

Fourth Quarter Comeback Sends Shells To State Quarterfinals

by Nathan Tucker, Sports Reporter
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ROXANA - Throughout their unbeaten regular season, the Roxana Shells didn't face too much adversity. Occasional slow starts, occasional mental mistakes, and silly penalties have given the Shells some problems at times. But the games have been fairly straightforward, with Roxana leaning on their rushing game to score quickly and run up big points totals.

Saturday was a different story, and with their backs up against the wall, trailing by two touchdowns late in the ballgame, the Shells took adversity head-on and came out victorious.

Roxana won 48-47 over the Spartans of St. Joseph-Ogden and kept their State dreams alive.

“A lot of times when you talk about facing adversity, it can fall on deaf ears when you don’t actually face adversity,” said Roxana head coach Wade DeVries following the game. “(St. Joseph-Ogden) didn’t flinch in the first quarter when we got up, they came right back at us.”

As DeVries alludes to, Roxana took an early 13-0 lead with two rushing touchdowns, one from Evan Wells from short range, and an 87-yard burst from Andrew Ellis, where the highly sought-after running back showcased his elite speed to get to the edge and down the sideline for six.



Roxana’s defense, usually stifling, had real struggles slowing down the St. Joe-Ogden offense. The Spartans mixed quick passes with an option run game, a more complex offense than most the Shells have seen in 2023. The Spartans mixed playcalls leading to

their first score, a Justice Wertz rushing TD from about 20 yards out to make it 13-7 before the end of the first quarter

When asked if he had seen a team as proficient through the air as St. Joe-Ogden, Roxana's Wade DeVries answered "Sure as hell not us. Breese Central is probably the closest thing we see to that type of offense. They've got the athletes on the perimeter and a quarterback that can sling it a bit, and they're pretty physical up front. (St. Joseph-Ogden) is physical, man."

Physicality is part in parcel of Roxana's success, often bullying their way to big rushing yard totals by dominating the line. That dominance wasn't there today, and the Shells offensive front wasn't creating the running lanes that have made their running backs so dominant all year.

St. Joe-Ogden took a 14-13 lead after a touchdown pass from senior quarterback Logan Smith, who made great plays all day to find holes in the Roxana defense. Comfortable in and out of the pocket, Smith made a habit of finding receivers and giving the Shells coaching staff fits.

Smith's next touchdown pass was a floated ball to the front-left pylon that receiver Tanner Siems ran under and caught in the endzone to give the visitors an eight-point lead.

After one Roxana drive stalled after an intentional grounding call set up a fourth-and-a-mile scenario, the defense would hold the Spartans and force a punt. The Shells capped the drive with Evan Wells' second touchdown of the afternoon, and gave it to him again for the two-point conversion to knot the game back up at 21-21.

It took St. Joseph-Ogden just moments to take the lead again, when Smith connected with Tim Blackburn-Kelley down the sideline on a big 50-yard touchdown play. In rebuttal, Roxana relied on their senior running back Terrel Graves, and he scored from 10 yards out with around a minute left in the half. Roxana's extra point was blocked, keeping the visitors ahead by one heading into halftime.

It's not the first time a team has made the Shells sweat in the first half, but it's the first time that a team has come to Charles Raich Field in 2023 and felt truly comfortable. Like Roxana, the Spartans of St. Joe-Ogden are a heavy, physical team, even if they aren't the ground-and-pound offense that the Shells are.

"This is what games like this are," DeVries noted. "When you get to the (round of) 16, eight, four, every game is going to look like that."



With all the confidence in the world, the visiting Spartans came out firing on all cylinders, marching down the field, leading to a Logan Smith scamper around the Shell defense for six. When Roxana needed a response, they didn't have it, turning the ball over on downs.

St. Joe-Ogden took a two-score lead with another Logan Smith passing touchdown, this time finding Coy Taylor beyond the Shell defense. It was 41-27 after the extra point, and Roxana had just 15 minutes of football to save their season.

On the ensuing kickoff, Terrel Graves attempted to receive the ball over his shoulder while backtracking, and the ball bounced off his fingertips and out of bounds at Roxana's own four yard line.

Not an ideal way to start the late comeback. Moments later, Andruw Ellis fumbled, and St. Joe-Ogden recovered. The Shells were down two touchdowns, and the Spartans had all the momentum heading into the fourth quarter.

Ellis made many forget about his fumble by capping off a Roxana drive to bring them within a touchdown with 10 minutes to play. A score set up by a big pass from Chris

Walleck to Aidan Briggs, Walleck had more pass attempts than usual Saturday. Pass attempts, obviously, to gain yardage, but to also force the Spartan defense to think twice before sending the cavalry.

In their more dominant games, Roxana didn't throw the football much, if at all on some occasions. In a very different game, they relied on Walleck and their playmakers to make big plays.

Not all of those playmakers are on offense.

On the next St. Joe-Ogden drive, the near-perfect Logan Smith made his first big mistake. An underthrown pass was swooped out of the air by Max Autery, who hustled all the way home for a pick-six that tied the football game. It was only Logan Smith's third interception all season.

"Players make plays," coach DeVries said. "And that was Autery making a play right there."

The Shells got the ball back with four minutes left on the clock after a big Nick Newton sack forced fourth and long. Momentum had flipped back in favor of the home side in Shell Country.

The Shells were patient on their drive, patient for their offense at least, and took nearly three minutes off the clock before giving the ball to Evan Wells who followed his blockers for the late go-ahead touchdown. The Shells had made the comeback, but now had to hold on for exactly 78 more seconds of football.

Unsurprisingly, St. Joe-Ogden trusted the arm of their senior quarterback, who came into Saturday's contest with 2,311 passing yards on the season. Smith found open receivers on two quick plays to get the Spartans in the red zone with 30 seconds on the clock.

Smith connected with Tanner Siems again on a similar front-ylon play to the one that produced a touchdown in the first half, but Siems was just short of the goal line, setting up a first-and-two-feet play with 13 seconds left.



Smith rolled out and found an open man in the endzone for the touchdown with just seven seconds left on the clock. It was 48-47. St. Joe-Ogden head coach Shawn Skinner had to make the toughest call he's made all season, and decided to go for two points and the win, instead of trusting his senior kicker Joe Frasca to tie the game and force overtime.

The Spartans lined up in the gun, and the play was blown up by the Roxana defense, coming up big when their backs were truly against the wall, and their own end zone. The Roxana sideline, players, fans, school staff, cheerleaders, band members, etc, was rapturous, and rightly so.

"If we were in the position that they were in, I was going for two, 100 percent," said Roxana's Wade DeVries of his counterpart's call to go for the win late. "I'm gonna trust my guys to go out there and get three yards... I know the adage is, you go for the tie on the road and go for the win at home, but I'm gonna go for it (in the same situation), and I'm probably going to give the ball to Evan Wells."

If the Shells hadn't faced adversity before Saturday, they passed their first test with flying colors.

“Adversity for us (before Saturday) was being down 15-6 or down 20-16 at halftime,” said DeVries. “And then we just flipped the switch. We knew that wasn’t going to happen against (St. Joe-Ogden).”

With the win, the Shells now move to the 3A quarterfinals, where they will take the show on the road against the Olympia Spartans just southwest of Bloomington/Normal, where the Shells hope to be playing in the 3A State Championship later this month.

Said DeVries of his now 11-0 football team following the win: “We’re going to fight and we’re going to battle regardless of circumstance.”

