

THE INDEX-JOURNAL

Sports

Emerald-Liberty Notes

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Published: Saturday, October 18, 2008 12:51 AM EDT

The Emerald High School football team gave up 143 points in its first three games of the season, so going into halftime of its past two games with commanding leads has been a pleasant turnaround for the Vikings. Over the past two weeks in wins against Crescent and Liberty, Emerald has gone into intermission leading by a combined score of 36-6.

Against the Tigers last week, the Vikings managed to hold them scoreless throughout the second half with just 92 total yards. Emerald was even more effective Friday against the Red Devils, giving up just 30 yards rushing in the third and fourth quarters. The only points the Vikings gave up in the second half were on a safety in the waning seconds of regulation. "We've focused on two things. We've talked about executing and we've talked about finishing," Emerald coach Mike Clowney said. "I think the guys, when they come in at halftime they say "You know, we've done a good job. Let's come back and execute.""

The Vikings' strong second-half performances have all come with their meltdown against Mid-Carolina last season fresh in their minds. Emerald led 14-0 at the half in that game, but ended up losing 28-21 in double overtime in a game that kept them out of the Class AA playoffs. That loss has helped the Vikings in retrospect. "You start having some experiences that you can draw from and move forward on," Clowney said.

ACHING AGAINST THE PASS: As strong as Emerald's defense has been over the past two weeks, its secondary continues to be a weak spot, particularly this week against Liberty.

The Red Devils threw for 80 passing yards, to just 55 by Emerald. Three of Liberty's four completions were for 10 yards or more.

Liberty quarterback Jacob Black started the game for the Red Devils and completed two passes for 21 yards. Backup Justin Smith, who proved more effective in the option, was brought in and completed a 14-yard pass to Nathan McQueen in the second quarter, which led to the Red Devils only touchdown.

Black returned in the fourth quarter and after back-to-back incomplete passes, found Smith on a 46-yarder down the left sideline with seconds remaining.

The Vikings' entire defense has been decimated by injury, but the secondary in particular has been weakened with defensive backs A.J. Jones and E.J. Wright moving to linebacker this season. "We're still giving up one or two plays in the secondary, so we're just going to continue to try to tighten that up a little bit," Clowney said.

NOT JUST A QB: Senior Zane Newton, slated to play quarterback before a shoulder injury in Week 1, proved Friday that his strong performance defensively last week against Crescent was no fluke.

Newton made a number of tackles on defense once again for the Vikings and also showed some skill on special teams, returning a kickoff for 19 yards and blocking a punt in the first quarter following Liberty's second drive that put Emerald on the Red Devils' 7-yard line. "Zane is one of those guys that we always felt was a defensive football player. He's been wanting to play and he's getting the opportunity," Clowney said. "I wouldn't say he's been a surprise (on defense), but he's been a big motivator for us. "He's a quarterback and one of the big things missing on defense was leadership, so he kind of plugs that hole a little for us."

Giving the Vikings good field position in situations like that was what Liberty coach Curtis Middleton considered the difference on Friday. "They were playing on a short field the whole first half," Middleton said. "They blocked a punt or we'd fumble the ball. Giving a short field -- that's been our Achilles' heel all year."