care of business. Very happy with today's performance."

The seventh-seeded Red Devils finished their season at 7-3.

The Hawks seeded tenth, move to 7-3 and will get a rematch against the two-seed Camp Point Central Panthers at Carrollton High School next Saturday at 1:00 p.m. The Panthers outlasted the Hawks 40-32 a week ago in the last game of the regular season. Coincidentally, Carrollton hosted Central last season in the second round as well and won 22-20.

Quarterback Hunter Flowers scored on three rushing touchdowns and threw for two more. He finished 18-for-29 with 283 passing yards.

Both teams traded turnover on downs to start the game, and then Eli Gunter stripped and recovered a fumble from Flowers at the Hawks 32-yard line. On the next play, Reid Basso connected with Chris Eubanks who was wide open over the top to put Sesser-Valier on top 8-0.

Basso finished with 95 yards and was 8-for-19.

Carrollton was 0-for-2 with no first downs on their first two drives, but Flowers and the Hawks would dig deep.

“It’s all about keeping the composure, and our defense stepped it up when they needed to,” Hunter Flowers said. “Our line got the job done, and I just had to keep my composure.”

The Hawks responded with a 3:34 drive capped by a Hunter Flowers 4-yard touchdown and a two-point conversion tied the game late in the first quarter.

On a third down and seven, Byron Holmes picked off the first of three interceptions on Basso and returned it 18 yards. On the very next play, Flowers lofted a pass downfield to Nathan Walker, who caught it, broke a tackle and was off to the races for a 46-yard touchdown catch to give the Hawks a 16-8 lead. That was one of Walker’s eight receptions with 153 yards and now has 14 touchdown catches for the season.

“He’s a great receiver, and I’m very lucky to have him,” Hunter Flowers said. “He can do things a lot of receivers can’t do, and it’s a great feeling whenever he does .”

With 3:43 left in the half, the Red Devils grounded and pounded their way downfield while mixing in a couple of passes. With time running out in the half, running back Jayon Malone took a double-reverse handoff, rolled to his left and hit Eubanks in the end zone with 3.9 seconds on the clock.

However, the Hawks got what turned out to be a crucial stop on the two-point conversion by denying Gunter’s run attempt at the one-yard line.

Sesser-Valier had the opportunity to take the lead after receiving the kickoff, but after two first downs the Hawks forced a punt and wouldn't get close to scoring for the rest of the game.

Carrollton held the Red Devils to 152 rushing yards and their feature back, Malon to 83 yards on 18 carries. Overall, Sesser-Valier gained 310 yards of offense.

"I want to give a lot of credit to our linemen," Holmes said. "They had some big backs that could run the ball real physical. They absorbed the blow-up front, and we came and wrapped them up so they couldn't go anywhere."

"We talked at halftime and said our defense the ones holding us back," Hunter Flowers said. "Even though we were up two at halftime, we could've been up a lot more, but our defense playing fundamental ball. If we come out here and play fundamental ball, then we could get up big on them. Our defense stepped up and shut down their run game."

The Hawks took what the Red Devils gave them in their nickel defensive setup with screen passes that got first down after first down.

Flowers scored on a 1-yard run to give Carrollton a 24-14 lead and then connected with Holmes on a 67-yard screen pass for a touchdown. Holmes broke two tackles patiently read his blocks before he burst away.

"We knew that they were bringing pressure. They're blitzing off the edge, so we knew our screens were going to be there," Holmes said. "Our linemen opened it up and blocked well downfield."

Holmes made another big play in the fourth quarter by blocking a punt inside the Red Devils 10-yard line. That set up a 9-yard touchdown run by Flowers.

This is the seventh season in a row Carrollton have reached the playoffs and every time they've won their first-round game. For the seniors, this was the ninth playoff game they've been involved with since their freshman season. Flowers believes the teams past postseason experiences played a factor in the victory.

"To be quite honest I feel like our playoff experience helped today with the momentum in the second half," Nick Flowers said. "Our boys knew that coming into the second half once we got the momentum swing on our side it going and going. We were stopping them on defense and kept trying to throw some deep balls to throw the dagger."







