

Fierce South Point rally falls short

**Four early fumbles help
put Red Raiders In 28-0
hole against Hibriten**

By Phillip Gardner

Special to The Gazette

LENOIR — In the blink of an eye, South Point found itself down two touchdowns and on the verge of being embarrassed by the defending state champions.

Just when the Red Raiders thought it couldn't get any worse, Hibriten scored two more quick touchdowns and the rout was on.

Or was it?

South Point somehow made a game of it, mounted a huge rally and kept the outcome in doubt until the final minute when Hibriten ultimately escaped with a 28-20 win on a cold, wet Friday night.

"Everybody was down, but we just had to keep our heads up," South Point senior lineman Larry Dowdy said.

Second-seeded Hibriten (13-0) advances to the third round of the 2AA state playoffs where it will host third-seeded Bandys.

End of the road

Freezing rain fell on the Red Raiders as they exited the field for the final time this season, ending a 9-4 campaign. South Point was the last team to beat Hibriten, having done so in the 2016 state semifinals. Since then, the Panthers have reeled off 29 straight victories and on Friday looked poised to challenge for another title.

See SOUTH, B2

Own worst enemy

South Point lost four fumbles in the first quarter, and Hibriten turned all of them into points for its commanding 28-0 lead just two plays into the second quarter. On the game's third play, Aaron Logan returned a fumble 32 yards for a touchdown. Two plays later, Kevon Wilson picked up another fumble and took it 25 yards to the house.

South Point then got into a groove by driving to the red zone but fumbled at the goal line and Hibriten recovered for a touch-back. The Panthers went 65 yards in six plays on their first possession to make it 21-0 on McKinley Witherspoon's 44-yard TD run down the left sideline.

South Point's fourth fumble occurred on the ensuing kickoff and Hibriten quickly drove from midfield to take a 28-0 lead two plays into the second quarter on a 7-yard run by Witherspoon.

"You turn the ball over that many times, it's tough to win," South Point coach Adam Hodge said.

"But they played their tails off and that's what you want to be proud of."

The comeback

The Red Raiders got on the board early in the second quarter with a four-play 72-yard drive, capped by Keaton Hale's

45-yard quarterback keeper for a touchdown. Late in the second quarter, a 42-yard pass from Hale to Jamani Leeper set up a 1-yard TD run by Naseem Jones, cutting South Point's deficit to 28-14. The game took on a different tone from that point forward.

"We just played Red Raider football," Hale said. "We never give up. That's our thing: we never give up. We keep fighting."

A Hibriten fumble late in the third quarter set the stage for a long touchdown drive by South Point as Jones scored from 6 yards out. The drive covered 75 yards but required 15 plays and lasted 7 minutes and 38 seconds. The extra point was blocked and South Point had only 5:06 remaining to make up the remainder of the 28-20 deficit.

South Point didn't recover the onside kick attempt but forced a three and out and regained possession at its own 34 with 3:06 remaining. However, the Red Raiders came up short on fourth and 3 from their own 41 with 1:17 left and that was their last chance.

"In the fourth quarter, we gave ourselves a chance to win and that's all you can ask for," Hodge said. "They're defending state champion. They've got a good team."

South Point outgained Hibriten 306-211, with 202 coming on the ground. Hale rushed for 90 yards and completed 6 of 7 passes for 104 yards. Jones finished with 83 yards on 21 carries. Witherspoon led Hibriten with 111 yards on 19 carries while Marqwone Jones rushed for 75 yards.



South Point's Devon King (23) breaks free during Friday night's game against Hibriten in Lenoir. [DAVID PREWITT | LENOIR NEWS-TOPIC]

South Point's Caleb Gibson (20) looks for running room during Friday night's game against Hibriten in Lenoir. The Red Raiders' rally came up just short 28-20 after they fell behind 28-0. [DAVID PREWITT | LENOIR NEWS-TOPIC]



Hibriten 28, South Point 20

SCORING SUMMARY

First quarter

H—Aaron Logan 32 fumble return
(Griffin Bryson kick), 10:34.

H—Kevon Wilson 25 fumble return
(Bryson kick), 9:45.

H—McKinley Witherspoon 44 run
(Bryson kick), 5:18.

Second quarter

H—Witherspoon 7 run (Bryson
kick), 11:12.

SP—Keaton Hale 45 run (Cade
Ratliff kick), 9:43.

SP—Naseem Jones 1 run (Ratliff
kick), 1:30.

Fourth quarter

SP—Jones 6 run (kick blocked), 5:06.

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SP H

First downs 12 11

Rushes-yards 43-202 46-211

Passing yards 104 0

Total yards 306 211

Comp-Att-Int 6-7-1 0-2-0

Fumbles-lost 5-4 2-2

Penalties-yards 5-55 4-30

Punts-avg. 0-0 2-21.0

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

RUSHING—South Point, Hale 13-90, Jones 21-83, Caleb Gibson 1-14, Devon King 2-7, Jamani Leeper 4-5, Ray Grier 2-3. Hibriten, Witherspoon 19-111, Marqwone Jones 16-75, Jaylen Scott 7-21, Aaron Logan 1-4, Skylin Thomas 1-2, Team 2-minus 2.

PASSING—South Point, Hale 6-7-1 104. Hibriten, Scott 0-2-0 0.

RECEIVING—South Point, Leeper 1-42, Jammari Lewis 1-34, Grier 3-20, Caleb Gibson 1-8. Hibriten, none.