

Oak Ridge falls short in another tight game with Stratford

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5 of 11

Oak Ridge Elijah Porter (10) makes a catch ion the first quarter against the Stratford Spartans during a high school football game between Oak Ridge and Stratford on September 2, 2022 at Tully Stadium in Houston , Texas. (Photo by Bob Levey/Contributor)

Bob Levey, Contributor / Houston Chronicle

HOUSTON — Stratford quarterback Nash Rankin has plenty of weapons at his disposal. Senior receiver Jake Brand was the go-to difference maker for the Spartans' offense Friday.

Stratford got the ball in his hands early and often, and it paid huge dividends during a 31-28 nondistrict victory over Oak Ridge at Tully Stadium.

Brand finished with 11 catches for 177 yards and three touchdowns, including a 60-yarder that put the Spartans ahead for good with just under eight minutes remaining.

“You’re talking about a kid who has worked so hard to be at this point in time,” Stratford coach Todd Rankin said. “He played with so much heart and made big plays when we needed it. I cannot say enough about it. Him and a lot of our seniors, they really gave everything they had tonight. It’s something special.”

Oak Ridge (1-1) and Stratford (2-0) have created plenty of drama during their matchups over the years.

The past four games between the programs have all been decided by one possession, and this one was no different.

“With the talent we felt like they have, we felt like this was a playoff-type game, playoff-type atmosphere,” Rankin said. “The talent level they have, we feel like that’s what you’ll see in the playoffs - playmakers on both sides of the ball like they have. We really challenged ourselves and said that it was going to be a battle of who gets better from Week 1 to Week 2.”

Stratford opened the scoring with a 31-yard field goal from Giancarlo Chilala, but Oak Ridge took the lead on a 12-yard touchdown scamper from quarterback Steve Smedley with 11 seconds remaining in the opening period.

The Spartans fired right back with 14 unanswered points on a 12-yard touchdown pass from Nash Rankin to Brand and an 8-yard scoring run from Dallas Payne. Stratford stuck to the passing game early on, but Payne took over in the second quarter and rushed for 83 yards on eight attempts by halftime.

Oak Ridge found a huge swing of momentum with 1:40 to play before the intermission as Smedley connected with Elijah Porter on a 40-yard score. That pulled the War Eagles within one possession at 17-12.

Oak Ridge promptly marched down the field on its first drive of the third quarter and capped it with a 5-yard touchdown run and two-point conversion from Larry DeBose for the 20-17 lead.

Stratford finally answered late in the period when Brand took a short pass from Rankin and weaved through the Oak Ridge defense for a 40-yard score.

The Spartans went ahead by two scores midway through the fourth quarter when Brand caught his third touchdown pass, this time from 60 yards out. That handed his team a solid 31-20 advantage.

“I just feel like we came out and executed and battled adversity,” Brand said. “There was a lightning delay (during warmups) that got us out of our rhythm, but it didn’t matter. We played really well as a team, the O-line played amazing, and when I had the ball in my hands, I felt like I was unstoppable.”

Oak Ridge made things interesting in the late stages as Frankie Arthur scored on a 23-yard run up the middle. But that was the last time the War Eagles would touch the ball as Payne and the Stratford offense took over and ran out the clock.

Payne finished the game with 124 yards on 19 carries, and Rankin passed for 243 yards.

The defense had a pair of key takeaways in the second half with a fumble recovery by Antwone McDonald and an interception by Nathan Grant.

Stratford has a road nondistrict game remaining against Hastings before jumping into District 17-6A play against Cy-Fair. Oak Ridge, meanwhile, begins District 13-6A action Thursday against defending champion The Woodlands.

“We wanted to see improvement over last week, and I think we saw improvement in a lot of areas,” Oak Ridge coach Mark Schmid said. “It wasn’t as perfect as I wanted it to be, especially going into district play next week, but I loved our kids’

competitiveness and their never-give-up attitude, their grit. They dealt with a lot of adversity tonight, especially toward the end of the first half, so I think our team is growing up in terms of being able to handle the ups and downs and highs and lows.”

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