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Sports

Abbeville Run Game Too Much For Vikings

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Abbeville running back Sammy Head (5) makes Emerald's Arnez Gray (22) miss en route to a fourth-quarter touchdown. (Staff photo by R. Shawn Lewis)

Abbeville running back Sammy Head (5) makes Emerald's Arnez Gray (22) miss en route to a fourth-quarter touchdown. (Staff photo by R. Shawn Lewis) For a half, Emerald High School's football team played inspired football, giving Abbeville a glimpse of what the Vikings could do. But for the duration of the game, Abbeville showed why it's the premier team in Region 1-AA. Behind the workhorse effort of Panthers fullback Dureal Elmore, who rushed for 232 yards and three touchdowns on 33 carries, and an explosive punt return by Gavagio Enwright, Abbeville ran away with a 43-22 region victory at Emerald's Frank Hill Stadium.

The victory clinches the region championship for Abbeville (9-0, 4-0), which hosts Liberty next Friday in the regular-season finale, and the Panthers extended their regular season winning streak to 31 games. Early in the game, however, the Panthers trailed 13-0 and Emerald's charged sideline eyed an upset. "They have good coaches and good players, and when you put that combination together like that, you'll have a heck of a football team," Abbeville coach Jamie Nickles said.

Nickles and Emerald coach Mike Clowney agreed the game's momentum shifted early in the fourth quarter on a punt return. With 3:03 left in the third quarter, Emerald's Jeremy Tommie

connected on a 26-yard field goal to cut the Panthers' lead to 29-22. After exchanging possessions, Tommie's punt appeared to likely force the Panthers to drive a long field.

But Enwright shot up the middle of the field, broke a tackle and raced down the Emerald sideline for a 92-yard touchdown. After Mason Taylor's PAT, Abbeville led 36-22, and the Vikings' once-jubilant sideline was silenced. "They had the momentum trying to pin us deep," Nickles said. "That was an athlete making a play there. I'm going to hug his neck as soon as I can."

Clowney, whose Vikings fell to 3-6 overall and 2-2 in the region, saw his team's two-game winning streak snapped. He said the reaction to the punt return will have to change if the Vikings hope to find postseason success. "You could see our guys kind of go into a lull," Clowney said. "When we get into the playoffs, bad things might happen. We just have to respond to them."

While Abbeville was able to pull away during the second half, Emerald's first-half performance was enough to serve notice. Emerald quarterback Zane Newton, who rushed for 52 yards and passed for 131, scored with 10:38 left in the first quarter on a 31-yard touchdown run that included him plowing through a vicious Abbeville tackle for the early lead.

Abbeville's ensuing drive was halted after one first down. But Taylor mishandled the punt, and Emerald's E.J. Wright scooped up the loose ball and rumbled 17 yards for a touchdown to give the

Vikings a 13-0 lead with 7:10 left in the quarter.

The first-quarter lead sent a raucous, yet small Emerald crowd into a frenzy, but Nickles said he was pleased with his team's composure. "You think about the next play," Nickles said. "Our offense came out, drove the ball down the field and scored. That's what we had to do. We try to think about the next play."

The Panthers responded with a nine-play, 53-yard drive that ended with Elmore's 4-yard touchdown with 3:17 left in the first quarter. Emerald's next drive resulted in a 24-yard field goal from Tommie, while Abbeville cut Emerald's lead to 16-13 with 8:38 left in the second quarter when quarterback Jimmy Thackson scored on an 18-yard option keeper out of the shotgun.

Tommie hit a 45-yard field goal to extend Emerald's lead to 19-13 with 7:23 remaining in the first half, but Abbeville's A-Bone offense ground out an 11-play, 51-yard drive culminated by Elmore's 3-yard touchdown run off left tackle to give Abbeville a 22-19 halftime lead.

All total, Abbeville rushed for 337 yards. Along with Elmore's 232 yards, Thackson rushed for 80 yards on 18 carries, while Sammy Head, who had a 6-yard touchdown run in the fourth quarter, had 22 yards on five carries. "(Emerald's) defensive front is really stout," Nickles said. "Give (offensive coordinator Mark) Smith, our offensive line and Dureal some credit for finding some holes in there," Nickles said.