

Long time coming

East Gaston's win over South Point first since 1995

By RICHARD WALKER
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MOUNT HOLLY — How long had it been since East Gaston had beaten South Point in high school football?

The year was 1995 and Dean Smith was the University of North Carolina basketball coach, the Carolina Panthers had yet to play a single game in Charlotte and the Charlotte Hornets were still a beloved local NBA franchise.

But on
EAST GASTON 35 Friday
SOUTH POINT 14 night,
East

Gaston exorcised those demons and emphatically ended an 11-game losing streak to its biggest rival with a 35-14 thrashing of South Point in front of a record crowd of 6,500 at Arrowhead Stadium.

"The whole week in practice, we talked about how this could make our season or break our season," East Gaston senior running back Jas



David Luoto/Special to The Gazette

Running back Jas Hopkins provided 268 yards of East Gaston's 419 yards of offense Friday night and the Warriors beat conference rival South Point for the first time in a decade.

tion senior running back Jas Hopkins said. "For us seniors, we knew this was our last time and we wanted to make sure we'd leave something they'd remember us by."

Did Hopkins and his Warriors teammates ever do that.

After falling behind 7-0 in the first quarter, East Gaston scored 35 straight points to capture the Big South 3A/4A Conference opener and claim the school's first win over South Point since Adam Cruise's 32-yard fourth-quarter field goal was the difference in a 3-0 victory on Sept. 15, 1995.

Friday's game remained in doubt until the middle of the fourth quarter when East Gaston scored three touchdowns in 4½ minutes behind Hopkins' running and passing and a ballhawking Warriors defense.

"It ain't fair not to say they didn't play a role in this," South Point coach John Devine said. "They forced us into turnovers and they took advantage of them. We held our own for about three quarters. Then they just kinda wore us down."

▼ Warriors

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Hopkins led the way with 229 yards rushing and two touchdowns in 28 carries. It marks the first 200-yard rushing effort by an East Gaston player in the 35-game series between the two schools that South Point still leads 24-9-2. But Hopkins' first career pass was what started the celebration of the Mount Holly and Stanley communities that support East Gaston while sending home many Red Raiders' fans back to Belmont in disappointment.

It was a play Hopkins said the Warriors had worked on only Thursday afternoon and in Friday's walk-through. And it worked to perfection when Hopkins took quarterback Stephan McQuage's pitch left, then when South Point defenders surrounded him, he lobbed a pass toward record-setting receiver Michael McDowell for what turned into a 19-yard scoring pass.

The touchdown made it 28-7 East Gaston with seven minutes to play.

"This was, by far, our best performance," Warriors coach Greg Lloyd said. "And I would say it was a group effort."

Hopkins accounted for 268 of East Gaston's 419 yards of total offense. McQuage added 151 yards passing and one touchdown — a 46-yarder to Marquis Sanders. Fullback Darius Abernathy picked up 34 yards rushing and one touchdown and helped lead the blocking for Hopkins, along with tight end Desmond Graham, tackles Matt Webb and Chris Dixon, guards Justin Wilbanks and Cody Edge and center Brad Belfiore.

On defense, Chris Smith's eight solo or first-hit tackles led a gang-tackling group that also included Lee Petty's six stops, Levi Lutz's five stops, Allen McCorkle's two fumble recoveries and one forced fumble, Brannon Handsel's two forced fumbles and a quarterback sack, and Chris Rhyne's blocked field goal.

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Greg Lloyd

East Gaston coach

Lloyd felt Rhyne's block, which came on Matthew Mitchell's 47-yard attempt with 2:56 left in the opening half and the scored tied at 7, gave his team such much-needed momentum.

"I really believe it took a series or two for us to get used to the speed of their offense," Lloyd said. "We couldn't simulate that in practice. And then when we needed a play on that field goal, we got one. If they score there, they maybe they go ahead 10-7 at the half."

Instead, East Gaston broke ahead for good after a 63-yard drive on its second possession after halftime. Abernathy picked up two first downs on the march, including one on a tackle-breaking 23-yard swing pass for a third-down conversion that set up his 1-yard plunge. Forrest Alexander's second of five extra points made it 14-7 with six minutes left in the third quarter.

South Point finished with 240 yards of total offense, led by sophomore quarterback Desmond Lowery's 56 yards rushing and 53 yards passing. Matt Hudspeth added 66 yards rushing. Brandon Spencer had 10 solo or first-hit tackles and a pass interception to lead the Red Raiders' defense.

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| SP | 7 0 0 7 - 14 |
| EG | 7 0 7 21 - 35 |

SP - Matt Hudspeth 1 run (Matthew Mitchell kick)

EG - Marquis Sanders 46 pass from Stephan McQuage (Forrest Alexander kick)

EG - Darius Abernathy 1 run (Alexander kick)

EG - Jas Hopkins 17 run (Alexander kick)

EG - Michael McDowell 19 pass from Hopkins (Alexander kick)

EG - Hopkins 22 run (Alexander kick)

SP - Desmond Lowery 10 run (Mitchell kick)



David Luoto/Special to The Gazette

East Gaston's Marquis Sanders catches a pass for a touchdown in the first quarter as South Point's Nathan Francis watches.