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Vikings Pummel Liberty 38-8

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Emerald's Zane Newton (10) and Denzel Nicholson (4) talk strategy on a rainy homecoming Friday night. The Vikings recorded their second-straight win, blowing out Liberty 38-8 to keep their playoff hopes alive. (Staff photo by T.M. James)

Just a few weeks ago, the Emerald High School football team's defense looked on course for one of its worst seasons, but two straight blowout victories have turned that around. The Vikings rolled easily to their second straight win with a 38-8 homecoming victory over Liberty on Friday night at Frank Hill Stadium. Coming off last week's win over Crescent last week, Emerald's back-to-back victories, by a combined score of 74-8, are the Vikings' first since September 2006, and all but lock up at least a fourth seed out of Region 1-AA in the Class AA state playoffs next month.

The Vikings, who equaled the past two seasons' win total of three games Friday, have not gone to the postseason in coach Mike Clowney's three-year tenure. This time last season, Emerald lost a double overtime game to Mid-Carolina that kept the Vikings out of the playoffs, giving them some added motivation Friday. "Last year, it's the same deal," Clowney said. "We win (the homecoming game) then we're pretty much in. I think this gives us a little bit of breathing room as far as we say, 'We know we're in, so let's go back and keep working on the small things.'"

Liberty was the fourth Wing-T offense the Vikings have faced this season, and Emerald has now won three of those matchups. The Red Devils threw in a wrinkle in that they utilized the option frequently, but the Vikings adjusted and limited Liberty to just 124 yards on the ground. The Red Devils also crossed midfield just once the entire game, on an eight-play drive in the second quarter with Emerald ahead 13-0. The Vikings' defense ended that drive, however, on fourth-and-2 at their own 2-yard line. "The biggest thing with that is I think we tackled a lot better today," Clowney said. "(The option) is one of those things we tried to continue (working on)

even if we don't see it often. "I thought our guys did a pretty good job containing it today and taking away the pitch when we could."

Junior defensive lineman Kent Kelley said the option took a few plays to get acclimated to before the Vikings found their rhythm. "I was a little confused at first, but as the game went on, we stepped up big and it got easier," Kelley said.

Emerald was able to benefit offensively from strong field position on nearly all its drives in the first half. The Vikings began all but two series in the first two quarters on Liberty's side of the field and capitalized with three touchdowns, two of which were scored by senior running back Dee Parks on runs of 7 and 22 yards. Junior quarterback Billy Pooser scored Emerald's first touchdown on a 1-yard run in the first quarter.

Carrying a 15-point lead into the second half, senior Jared Norman ensured the Vikings maintained control with a 4-yard touchdown run that came off a pair of consecutive 23-yard rushes by Parks in Emerald's first drive of the third quarter. "Jared Norman and Dee Parks did a good job as far as moving the football," Clowney said. "The other big key was the short field. "We didn't have to make as many big plays offensively and didn't have to move the ball as far."

Senior A.J. Jones sealed the win with a 62-yard punt return in the third quarter, one of a couple big plays, along with a blocked punt in the first half by Zane Newton, that have been big part of Emerald's turnaround. "Those are things that are important when you talk about getting your football team over the hump and kind of moving forward," Clowney said. "You've got to make plays like that. "To be able to make plays like that to where we gave our offense a short field was a big key for us this and last week."