

Lee's West leads the way, recognized for efforts

Brunson, Williams, Smith also honored by Sumter TD Club

By Dennis Brunson

In the biggest game of the season, Lee Academy football head coach David Rankin kept feeding and kept feeding senior wingback William West.

"We probably ran the wingback counter 20 times," said Rankin, whose Cavaliers beat Thomas Heyward Academy 35-19 on Friday to advance to the SCISA Class A title game.

West also had a few carries in the wildcat formation at quarterback as he finished with 151 yards and three touchdowns on 27 carries. Because of his performance, West has been selected as the SAFE Offensive Player of the Week for the Sumter Touchdown Club presented by FTC.

The other three selections for the SAFE Players of the Week are Laurence Manning Academy cornerback Jackson Brunson as the Defensive Player of the Week, Sumter High School left guard Jerius Williams as the Offensive Lineman of the Week and Williamsburg Academy kicker Wes Smith as the Special Teams Player of the Week.

The quartet will be honored at the touchdown club's final weekly breakfast meeting on Friday at the Sumter County Receptions and Parks' Jasmine Hall located at 155 Haynsworth Street. Breakfast will start at 7 a.m. with the program beginning at 7:30. The guest speaker will be recruiting guru Phil Kornblut, the longtime host of the "SportsTalk" radio show.

OFFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE WEEK

WILLIAM WEST

LEE ACADEMY

RUNNING BACK

SENIOR

West has been a key performer for Lee, the defending Class A champions, but still had just 55 carries entering the Thomas Heyward game, albeit for 663 yards. He came up just short of getting half of that number of carries against the Rebels.

"We ran a lot of counter and a lot of quarterback runs," said West, who took over at quarterback for a while when starter Clayton Catoe was out with an injury. "Mainly the credit goes to our offensive line because they were able to open up the holes."

Rankin said the offensive line likes blocking for West. "The guards like pulling out in front for him," Rankin said. "He does a good job by cutting off of their blocks. The line is motivated to get out there and block for him."

While the Cavaliers indeed won by 16 points, they only led 21-19 at one point in the second half. So West was doing some tough sledding with the game on the line.

"We needed him to be able to run it for us to be successful," Rankin said. "He's really started to come on, starting about three weeks ago."

That would have been against the Carolina Academy when West ran for 168 yards and three touchdowns on 14 carries and caught a 34-yard touchdown pass in a 42-14 victory.

“I’ve just been schemed more into the game,” West said of his recent success. “I feel like our team offensively has been clicking a whole lot more lately.”

DEFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE WEEK

JACKSON BRUNSON

LAURENCE MANNING

CORNERBACK

SENIOR

Brunson had 13 tackles, two forced fumbles, a fumble recovery and two tackles for loss in the Swampcats' 48-21 win over Porter-Gaud in the semifinals of the SCISA AAAA playoffs.

Brunson was a disruptive force from his cornerback position as soon as the Swampcat defense stepped on the field. The Cyclones tried to pitch the football to star running back JJ Fludd on the option on their first offensive play, but Brunson got in the backfield and kept that from happening. The ball hit the ground and Brunson moved in and recovered it.

To top it off, Brunson caught a 16-yard touchdown pass from quarterback Tyler June on the next play. That was the first of three touchdowns Brunson scored, two via a pass and the other on the run.

“That first drive on defense we got the fumble and scored,” Brunson said. “Then on the second drive on the second play; Noah Tanner got the interception and we scored (to make it 14-0). That's when we know we're moving on (to the state championship game), that we're winning that game.”

At the start of the second half, Brunson made a similar defensive play that took away any doubt. The Cyclones received the kickoff trailing 28-7 and tried the option again. Brunson was again there, forcing another fumble that was recovered by linebacker Jeremiah Burson. LMA punched it in the end zone to put the game away.

Brunson, who has been a standout his entire career at LMA, didn't really have an explanation for his tremendous performance. “I really don't know,” he said. “I was just locked in, always trying to spring to the ball. We're always springing to the ball. That's a good thing about our defense.”

Laurence Manning head coach Will Furse said Brunson is simply a well-rounded player.

“One thing we're looking for on defense is guys that can tackle, and Jackson can do that,” Furse said. “He's really good in pass coverage, he's a sure tackler in the open field. He's always around the ball.

“He just had a huge game. He's a threat offensively; he's so versatile. He can do it all and we ask a lot out of him, and he can do it well.”

LINEMAN OF THE WEEK

JERIUS WILLIAMS

SUMTER

LEFT GUARD

JUNIOR

Williams graded out at 90 percent and had three knockdown blocks as the Gamecocks had 430 yards of total offense in their 27-6 win over Stratford in the second round of the AAAAA state playoffs.

Williams felt like he and his teammates had to overcome a ploy by Stratford in pregame warmups to take the edge off of them entering the game.

“I felt like they were trying to lull us to sleep,” the junior left guard said. “They were playing slow jazz, real soft music. Stratford came late to warmups. We really just started to bring the energy once the game started.”

Sumter had a balanced offensive attack. Running back John Peebles rushed for 209 yards and three scores while quarterback Pate Merchant threw for 195 yards and another TD.

The lineman said he had a simple motivation for his performance.

“I really just wanted to move on,” said Williams, whose team will play undefeated White Knoll in the third round on Friday. “I knew I needed to play my best, so I put my all into it.”

Sumter head coach Mark Barnes said Williams has played most of the season with both a shoulder and knee injury.

“He doesn’t get to practice a lot,” Barnes said. “He does walk-throughs during the week because of the injuries. I’m so impressed by his toughness, his desire to be out there every Friday. He’s a great teammate, and he goes out there and plays hard.”

SPECIAL TEAMS PLAYER OF THE WEEK

WES SMITH

WILLIAMSBURG

KICKER

SENIOR

Smith was 5-for-5 on extra point attempts, had two touchbacks on kickoffs as Beaufort Academy started inside its 20-yard line on four kickoffs in the Stallions' 41-6 win in the semifinals of the SCISA AA state playoffs.

Stallions head coach Tyler Boyd said Smith’s performance on kickoffs was huge because the Eagles have been explosive on kickoff returns all season.

“All year long it seems they been returning it to the 50, and they almost ran one back against us the first time we played them,” said Boyd, whose team came away with a 26-13 triumph in the first meeting. “I was worried to death about that. They put all of their best players on kickoff return. Wes did a great job, kicking two into the end zone and kicking two very high that they caught around the 2. We did a great job in coverage.”

“On film we saw that they’re a good, strong kick return team,” said Smith, who is a senior. “I was trying to keep it away from the good, strong returners and kicking it high. We were making tackles inside the 20.”

Smith, who started kicking in the eighth grade, is now 49 of 57 on extra point attempts. He is 3-for-5 on field goals with a long of 43 yards.

“I had always been a receiver and didn’t play much defense,” Smith said. “I wanted to get on the field more, so I started working on kicking. I knew if I worked at it, I could be good at it.”

He’s also the leading receiver for the defending AA champions with 18 catches for 278 yards and three touchdowns.