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Football

Rockford's game-breaking special teams spoil West Ottawa's homecoming

rockford junior running back Ethan LaCourt looks for an opening during the first half at West Ottawa High School on Friday, Sept. 27, 2013. Rockford won 20-13. (Andrew Kuhn | MLive.com)

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HOLLAND, MI -- Rockford head coach Ralph Munger said his squad's offense, particularly his team's run game, is still a work in progress.

Thankfully, the Rams' special teams are in championship form.

Sophomore speedster Tyler Bradfield had punt and kickoff returns for touchdowns, and the Rams turned in another short scoring drive following a West Ottawa special teams blunder in a key 20-13 victory in the OK Red Conference opener for both squads.

Rockford, which improves to 4-1, not only gets the distinction of beating West Ottawa for the 13th straight time, but strikes a key blow in a battle between arguably the two best teams in the OK Red.

"(This win) is big," said Bradfield, a 5-foot-11, 185-pound defensive back. "West Ottawa's a really good team. Now we just have to keep moving forward."

"Special teams are always important. It's one-third of the game and you have to win it to win the game."

Both teams had trouble moving offensively throughout the first half as they combined for just 123 yards of total offense. Rockford harassed West Ottawa senior quarterback Jared McNitt with relentless blitzing linebackers. Although the elusive signal caller had five carries of 10 yards or more, he was also sacked by the Rams eight times. As a result, McNitt finished with just 25 yards rushing on 21 attempts.

"We're rebuilding our entire offense, so there's going to be some growing pains," said Munger, whose squad managed only 142 yards. "But the bottom line is we're playing very good defensively, and anytime you do that, you're going to be in the ballgame.

"Randy Vanderveen, our defensive coordinator, and our defensive staff packages a lot of different blitzes and different schemes each week and tonight it was right on."

Bradfield broke the scoreless tie with 4:26 left in the first half when he fielded a West Ottawa punt near the 40 and used his speed to create some excitement.

"I made the first guy miss and then I just got some really good blocking upfield," Bradfield said. "That's what made it happen, the great blocking."

Sacks to McNitt proved costly to several Panthers' first-half drives, but they found the scoreboard quickly to open the second half.

McNitt lofted a perfect pass to 5-foot-8 junior receiver Toni Sok, who beat a Rams' defensive back on a fly route and hauled in the heave for a 75-yard touchdown just 19 seconds into the third quarter.

The excitement for the homecoming crowd would be short lived, however, as Bradfield fielded the ensuing short kickoff, got around the right corner and was gone up the sideline.

"I just had to break through the first line of defense and I got a good block and that sprung me," he said.

Rockford pushed its advantage to 20-6 with 7:11 left when Panthers' receiver Alex Zimmerman muffed a punt return and the Rams pounced on the loose ball. Five plays later, Rams' quarterback Austin McKellar got in from a yard out to put his team up comfortably.

Rockford held the cushion until late in the fourth, when McNitt and the Panthers finally orchestrated a successful, sustained drive. McNitt scored on a 9-yard keeper up the middle to cut the Rams' lead to 20-13.

The Panthers tried to regain possession with an onside kick, but Rams' starting running back Ethan LaCourt secured the ball in a huge scrum of players. The possession allowed Rockford to run out the clock and keep its bragging rights alive over the Panthers.

McNitt completed 15-of-22 passes for 220 yards, but failed to create magic with big-play receiver Zimmerman, who was held without a catch for the Panthers (3-2).

Reserve running back Chris Bell paced the Rams with 53 yards rushing on seven carries.

Although the Rams' defense had several standouts, senior linebacker Randy Garvin especially shined. His blitz and sack of McNitt on fourth down forced a Panthers' turnover on downs as they threatened to tie the game near the end of the third quarter.

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