

Liberal runs away from Dodge City, 40-27

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By EARL WATT

• Leader & Times

DODGE CITY — Liberal wouldn't stop pushing to end a 19-game losing streak Friday, and Dodge City wouldn't stop shooting themselves in the foot.

Liberal broke a five-year winless drought with a 40-27 win and spent most of the fourth quarter simply running the clock.

Dodge City spent the same time throwing incompletions, slipping on the rain-soaked turf and turning the ball over.

The jam-packed home stands emptied to only a handful of fans after the homecoming festivities at halftime and a near two-hour lightning delay.

But the Redskins faithful that made the trip stuck it out, and despite watching a nine-point halftime lead disappear in the first four minutes of the second half, the fans had something to cheer about when the Redskins fired back for two third quarter touchdowns and then watched the defense close out the game by making it difficult for the Red Demon offense to put together

sustained drives.

Dodge City was poised to take an early lead in the first quarter after a short Britton Abbott punt gave the Red Demons the ball at Liberal's 37 yard line.

Blaik Middleton carried the ball six straight times to the one foot line when the Red Demons opted to go for a touchdown on fourth-and-goal.

Middleton again took the ball but was met in the backfield by defensive end Nolan Larkin and lost five yards.

Liberal took over at their own 6 yard line, and Britton Abbott hit Trenton Hammond on a short sideline pass that Hammond broke for a 94-yard touchdown and an early 6-0 lead.

Dodge City fired back to take a 10-6 lead, but the deficit did not seem to stop Liberal's offensive pressure.

The Redskins drove 80 yards on eight plays and scored on an eight-yard touchdown run up the middle by Rex Heronemus, and the Redskins had a 12-10 lead.

Liberal increased the lead to 20-10 with a 64-yard drive that was aided by a defensive holding penalty and ended with a 14-yard touchdown run by Abbott.

Dodge City responded with a touchdown of their own to narrow the score to 20-17, but the Redskins spent little time building back the lead with two perfectly executed gadget plays.

The first was a lateral pass for Abbott to Lorenzo Pando who then found a wide open Larking for a 56-yard reception that put the ball on the Red Demon 10 yard line.

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On the next play, Abbott walked away from being under center, and the ball was snapped to Hammond, who then handed the ball off to Pando on a reverse who threw a pass back to Abbott in the end zone for a touchdown and a 26-17 lead.

Dodge City drove the ball down to the Liberal 6 yard line with less than 30 seconds remaining in the half and tried some trickery of their own when quarterback Kelan Newton pitched the ball to Middleton who looked to throw the ball back to Newton, but Larkin leaped in front of the pass to make the interception.

“I read my assignments,” Larkin said. “I saw the running back take over, and he made it obvious. I said, ‘Throw that ball.’ I jumped up and took the ball.”

For the next two hours, fans huddled underneath the stands or in their cars as two rain storms passed through Dodge City.

It was the fourth weather delay in Cliff Abbott’s three-year tenure.

Abbott took the Redskins to the bus and kept the kids cool while feeding them peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

When the second half finally kicked off after 10:30 p.m., Dodge City put together a drive that stalled on the Liberal 32 yard line, but Dillon Burkhard kicked a 50-yard field goal for the Red Demons to set a school record and bring the Red Demons back to within six points.

After the Redskins failed to get a first down on a fourth-and-three at their own 27 yard line, Dodge City marched the ball to the end zone on the short field and kicked the point after to take a 27-26 lead.

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It didn't last long.

Liberal marched down the field on a drive that was aided by two 15-yard penalties against Dodge City and scored to jump back out to a 34-27 lead.

After a defensive stop, Liberal again marched to the end zone with a key reception to Christian Erives for 52 yards that led to another score and a 40-27 Redskin lead.

Dodge City drove inside the Liberal 10-yard line early in the fourth quarter, but on a fourth-and-goal the Red Demons bobbled the snap, and the Redskins piled on Middleton in the backfield for an eight-yard loss.

Another Dodge City drive was thwarted when Newton was sacked for a loss on second down and then slipped on the wet turf for another eight-yard loss on third down.

Liberal began to work the clock and play keep-away the rest of the game.

One player that has made a dramatic turnaround on the defensive line has been Arturo Ortega. Last week he had two key sacks, and against the Red Demons he made several stops behind the line of scrimmage and contained the sweeps.

"Last year I told myself this would be a new year for me," Ortega said. "I want to go hard every play. We've been known for offense, but coach (Caleb) Cline said it is time to be known for our defense now."

Liberal will look to start a winning streak in the WAC Friday when Garden City comes to Liberal for homecoming.

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