

Last-minute score secures league title for Wildcats on Senior Night



Members of the Louisburg football team celebrate their Frontier League crown with head coach Drew Harding following the Wildcats' 20-17 come-from-behind win Friday over Spring Hill.

With just over a minute left in regulation Friday, Louisburg was staring at the possibility of their first league loss and was watching an outright Frontier League title slip away.

Spring Hill scored a touchdown and took a four-point lead with 1 minute and 12 seconds left. Things were looking bleak for the Wildcats.

As it turned out, 52 seconds was all the Wildcats needed to pull off one of the season's most memorable moments. Louisburg quarterback Declan Battle found junior Caden Caplinger in the endzone on an 18-yard touchdown pass with 20 seconds remaining to give the Wildcats a 20-17 victory.

The win was the Wildcats' seventh straight on the season and clinched the team's first Frontier League championship since 2018.

"There weren't a lot of people who thought we could be league champions," Louisburg coach Drew Harding said. "I don't think it was anything that people expected out of us, and the

Frontier League is really good. For this group to come to work, get better every day and to see success is pretty sweet.”

Battle, Caplinger and the rest of the Wildcat offense put together a drive to remember – a drive that gave them a league title and undefeated record in league play.



Louisburg junior Caden Caplinger fights for some extra yards Friday on the Wildcats’ final drive against Spring Hill.

Louisburg started on its own 20-yard line, but the Battle to Caplinger connection was used early and often. Battle hit Caplinger for a 30-yard pass to midfield on the first play of the drive.

The Wildcats found themselves in a big hole after Battle was sacked at the 45 and Louisburg faced a 3rd and 14 with under a minute remaining. Battle completed a screen pass to Riley Van Eaton and Spring Hill was called for roughing the passer on the play, which gave Louisburg new life.

Louisburg (7-1) took advantage as Battle found Caplinger again

for an 18-yard pass to the 18-yard line, which set up the go-ahead score on the next play.

“At first I just stood there, I almost felt frozen as I took in the fact that he caught it,” Battle said. “J.R. (Rooney) was next to me and we both started shaking each other celebrating.”

The Battle and Caplinger combo accounted for 66 of the 80 yards on the drive, but it wasn't the first big play for the duo. Last season, Battle hit Caplinger for a game-tying score against Tonganoxie that forced overtime in an eventual Wildcat win.

“Declan and Caden have been playing together for a long time,” Harding said. “They hooked up for a big play against Tonganoxie as well last year, so for them to be able to do it again was pretty cool.”

Another big obstacle for the Wildcats to overcome on the final drive was the Bronco defense, which had stymied the Louisburg offense up to that point. Still, the offensive line of Will Hutsell, Rooney, Jaymes Melton, Brayton Brueggen, Nathan Vincent and Mack Newell helped put together a drive when their team needed it the most.

“Spring Hill had a lot of big guys up front and all week our coaches prepared us for them and put us in a good position to do our job on Friday,” Vincent said. “As far as the final drive, we knew we would have to give Declan the best protection he's had all season because we knew Spring Hill was going to send a lot of pressure.”

With 20 seconds remaining, Spring Hill would have one more opportunity, but the Broncos fumbled the kickoff and Caplinger recovered it to seal the victory.

The win was extra special for 16 Louisburg seniors as they were also able to celebrate that league title on Senior Night.

Jackson Kush, Nathan Apple, Carson Wade, Isaiah Whitley, Riley Van Eaton, J.R. Rooney, Will Hutsell, Brayton Brueggen, Christian Golladay, Nathan Vincent, Jase Hovey, Mack Newell, Hunter Moore, Mason Dobbins, Corbin Hamman and Layne Ryals all got to end their final regular season home game with a win.

“The Frontier League title means so much to me and this team,” Rooney said. “As a team before the season, the seniors wrote down our goals, and league champs was on everyone’s list. To clinch it on senior night was amazing. Going undefeated at home, to win it on our field in front of our town – it was an indescribable feeling.”



Louisburg senior Declan Battle breaks free for a 27-yard touchdown in the third quarter of Friday’s game against Spring Hill.

The Wildcats were forced to play from behind early as Spring Hill jumped out to a double-digit lead in the second quarter and took a 10-0 advantage.

Layne Ryals gave the Wildcats a little momentum going into halftime with a 27-yard field goal, but they still trailed

10-3.

Battle came up big in the third quarter for Louisburg as he found a rare wide-open look at the end zone when he broke loose for a 27-yard touchdown run down the sideline.

Ryals then came through again as he converted a 43-yard field goal later in the quarter to give the Wildcats their first lead at 13-10. In all Ryals, put eight points on the board in what was a tight game throughout.

"Three points was the difference, so all of his kicks were big for us," Harding said. "Layne was able to put six points up on the board for us on field goals, and then some extra points as well. He is a huge weapon for us and we have all the confidence in the world in him to go out there and put a field goal through."



Louisburg senior kicker Layne Ryals celebrates after making a 43-yard field goal to give the Wildcats the lead.

Midway through the fourth quarter, the Wildcats were forced to punt deep in their own territory and gave the ball back to Spring Hill with a three-point lead.

The Broncos put together a strong drive of their own that ended with Colton McKenna's second touchdown of the night and Spring Hill was up 17-13.

Despite giving up the touchdown on the Broncos' final drive, the Wildcat defense limited Spring Hill's chances and gave up just 10 points through the first three quarters. It also allowed just 179 yards of total offense.

Sophomore linebacker Ashton Moore led the team with 12 tackles. Junior linebacker Wyatt Holland added 10 to go along with a sack and a forced fumble. Jase Hovey and Hutsell each finished with nine stops on the night.

That final Spring Hill touchdown set up the heroics from the Wildcat offense and the rest is history.

"Coming onto the field at the 20 yard line with very little time is never a good feeling for most people," Battle said. "But I was confident because we practice 2 minute drills every week. I knew we just had to execute our assignments and it would end in our favor."



Louisburg's J.R. Rooney (left) and Wyatt Holland douse head coach Drew Harding with the water bucket after the Wildcats' 20-17 win.

It was one of the more difficult victories on the season for Louisburg, which saw an improved Spring Hill team from the beginning of the year.

"It was a grind, for sure," Harding said. "Spring Hill is a really good team and they are just getting better and better as the season goes on. We knew it was going to be a battle.

"We started off the game about as bad as you can be, didn't play well in the first half and it was a struggle offensively through most of the game. But to see no one hang their head when we were down, then put a drive together and come back and win was just awesome."

Now starts a new season for the Wildcats as they enter the postseason as the No. 3 seed in Class 4A. Louisburg will host No. 14 Bonner Springs at 7 p.m. this Friday at Wildcat Stadium.

"Everybody knows we're playing for one more game, it's just that one week at a time mentality that we've had all season long," Vincent said. "I know the seniors are going to give it everything we have to keep playing and so will the rest of the team."

SCORING SUMMARY

LOU 0 3 10 7 – 20

SH 3 7 0 7 – 17

First Quarter

S: Ryan Jackson 23 FG

Second Quarter

S: Colton McKenna 1 run (Jackson kick)

L: Layne Ryals 27 FG

Third Quarter

L: Declan Battle 27 run (Ryals kick)

L: Ryals 43 FG

Fourth Quarter

S: McKenna 1 run (Jackson kick)

L: Caden Caplinger 18 pass from Battle (Ryals kick)

STATISTICS

RUSHING – Riley Van Eaton 13-69; Declan Battle 7-32; Jase Hovey 4-13

PASSING – Declan Battle 13-21-173

RECEIVING – Caden Caplinger 3-66; Ashton Moore 2-33; Mason Dobbins 2-28; Corbin Hamman 2-26; Jackson Kush 2-11; Riley Van Eaton 2-9

TACKLES – Ashton Moore 12, Wyatt Holland 10, Jase Hovey 9, Will Hutsell 9, Nathan Vincent 7, Layne Ryals 5, Mack Newell 4, Mason Dobbins 3, Isaiah Whitley 3, J.R. Rooney 3, Hunter Heinrich 2, Brady Hickey 1, Carson Wade 1, Caden Caplinger 1