

Cherokee rolls the dice late, finds way to beat Mustangs

**by Robert Haddocks
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KENNESAW - Holding on to a tenuous seven-point lead in the game's final minutes, Cherokee faced fourth-and-2 on its own 35-yard line. Conventional wisdom usually says punt the ball and let your defense preserve the victory.

With some prodding from his players, Brian Dameron instead punted conventional wisdom.

Cherokee, which had run its triple-option offense effectively all night, handed the ball to Kenny Foster, who plowed forward for 2 yards. The huge first down allowed the Warriors to run off 2 more minutes before Kennesaw Mountain forced a punt, which it almost blocked.

The Mustangs got the ball back with 34 seconds, but were unable to mount a drive and Cherokee escaped with a hard-fought 28-21 Region 5AAAAA victory Friday at Cobb Energy/Mustang Stadium.

Cherokee, which was winless last season, won its second consecutive game to improve to 2-4 overall and 2-3 in region play, the first time that the Warriors have accomplished back-to-wins since returning to Class AAAAA before the 2008 season.

After calling a timeout, Dameron was ready to punt, but his players convinced him otherwise.

"The kids encouraged me to go for it," Dameron said. "They said, 'Coach, man, we don't want to give them the ball back, give us a chance.' Part of building a team is having confidence in tough situations. Doubt could've creeped in, but they had confidence in one another and I gave them to opportunity to prove it."

Cherokee's ground game gashed the Mustangs for a total of 280 yards. Quarterback Dylan Hayes executed the option nicely, running himself, handing off to the bruising Foster, or pitching to speedster A.J. Redwine, who had a game-high 117 yards, including a 57-yard touchdown.

Haynes, a junior, has become a "student of the game," Dameron said, while Foster also "came up pretty big" Friday night.

Foster gave Cherokee a 7-0 lead when he ran over a Mustang defender in the secondary and rumbled for a 20-yard touchdown late in the first quarter.

But Kennesaw Mountain (1-5, 1-4) got its ground game in gear and answered with a 6-yard run by Devon Jones, who ran for 70 yards and two touchdowns. Diamond Stewart led the Mustangs' solid ground game with 104 yards on 18 carries.

After Jones' score, Haynes quickly engineered a nine-play drive to break the tie. He broke two tackles, cut back and ran in for a 30-yard touchdown with 2:00 left in the first half.

On Cherokee's opening drive of the third period, Redwine padded the lead when he took a late pitch from Haynes and jetted past the Mustangs' secondary. Aaron Carrasquillo kicked his third of four extra points for a 21-7 lead.

But Kennesaw Mountain refused to go away.

Jones ran around left end for his second touchdown, also 6 yards, to trim the lead to 21-14, only to see Haynes, once again, come up with an answer.

After a bobbled kickoff, Cherokee took over at its own 10, but the quarterback took over, running six times on a 12-play drive. Facing a third-and 6, Kennesaw Mountain was sitting on the run, but Haynes dropped back and hit Redwine streaking down the sideline for a 39-yard touchdown to give the Warriors a 28-14 lead early in the fourth quarter.

Will Campbell scored on a 7-yard run to trim the lead to 28-21 with less than 4 minutes remaining, setting up the courageous call by Dameron.