

Game Recap

Bear Down! Red Raiders Eliminate Pisgah Bears, 27-24

The year was 1991, the team was the Buffalo Bills, the distance was 47 yards, 8 seconds on the clock, and the call – “No good!” “Wide right!” And with that, the New York Giants stormed the field in Tampa Stadium, celebrating a Super Bowl XXV victory! The year is 2021, the team is the Pisgah Bears, the distance was 39 yards, 2 seconds on the clock, and the call – “No good!” “Short!” And with that, the South Point Red Raiders stormed the sidelines, celebrating a 2nd round playoff victory! The nail-biting 27-24 win over Pisgah ended the Bears’ season and sends the Red Raiders on to a 3rd round tilt with the familiar, and hungry, Jaguars of Forestview. Pisgah entered the playoffs with a 9-1 record, earning them the top seed in the 3A West bracket. South Point, as is their custom, paid no attention to the seeding or their own underdog status. Rather the Red Raiders went to battle with the Bears and proved the matchup to be much closer than anticipated given the rankings. In fact, both squads were nearly identical in their dependence on powerful ground games. Pisgah benefitted from a pair of long throws downfield that sustained drives, but the majority of the battle was fought in the trenches, sparking numerous momentum swings. The contest had eight total lead changes beginning with the initial 3-0 Bears lead from an opening possession field goal. But the Big Red never backed down! And their effort kept the season alive!

South Point won the toss and deferred the option, sending the Red ‘D’ onto the field to begin the game. Pisgah began from their 20-yardline, and did so often, as K Charles Birtwistle routinely drilled his kickoffs into the endzone. The power of the Bears ground game stemmed from their decisions to hit the hole and keep moving rather than waiting for the lane to clear. It was also a benefit to the attack that a stocky, quick, and strong running back was set in the backfield. Already built low to the ground, it was a challenge for the defense to keep from arm tackling the “fire plug” up high. And much like South Point’s ground game, first hits did not typically bring down the Bears’ ball carriers. After a 1st down punch up the middle, it was the Pisgah quarterback who was responsible for the biggest gain on the initial drive. Taking the snap and immediately racing to the outside, he managed to spin out of tackles and speed across midfield. The Red ‘D’ stiffened and allowed no further advance than the twenty-four. The ensuing 41-yard field goal on fourth down split the uprights, giving Pisgah the early advantage, 3-0. The drive of over five minutes left 6:49 on the first quarter clock and the Raiders were ready to answer. Return specialist Will Ross hit the wedge and set the Red ‘O’ up at the 34 yardline. His return would give a glimpse of what would become a high standard for special teams play throughout the game. The Raiders went straight to work. RB Cam Medlock took a pitch on South Point’s opening offensive play, and sped across midfield to the Pisgah thirty-five. Continuing to pound, and after a pair of fourth down conversions, RB Tyson Riley burst through from one yard out to give the Raiders the 6-3 lead. Forty seconds remained in the first and with no flags yet to be thrown, the stage was set for ball control type of contest. The Bears carried their next possession into the second quarter.

A drive of eighty yards milked 5:18 off the clock (plus the last 00:40 of the 1st) and ended with a 1-yard plunge for a 10-6 lead for Pisgah. South Point punched back. Return Specialist Ashton Harris scooped up a short kick and carried across midfield to give the Red 'O' excellent field position at the Bears' forty-eight. A mix of runs by QB Elijah Phiffer, Riley, and Harris behind the push of the O-line drove the Raiders to the Pisgah two. Facing fourth and goal the play was sent in. Riley off right tackle was the thrust that put South Point back ahead at 13-10 with 19 seconds to go before the half. From the shotgun formation, Pisgah kneeled out the remaining time and the teams headed to the lockerrooms.

With the ball to begin the third stanza, South Point looked to create distance in the advantage. And after a kick out of bounds gave the Raiders the ball at their thirty-five, the chances looked positive. But an errant pitch on fourth down in Bears territory halted the South Point drive and ended the threat. Pisgah managed to drive to the Raiders fifteen. From there, a run to the outside netted six and the extra point put the Bears back on top, 17-13 with 4:20 remaining in the third. The Big Red carried the game into the final 12:00 with the ensuing possession.

Through three quarters in the 2nd round playoff contest, it was obvious that time of possession and matching scoring opportunities would be a storyline of the contest. It had shaped up that the first team to make a defensive stand would likely advance. Down to begin the fourth, South Point needed to match the score and try to turn the clock in their favor. With 2nd and 10 to begin the quarter, the Raiders continued the ground attack. Moving to the Pisgah four, Phiffer faked a handoff to Riley, cut back through the over-pursuit and stepped into the endzone. "Going out there, we focused on making the right read", said Phiffer. Concerning the flow of the game he added, "It all comes down to who makes the (fewest) mistakes is going to win the ballgame." His decisions and the error-free drive put the Raiders back on top 20-17 with 7:21 remaining. The Bears answered with an uncharacteristic drive of less than three minutes for the game's seventh lead change to go ahead 24-20. The clock read 4:25 when the ball was placed on the tee for the ensuing change of possession. It read 4:12 after RS Ashton Harris hit the wedge, shed off a couple of touches and outran the field to the endzone! Asked about the play that swung momentum so quickly after the Bears score and put the Raiders up, Harris admitted that it was an adrenaline rush. "I saw every hole, that's all I can say", said Harris. He added that the intent is to "hit the wedge". His hitting the wedge was now the difference in the contest! Birtwistle's PAT completed the eighth lead change and put the game into the hands of the Red 'D'. The Pisgah sideline had burned a pair of timeouts earlier in the half and was left with one remaining as time wound down. With the ball and time on the clock, the Bears clung to their game plan to attack on the ground and try to hit at least one big play in the air. A perfectly timed leap and tipped pass by DB Micah Stowe helped keep Pisgah honest. The defensive play served to keep the Bears from challenging through the air for the remainder of the possession. The ground game managed to gain just outside the South Point twenty-one. The stingy and hard-hitting Red 'D' forced the Bears to adjust their plan. Saving their one timeout, Pisgah opted to play for the tie and pin their hopes on an overtime victory. With 2 seconds on the clock and lining up for the

potential, tying, 39 yard field goal, South Point called timeout. It was notable that the timeout was called before an attempt to snap the ball, assuring the long snapper, holder, and kicker had no opportunity for a “practice” kick. The teams realigned. The snap was made. It was just off target forcing the holder to catch it slightly high and to his left. The kicker had started his approach but stutter stepped with the timing thrown off. He generated as much power as he could muster from essentially a standstill and the result was – well - the Red Raiders advance!

No facet of the game of football can be discounted as never being a contributor to the outcome of a contest. It’s why practices are not strictly for offenses and defenses. Special teams figure greatly in many games, especially in games where teams are evenly matched and the stakes are high. While it was the Raiders defense that stopped the advance of the ball and forced a field goal attempt that would have prolonged the contest, it was the kickoff return (Special Team) that will ultimately receive much credit for the victory. The reality is that it took an entire team effort. And the support of an unparalleled coaching staff and fanbase ensured the Red Raiders would continue their tradition of playing with all-out effort. The heart of the team was on display and the reward is another opportunity to play. Another opportunity to slam the Jaguars!

Go Get ‘Em, Red!

Notable Facts and Thoughts

Forestview heads to Lineberger Stadium. NCHSAA 3A Playoffs 3rd Round. ‘Nuff said.