

Braintree Cowboys win with fantastic finish

By Win Bates

GateHouse News Service

Posted Aug 25, 2010 @ 12:37 PM

The Braintree Cowboys may play and win a lot of games in future years, but they'll almost certainly not produce a more improbable ending than they engineered last Friday night in their first-ever game with the Randolph Oilers at Randolph High School.

The Cowboys literally snatched victory from the jaws of defeat on the last play of Friday's game. The score was tied, 20-20, and the Oilers were lining up for a game-winning field goal from just 22 yards out by veteran placekicker Dave Canavan, one of the top kickers in the Eastern Football League, with 10.6 seconds to play.

However, Cowboys co-captain Fran Robbins led a strong rush from the Cowboys defense and blocked the field goal attempt. He then picked up the loose ball and outran the Oilers' kicking team to score an 82-yard touchdown as time expired to give the Cowboys an exhilarating 26-20 victory that kept their EFL playoff hopes alive.

The win was just the second of their first season for the Cowboys, their first-ever road victory, and put them just a half-game behind the Hyde Park Seminoles for the eighth and final playoff spot in the EFL.

Meanwhile, the Oilers could have clinched a playoff berth with a win over the Cowboys, but instead sit just a half-game ahead of the Seminoles in seventh place with a 3-5 record, and just a game ahead of the 2-6 Cowboys.

The games only get more interesting now since the Oilers, Seminoles and Cowboys are fighting for those final two playoff berths, and the Seminoles play both of the other two teams, beginning with a trip this Friday to Randolph to face the Oilers.

The Cowboys have three games left, starting Saturday in Maine against the winless Mid-Coast Falcons. They'll have Labor Day weekend off and then finish their season against the Bay State Buccaneers (1-7) on Sept. 11 at Easton's Oliver Ames High School, and the Seminoles (2-5) in Hyde Park on Sept. 18, possibly with a playoff berth on the line.

But they'll be hard-pressed to come up with a more exciting ending than last Friday's.

"I don't know what to say," exclaimed Robbins, clearly physically and emotionally spent after his big play and touchdown run which touched off a wild celebration among his teammates and their fans as the Oilers and their fans stood in stunned disbelief.

"I just got through, blocked it, picked it up and ran. I don't know how I made it, but I did. I've never done anything like that, and I've never seen anything like that. It's pretty unbelievable. We needed this game. It's a big win."

Cowboys owner/head coach Larry DeVoe has been around the EFL for most of its 50 years as a player, general manager, coach and owner, but even he admitted the ending was unlike anything he had ever seen.

"Unbelievable," was the first word uttered by DeVoe after the game. "I've seen kicks blocked and returned for touchdowns before, but not to win a game when it looks like the other team is about to score the winning points."

"That guy is a good kicker and I figured he'd make the kick. It was a great play by Franny. He and that whole defensive line played great. I thought we played pretty well, but we were far from perfect. We had too many penalties, and threw a couple of bad interceptions that nearly cost us the game. We needed a big play and we got it, and we got a big win over a good football team that is ahead of us in the standings."

What had been a topsy-turvy game with many momentum swings that was played with a ton of emotion on both sides took its craziest turns in that final minute.

The Cowboys had the ball at midfield with under a minute left when an Oilers interception was returned to the Cowboys 7 yard-line with 30 seconds left.

The Oilers couldn't punch in a winning touchdown, gaining just two yards on three running plays and keeping the possession alive after recovering their own fumble on third down when the Cowboys thought they had recovered the loose ball.

The officials ruled Randolph had recovered it, so the Oilers' field goal team took the field to kick home the game-winning points, only to have Robbins make his big play and turn it into the biggest points scored so far by the Cowboys.

The 26 points were the most scored by the Cowboys so far, and Friday's game marked just the second time this season they had scored more than six points.

The game began the way it ended, with a big special-teams play as Amos Thomas returned the opening kickoff 74 yards to the Randolph 22.

After an 18-yard pass from Jonathan Turner to Ernest Brockington on the first play from scrimmage, Thomas scored on a sweep around right end from four yards out to give the Cowboys a 6-0 lead with just 1:27 elapsed.

The Oilers scored the next 10 points, notching a safety after a bad snap on a punt forced the Cowboys to cover the ball in their own end zone, and Brooks Payne ran 31 yards for a touchdown and then also scored the 2-point conversion to give the Oilers a 10-6 lead.

The Cowboys got the lead back when Mark Reale hooked up with receiver Felipe Garcia for a 73-yard touchdown pass that Garcia caught past midfield and went down the left sideline in front of the Cowboys bench to put Braintree back in front, 12-10.

The Cowboys marched from the Oilers 35 to the 10 at the end of the half after an Oilers personal foul on a punt, but the drive stalled with four consecutive incomplete passes.

The Oilers had time for one play, and inexplicably tried to pass from their own 10. Quarterback Ryan Myers was sacked in the end zone for a safety on the final play of the half to extend the Cowboys lead to 14-10.

A 24-yard field goal by Canavan made it 14-13 after the Cowboys stopped Randolph's opening drive of the second half inside their 10 yard-line, but Braintree responded with a 65-yard march in eight plays, all on the ground, capped by a 1-yard touchdown burst by fullback Jake Finnegan to give Braintree a 20-13 lead with 4:02 left in the third quarter.

The Oilers pulled even early in the fourth quarter on a 5-yard touchdown pass from Myers to Brian Gallo and Canavan's extra point that completed a 60-yard march, with 35 of those yards coming on Braintree penalties. Neither team threatened again until the chaotic final minute.

The Cowboys offense came alive against the Oilers. After mustering just five first downs the last two weeks, the Cowboys produced 13 in Friday's game, and the running game that had struggled recently rushed for 190 yards against the Oilers, 107 from Thomas and 71 more from Tom Schneider.

The Cowboys also passed for more than 100 yards and had nearly 200 yards on kick returns by Thomas and Giovanni Sanders. DeVoe knows he needs that same kind of production the last three games.

"We had some continuity on offense that has been missing," acknowledged DeVoe. "We need to do this the last three games. We're not looking past the next game. Our only concern right now is Maine this Saturday."

Copyright 2010 Braintree Forum. Some rights reserved