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# VARSAITY REPORT

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*by Jamey Andrews*

“Western Regional Champions!”

Perched atop the highest elevation on campus, Hibriten’s Jeff Storie Memorial Stadium seems a fitting location to host a playoff championship contest. Reaching the field at the school’s summit could be likened to reaching a pinnacle of athletic success, a mountain climb to the top where awaits a coveted reward. Nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains and surrounded by woods, the backdrop lends itself to an inspiring and motivational entrance. The Panthers of Hibriten slowly emerge from the woods inciting a fanbase to a climactic roar. The team fed on this motivational surge and parlayed it into an undefeated regular season and three playoff games. Hibriten had every expectation to continue their championship run and “on paper” the task seemed feasible. Yet across the way, marked by an entrance of equal fanfare from a spirited cheer squad and a dedicated RaiderNation, the South Point Red Raiders took the field determined to halt the impressive run of the host and continue their own remarkable season. The Raiders disregarded any perceived intimidation fostered by undefeated records and notable statistics. With their workmanlike attitude, the Red Raiders struck early, hit hard, and never let up en route to a decisive 26-0 thrashing of the “other” number one seed in the western region. South Point advanced to the NCHSAA 3A State Championship Game as Western Regional Champions. The Raiders gained four more quarters and perhaps more importantly an opportunity to bring home to Belmont a well-deserved state championship trophy!

Hibriten won the toss and deferred the option, giving the South Point offense the game’s initial possession. The Raiders made good on the opportunity. Beginning from their 29 yardline, the Red ‘O’ pounded out the yardage. In three plays South Point reached midfield. The ground attack would be challenged but the offensive line never stopped fighting. On third and seven from the 33, quarterback Scottie Lee connected with Nick Muse who then carried tacklers to the fifty. The three plays, although coming so early in the contest, had perfectly set the tone for the Raiders effort, positive yardage on the ground and an effective passing game. Staying with the plan, South Point used five more plays to reach the Panthers 30 yardline. From there Lee lofted a spiral over the outside shoulder split end Ray Grier. Grier caught the pass in stride at the five and his momentum carried him into the endzone for six. Kicker Thomas Lempereur’s PAT split the uprights and the Raiders took the 7-0 lead on the opening drive. The punch likely jarred the Panthers as in their 14 game undefeated streak they had compiled 5 shutouts and 3 games in which they surrendered a single touchdown. The Raiders were just getting started. On the ensuing possession, Hibriten, like South Point, also began play at the 29 yardline. The Red ‘D’ saw that it got no better! In fact, they intended quite the opposite. A false start on first down cost the Panthers five yards. A muffed pitch on the first and fifteen play was recovered by South Point. The Raiders appeared to have quick control of the game, up 7-0 and with the ball at the Hibriten twenty. But a third down pass had a low trajectory and was picked off at the Panthers three. Still fired up, the Raiders defense came back onto the field. A pitch that went back into the endzone was handled but then, so was the ball carrier! The Red ‘D’ swarmed the Panther, slamming him down for the safety. Linebacker Nathan Hamilton led the charge and was joined

by safety Mario Brandon and defensive end Lawrence Haley. Defensive tackle Payton Graham and cornerback Nick Farmer were also in position for the play. The Raiders lead advanced to 9-0 with just under six minutes gone in the contest. The teams would trade punts to close out the first quarter and South Point would continue a drive from their 42 yardline into the second stanza.

South Point began with a first and ten from the Panthers 31 to start the second twelve minutes. The Red 'O' had built momentum with their solid play. Carries by Lee and Brandon and a remarkable catch by Grier, using his taller frame to snatch the ball from two defenders, just in bounds, moved the ball to the Hibriten five. From there, Lee faked a pitch and cut up the middle untouched into the endzone. The Raiders pushed the advantage to 16-0 with 10:34 remaining in the half. In just under 14 minutes of play, South Point had accomplished what nine\* other teams could not in an entire game against Hibriten, put 16 points on the board. (\*Along with the 8 games of a touchdown or less, one Panther opponent scored 14 points in a contest.) The Raiders sustained the momentum they had established on both sides of the ball. A three-and-out defensive stand forced a Hibriten punt and South Point started a drive from their forty-one. In two plays the Raiders crossed midfield but then a false start penalty threatened to stall the push. Then on third and ten Lee hit Muse with a short pass and Muse then pitched back to a trailing Brandon. The hook and lateral picked up the necessary yardage and the drive continued but would nearly stall for a second time. South Point would pick up another first down on a fourth and ten pass completion from Lee to Muse but the drive finally stalled at the Panthers 4 yardline. Lempereuer trotted on to attempt a 21 yard field goal. The snap was perfect, the hold was textbook, and the kick was true. The Raiders special teams had figured into the scoring by putting 3 more on the board. South Point led 19-0 with 4:14 remaining. On the ensuing possession the Red 'D' allowed a net 4 yards before forcing another punt. The Raiders ran out the remaining 1:42 and the teams headed to the locker rooms.

With the ball to begin the third quarter, the Panthers looked to shift momentum. But the Raiders defense was too stout and a quick three-and-out suggested that the second half would mirror the first. Hibriten punted and South Point took over with good field position at their forty-four. The Raiders drive burned time off the clock but facing a fourth and twelve from the Hibriten 15, the Red would settle for a field goal try. The 32 yard attempt was on target but just shy of the mark and the score remained 19-0. The ball was moved to the 20 yardline and the Panthers took over. A scrambling quarterback managed the Panthers first offensive first down of the game coming with just under 8:00 minutes remaining in the third. Desperation helped drive Hibriten to the Raiders 12 yardline and their first scoring threat. On fourth and four, cornerback Nick Gange and defensive end Nolan Cochran burst through the line to apply the pressure and force an errant pass. South Point took over and began a drive that would carry over into the final quarter AND emphatically vault them into the championship game!

Faced with a third down conversion to begin play in the final stanza, the strength and stamina of the Red offensive line took its toll on the Panthers defense. Lee called his own number and bounced off right tackle into the open field. Forty-eight yards later the Raiders were awarded a first and ten at the Panthers 26 yardline. South Point stayed on the ground, moving the chains and the clock. From the 3 yardline, Alexander bulled in for the touchdown and the

26-0 final advantage. The scoreboard indicated a seven minute (7:04) wait before the Raiders could celebrate a return to the state championship game. Hibriten picked up three first downs on their last drive but the possession became just that...their last drive...of the season. South Point took over on downs, crushed a number one seed, and grabbed the Western Regional Championship!

Climbing to the summit of Hibriten's campus was only the beginning of the trek to the pinnacle of athletic success. Once on the field, the South Point Red Raiders eagerly awaited the arrival of the Panthers as they emerged from the woods. The Big Red wasted no time and after a thorough, four quarter thrashing, the Panthers retreated to the woods...and to the offseason. South Point advances to the NCHSAA 3A State Championship at BB&T Stadium next Saturday. The remarkable run continues as the Raiders gain four more quarters. In fact, they've gained the four biggest quarters of the season!

Go Get 'Em, Red!

### **Notable Facts and Thoughts**

The state championship game will be a rematch of last year's contest as the Raiders will face Rocky Mount. The Gryphons advanced with a triple overtime victory over Havelock (34-33). The tale of the tape suggests that Rocky Mount, with 2 losses over the season, is capable of putting a lot of points on the board, but are equally likely to give up points in bunches. Of course, once a team reaches the final game of the season, records and stats mean nothing. It's all about matchups. It's all about determination. It's ALL about to happen!

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