

Dora heads to state semifinals
by W. Brian Hale



TROY – The Dora Bulldogs took one step closer to their ultimate goal of playing for the Class 4A State Championship, earning a 33-21 third-round playoff victory over the hosting Charles Henderson Trojans on Friday night at Veterans Memorial Stadium on the Campus of Troy University.

The No. 7 Bulldogs secured their 12th win of the season with their power running game, rolling up 220 rushing yards, including Kai Thomas' 110 yards, two-touchdown performance, behind their offensive line.

However, it was also the Dora defense's night to shine, as the Bulldogs held the Trojans' vaunted offense to 249 total yards for the contest and forced five crucial Charles Henderson turnovers.

Cade Stone led the defense with nine tackles, with two tackles for a loss and a fumble recovery. DeMarcus Kirk also turned in a good night defensively, recording eight tackles, one quarterback sack and a tackle for a loss, while Thomas grabbed two Trojan interceptions.

Next up for Dora (12-1) is a trip to Mobile next Friday to take on the UMS-Wright Bulldogs. UMS (11-2) advanced with a narrow 22-19 win over Beauregard.

Dora coach Johnny Wright singled out the turnovers, as well as the play of the offensive line and running backs, as the keys to victory.

"We knew we were going to have to win the turnover game and it was big for us to end as many offensive opportunities that Charles Henderson had with them," Wright said. "We made some adjustments at halftime that allowed us to move the ball better and with the job our defense did in shutting down their run and forcing a lot of errant passes, we were able to get the win. Everyone played well and it helped us get the job done."

The Bulldogs' defense put the first points of the game on the scoreboard, with DeAngelo Pendleton stepping in front of a Trojan pass and racing 75 yards for the touchdown. After the extra point kick, Dora took a 7-0 lead.

On Charles Henderson's ensuing possession, Thomas recorded his first interception of the night, leading to a 31-yard field goal by Kailan Rutledge to extend Dora's lead to 10-0.

The Trojans got on the scoreboard after blocking a Tanner Gordy punt and returning it for the touchdown, cutting the Bulldogs' lead to 10-7.

Charles Henderson struck again midway through the second quarter, following a 13-play, 74-yard drive to take the lead, 14-10.

Dora regained command before halftime after an 8-play, 80-yard drive ended with Caleb May finding Thomas for a 33-yard touchdown strike, ending the second quarter with a 17-14 edge.

After an exchange of possessions to start the third quarter, May took the ball into the end zone from a yard out to cap off a 7-play, 76-yard drive to pull Dora further away, 24-14.

Rutledge came up with a Trojan fumble recovery on the kickoff, and then connected on a 34-yard field goal to push Dora ahead, 27-14 on the final play of the third quarter.

Charles Henderson was able to score on their first possession of the fourth quarter on a 53-yard, 7-play drive to cut the Bulldogs' lead to 27-21.

The final touchdown of the game belonged to Dora. After the Bulldog defense held the Trojans on downs near the end of the fourth quarter, Thomas grabbed his second score of the night on a 64-yard run. He followed up his stellar offensive play by intercepting a Trojan pass in the end zone in the final 30 seconds of the game to preserve Dora's 33-21 win.

"Kai just amazes me with his play on both offense and defense," Wright said.

"He has such great athletic ability. He, like many of our kids tonight, performed at a very high level and I could not be more pleased with them."

Dora's next opponent is a fixture in the playoffs.

UMS-Wright has advanced to the postseason every year since 1994 and has only lost in the first round once during that period. The Bulldogs have won four state championships (1987, 2001-02, 2005, 2008) under head coach Terry Curtis, who took over in 1999. UMS-Wright lost in the semifinals last season.

The Bulldogs' two losses this season came to Class 6A McGill-Toolen, which finished 11-1, and St. Paul's, which is in the state 5A semifinals.

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