

Wildcats earn district runner-up in overtime thriller

By Abby Hooven

When Henry County's district alignment shifted a couple years ago, head coach Matt Wright received "condolence calls" telling him the Wildcats would never finish above fourth in the stacked district.

The callers may want to rethink their sentiments.

After easily taking down DeSales and Western Hills, Henry County put its shot at finishing second in the district on the line at Mercer County on Friday.

In a "Friday Night Lights" television type of ending, Ray Matthews pushed his way just inside the end zone on fourth-and-goal in overtime to lift the Wildcats to a 41-38 win over the Titans.

"It was one of those things where it was back-and-forth, back-and-forth. We knew it was going to be a close game and highly contested, and it was just a matter of, 'Were we gonna make the plays when we needed to?' We gave up a lot and we made some mistakes, but ultimately found the plays that we needed to win the game," said Wright.

The dramatics of the final play were a drastic shift from the opening minutes of the game. Henry gave up a 17-yard

touchdown run by Ashton Drakeford on Mercer's first drive and the Titans recovered a Blaik Nation fumble on the Wildcats' opening drive to regain possession.

Once the Wildcats settled into the game, both sides of the ball ramped up the intensity. The defense forced a fumble on a punt return, allowing the offense to take over five yards from the goal. Matthews punched the ball in from three yards out to score and Morgan Wilson's extra point knotted the game at 7-7.

Matthews, who had three touchdowns in last week's blowout win over Western Hills, finished with four touchdowns and accounted for several crucial stops on the defensive end, including a huge sack to force a punt in the second quarter.

When the Wildcats needed a play, they often turned to Matthews to bully his way through the defense to pick up first downs. On multiple runs, more than one Titan combined to bring him down. During one specific run, it took six defenders to bring Matthews to the ground.

"He was the hot hand the whole game. I mean, they were having a hard time tackling him when he was running hard,"

said Wright.

Mercer regained the lead on a 55-yard touchdown run by Morgan Pennington, but Henry quickly put up seven points of its own as Luke Lyons returned the kickoff the length of the field for a touchdown.

Jordan King connected with Landon Robins for an 11-yard touchdown to give Henry a 21-14 lead going into halftime.

"The offense was able to move and continue to get better throughout the game and score enough to win the game," said Wright. "That's fun."

Matthews continued his rampage early in the second half, running for a 1-yard touchdown to push the lead to 28-14.

Denim Griffeth, the main ball carrier for Mercer, cut the lead to seven on the next drive. He found an opening in the defense and ran for 18 yards to the end zone.

Matthews, Nation and Trenton Hardy accounted for most of the snaps on the ensuing drive, along with a couple passes to Lyons. The Wildcats faced fourth-and-one at the 30-yard line, but Matthews was stopped short to force a turnover on downs.

A 39-yard pass from Thaddeus Mays to Drake

See WILDCATS page A8



Photo by Abby Hooven
Kyle Gillingham nabs a pass between two defenders for a first down. The Wildcats scored two plays later to take the lead.

Wildcats

FROM PAGE A7

eford put Mercer near the goal on the following possession. A sack and an incomplete pass put the Titans in a third-and-13 situation, but Mays found Drakeford again for a 27-yard touchdown to tie the game with 7:40 remaining in regulation.

The Wildcats countered with an 11 play, 80-yard drive featuring seven carries by Matthews, including the 1-yard carry for the touchdown with 1:51 to go.

A face mask call against Henry on Mercer's first play of its drive and several completed passes moved the Titans down the field. The final pass, a 10-yard launch to Wade Lane, and the completed PAT tied the game at 35-35 with 22.9 seconds left.

Henry only got one play off before the end of regulation, a four-yard carry by Hardy.

Mercer took the field first in overtime, and the Wildcat defense came away with the biggest stop of the game, and possibly the year. Griffith was brought down for a loss of three yards and a false start against the Titans pushed them back to the 18-yard line. Two incomplete passes brought up fourth-and-18, and Jase Coconaugh hit a field goal to put Mercer ahead 38-35.

"When we look at the team effort, we had the turnover on the punt earlier in the game that led to a touchdown. You have



Photo by Abby Hooven

Ray Matthews hurdles his teammate to gain yardage. Matthews finished with four touchdowns, including the game-winner in overtime.

a kickoff return that ends up being a touchdown. Your defense has a couple big stands, has the biggest stand at the end there in overtime," Wright said.

The Wildcats used two carries to get to the 1-yard line. Out of a Mercer County timeout, Henry was stopped just shy of the goal line to bring up fourth-and-goal. Wright called a timeout, and rather than play it safe with a field goal, he decided to put his O-line to the test.

"I don't want to look back and say I didn't put the game on the offensive line," said Wright. "We called timeout on that fourth-down play, I said, 'Hey we're putting it on you O-line, move them, we're giving the ball to Ray, put it in the end zone,' and it was close but he got in. He definitely

got in."

With the protection of the O-line, Matthews found the end zone, and after a quick pause by the referees to inspect the pile, the touchdown was confirmed, much to the dismay of the Mercer County coaches.

"It was a great team effort, a great team win," said Wright.

Unlike the previous district matchups with running clocks, Henry needed every second to emerge on the winning side.

"The last few games have not been competitive, and that's the big thing too, to be able to compete with a program that's got a lot of history. To be competitive in this district, you're gonna have to beat teams that have a lot of history that are established and have had some wins," said

Wright.

According to the KHSAA website, the win was the first against Mercer at least since 1999 when KHSAA's records first show a matchup between the two schools.

The thrilling end also secured the status that many saw as impossible: district runner-up. With that accomplishment, the Wildcats will also host a playoff game for the first time in years.

"To be able to be district runner-up and win against these other good teams, I mean that's huge. It's big for our program to show that we can play with anybody, that we're not competing for just making it in, that we're going to win it," said Wright. "It's huge for us in the future. It's huge for us now. I'm so proud of the kids."