

Game Recap

Smoky Mountain Pain; South Point Wins Fight, 42-35

Apply any moniker of choice, dog fight, fist-fight, etc., the reality is, playoff football is a fight for survival. And given the trials of the regular season schedule, South Point cautiously welcomed the “new” season. A fresh, 0-0, start would surely pump life into the Big Red despite the sudden death format of post-season play. The NCHSAA State Playoffs began last Friday night and the #13 seeded Red Raiders were invited to the Great Smoky Mountains for a 2AA First Round matchup against the #4 seeded Smoky Mountain Mustangs. Higher seeds are rewarded with home contests and this generally equates to an advantage in the playoffs. And while a greater disparity between the seeds (#13 vs #4) should signal a more favorable matchup for the home team, the pairings did not take into consideration the “size of fight in the dog”! South Point went toe-to-toe with the Co-Champions of the Mountain 6 2A Conference and came away with a 42-35 victory that sends the Raiders to the Second Round and the Mustangs to the corral.

Smoky Mountain received the opening kick and quickly showcased a formidable running attack. A sturdy offensive line and a couple of speedy, “fire plug” running backs would prove a challenge to the Red ‘D’. But the South Point defense fought hard and forced the game’s first punt. The Mustangs won the early field position battle when the ball rolled and was downed at the South Point one yardline. The Raiders managed some positive yardage but were forced to turn the ball back over to Smoky Mountain, giving the host a short field for their second possession. Starting in Raiders territory at the forty-six, the Mustangs struck on the fifth play of the drive with a 27-yard run for the score. The snap for the PAT was muffed, holding the score at 6-0, favoring the home team. South Point mounted a similar drive on their second possession, beginning inside their thirty yardline. Moving effectively on the ground, the Raiders faced a 3rd and 7 just outside the Mustangs’ thirty-five. QB Will Rhinehart lofted a pass downfield that was hauled in by WR Ray Rose. Rose was marked out of bounds just before the goal line, but the play set the Red ‘O’ up with 1st and goal. A Rhinehart dive was inexplicably marked short and the first quarter ended on the play with the Raiders trailing.

On second and goal to begin the second and the ball resting inside the one, FB Naseem Jones barreled over for the equalizer. K Carson Smith’s PAT was drilled, and South Point took the 7-6 lead. Recharged, the Raiders Defense flexed some muscle and pounded the Smoky Mountain ‘O’ line and ball carriers. Drawing a holding penalty that aided in snuffing the drive, South Point forced the Mustangs second punt of the game. The Raiders third possession evened the field position battle as South Point began at their thirty-eight yardline. RB Omari Hunt carried to midfield on first down. RB Hunter Hogue dove to the Mustang’s forty-eight. Then King and Rhinehart swapped positions with King taking the snap. Following his FB Jones, King slid through an opening and sped forty-eight yards for the touchdown! South Point grabbed momentum and the 14-6 advantage. The Raiders’ punches were starting to land. A Mustangs’ punt on the following possession suggested that South Point had taken solid control of the

contest. That is, until a fumble on the Raiders' next possession handed the momentum back to Smoky Mountain. The Mustangs took advantage. A nine yard run and two-point conversion evened the score at 14 with 4:59 remaining before the half. The turnover proved ultimately to describe the narrative of the game. South Point would hand momentum to Smoky Mountain (the Mustangs never really "took" it) but would then immediately reclaim the push. From the Raiders' thirty-seven on the ensuing drive, Rose took a pitch from Rhinehart around the right side and blazed a trail 73 yards to the endzone. The tie game lasted all of 50 seconds before the Red Raiders re-established control. Recognizing a tendency for the front line of the Mustangs kickoff receiving team to retreat as the ball is struck, K Smith pooched a perfect onside kick just across the midfield stripe. Hogue recovered for the Raiders and his offense returned to the field. South Point did little with the drive, a credit to the desperation of the Smoky Mountain defense. But the time off the clock was a value to the Red Raiders. The teams went to the intermission with South Point up 21-14 and eager to receive the second half kick.

To counter the explosive speed of South Point kick returners, Smoky Mountain opted for short kicks hoping to elicit a fair catch or to cover a drop. The strategy back-fired as the third quarter opened. Back deep for South Point, King approached the kick, took it on a bounce and shot through an opening all the way to the Mustangs' twenty yardline for the Raiders first and ten. South Point ran plays to the Smoky Mountain three. From there, Jones notched his second touchdown of the game to put the Raiders up by two scores, 28-14. The ensuing kick was punched high and short. The ball was caught by the Mustangs at the Smoky Mountain thirty and then promptly popped loose at the thirty-four, recovered by the Raiders. Taking advantage of the short field, Rhinehart lofted a pass that fell into Rose's hands just across the goal line, in stride. The clock read 7:47 in the third stanza and everything pointed to an impending Red Raider blowout and playoff advance. South Point had pushed the lead to 35-14. But Smoky Mountain didn't share their conference championship by luck alone. The Mustangs, like the Red Raiders, were fighters. A seventy-nine yard drive netted points for Smoky Mountain to close the gap to 35-21. But with 0:27 left on the clock, the drive of over seven minutes was a benefit to both teams. The quarter closed with the Raiders in possession and looking to answer the bell in the final round for the win. It would not be easy.

With the ball to begin the fourth quarter and still deep in their territory, the Raiders were victimized by an illegal substitution penalty that forced P Dylan Nicks to stand on his goalline for the punt. The snap was high, forcing Nicks to make an athletic catch, but the timing was thrown off and the punt was blocked. Adding insult to injury the ball was recovered by the Mustangs prior to sliding out of the back of the endzone for a touchdown. Once again, momentum had essentially been handed to Smoky Mountain. South Point's comfortable leads at 35-14 and 35-21 had become an uneasy 35-28 advantage with over eleven minutes to go in regulation. The fight continued with the Raiders sustaining some blows but determined to stay in the fight. The Mustangs attempted an onside pooch kick that was perfectly fielded by the Raiders' Peyton Chaney. Chaney, listed as a TE on the offensive roster, made a textbook play on the ball catching it in midair while leaning and finally sliding out of bounds. Saving the possession

proved to be a key play in the game. The quick strikes and opportune scoring seemed to indicate that the winning team would have to lean heavily on defense to secure the win. With Chaney's recovery, the Red 'O' gave the Red 'D' a boost. Driving from near midfield, South Point pounded to the Smoky Mountain five yardline. From there, King took a pitch around the left side and dove toward the pylon with the ball in hand and contacting the marker. The Head Linesman (after some painstaking deliberation) stepped in position and signaled touchdown. The Raiders moved back up 42-28 with 6:21 remaining...in someone's season. The Mustangs took their next shot. Smoky Mountain running wildly in desperation cut the lead again on a four yard run to make the score 42-35. Expecting yet another onside kick, South Point was ready. Up-man for the Raiders, Matt Hastings, perfectly played the end-over-end kick, catching the ball in air off the bounce and falling to the ground to save the possession. Unfortunately, the Raiders failed to pick up a first down in four plays thus turning the ball over on downs. With 2:37 left, the ballgame was in the hands of the Red 'D'. Smoky Mountain made some short gains and converted a 4th and 4 near midfield. With no timeouts, the Mustangs were forced to work the chains or go to the air. The Raiders were ready and determined to keep counterpunching. A 3rd and 10 screen pass netted 9 yards to the South Point forty-one setting up another fourth down play. Pinching in from his OLB position, Omari Hunt crashed down and forced the running paly into the middle of the line and teammates Ethan Simmons, Xarique Culbreath, Hunter Mason, and Jackson Risk. From his Free Safety position, Alex Campbell joined the fray with perfect timing. Campbell's helmet squared up the running back's arm, and ball, causing the latter to pop free. The shot sent the ball seven yards downfield in an open area. DE Ben Lunsford was first to streak to the scene and fall on the loose ball. His effort secured the Raiders win and keeps the season alive for South Point!

Call it a dogfight; call it a fist-fight, it just doesn't matter to the Red Raiders. Being able to do battle in the playoffs where records are reset was/is a welcome challenge for the Big Red. The Mustangs came out swinging. The Raiders landed the punches. When the dust settled, it's South Point who survives and advances. A visit to West Lincoln marks round two. Ring the bell!

Go Get 'Em, Red!

Notable Facts and Thoughts

The South Point/West Lincoln matchup pits a #13 seed vs #12 seed in the Second Round of the NCHSAA 2AA State Playoffs. The Rebels thrashed the #5 seed, Ashe County, in the opening round, 48-6.