

Spartans Host Improved Timberwolves in Quarterfinal

By Ron Holt

After suffering a disappointing loss to visiting Norman in the regular season finale, Bixby's District 1 champion Spartans spent the bye week working on correcting mistakes and increasing practice tempo and energy.

This week, the Spartans are focused on formulating a game plan in preparation for the Class 6A-I state quarterfinal battle with improved Norman North. The Timberwolves visit Bixby's Lee Snider Stadium for a 7 p.m. kickoff on Friday (Nov. 22).

The Spartans dropped to 8-2 on the season and 6-1 in District 1 after falling to fired-up Norman, 31-20, almost two weeks ago. Finishing atop the district, however, earned the Spartans a bye week.

Norman North (4-7, 3-4), winners of four of its last five games, celebrated qualifying for the state playoffs with an impressive second half rally en route to a 30-19 win over Moore in a Class 6A-I first round playoff game at Norman's Harve Collins Field last Saturday afternoon.

Trailing the Lions 19-7 at halftime, Norman North rallied behind veteran, talented senior quarterback Owen Eshelman to outscore the Lions 23-0 in the second half while advancing to the playoff quarterfinals for the second year in a row.

Eshelman, a 6-3, 195-pound dual threat at quarterback, sparked the Timberwolves by rushing for two touchdowns and passing for two TDs. He was 10-of-19 passing for 153 yards and two TDs while rushing 21 times for 192 yards and two scores.

The Timberwolves defense contributed to the win by recovering two fumbles and being credited with four sacks.

It was a stunning turnaround for the Timberwolves who lost six straight games starting the season before pointing the arrow upward. The final non-district loss earlier this season was a 33-28 setback at Moore.

Other non-league losses were to Norman (37-27) and at Deer Creek (35-10).

In District 2 play, Norman North lost to Edmond Memorial (21-6), lost at Westmoore (27-24) and fell to visiting Tulsa Union (56-27) before winning 47-28 at Broken Arrow for its first win. NNHS rolled 42-21 at Yukon, battled top-ranked Owasso tough at home before losing 64-54 and ended the regular season with a 55-28 win at Edmond Santa Fe.

Norman North, led by head coach Justin Jones, overcame a 24-point third quarter deficit against Owasso to get within 50-47 in the fourth quarter. The Timberwolves finished with 565 yards of total offense against the Rams.

Eshelman had an outstanding game in the loss. He threw five touchdown passes to receiver Mason James, who ended with 11 receptions for 222 yards. Eshelman passed for 363 yards and rushed for 202 yards.

This will be the third meeting between Bixby and Norman North in the last three seasons. In 2023, Bixby defeated the Timberwolves, 60-2, at Lee Snider Stadium in the first district game of the season. In 2022, Bixby rolled over the Timberwolves 63-7 in a district game at Norman North.

Bixby did some soul-searching last week while watching film and emphasizing areas that needed improvement following the loss to Norman. Bixby trailed early against the Tigers before rallying in the second quarter to narrow the deficit to 21-20 at halftime.

In the second half, BHS received Braeden Presley's second pass interception of the game, but the Spartans never got untracked offensively as the Spartans were blanked in the second half.

The Spartans understand the need to play their best football of the season in the state playoffs. There are no second chances in the playoffs.

"The big emphasis for us is that winning isn't easy, that's something we've talked about all year," said Bixby head coach Loren Montgomery discussing bye week practices. "Last week we were playing an 8-1 team and as we're heading into the playoffs, we're going to have to be at our best ... we're going to have to grind and do the little things right to win some games.

"I felt we competed and the tempo of practice was good, how we prepare is a big thing. On a bye week

sometimes it's a challenge a little because you don't know who you are going to play yet and you can't work on a game plan, but our practices have been really crisp all week.

"Improving as a practice team was the big thing we accomplished this week," coach Montgomery added. "The bye week also helps because of some nicks and bruises we had. It allowed us to heal up."

NOTES – In the 2023 meeting with Norman North, Bixby led 39-0 at halftime. The Timberwolves only score came on a safety with 3:02 left in the game. In that game, Bixby ended with 616 total offensive yards while Norman North had 216 yards of total offense. Spartan quarterback Carson Kirby passed for 264 yards and four touchdowns while Cord Nolan had two catches for 126 yards and two TDs and Kordell Gouldsby had three receptions for 92 yards and one TD. ... Bixby has won nine of the last 10 state championships – seven in Class 6A-II and the past two in Class 6A-1. The Spartans have captured six straight state titles. ... Norman North quarterback Owen Eshelman committed to play collegiately at South Dakota State. ... The Timberwolves athletic junior wide receiver/defensive back Mason James saw limited action against Moore. The 5-11, 170-pounder is a four-star receiver who has received numerous Power 5 collegiate offers. Last season, he scored 17 touchdowns. ... In 2023, Norman North defeated Edmond North (30-17) in the first round of the playoffs before being ousted by Owasso (50-21). In 2022, the Timberwolves fell at Owasso (41-34) in the quarterfinals. ... Of the teams involved in the state playoffs this season, Bixby played Moore, Norman, Owasso, Deer Creek, Mustang and Jenks. ... The Bixby-Norman North game will be broadcast by The Sports Animal, FM-97.1, with Shawn Tiemann providing play-by-play description and Mark Wozniak providing color commentary.

CLASS 6A-I PLAYOFFS – In first-round playoff games last week, Norman North defeated Moore (30-19), Norman routed Westmoore (69-28), Deer Creek-Edmond edged Broken Arrow (21-19) and Tulsa Union knocked off Mustang (38-21).

State quarterfinal games Friday (Nov. 22) include Bixby hosting Norman North, Edmond Memorial hosting Norman, Deer Creek visiting Owasso and Tulsa Union visiting Jenks.

In the state semifinals, scheduled Nov. 29, the Bixby-Norman North winner plays the Edmond Memorial-Norman winner while the Owasso-Deer Creek winner plays the Union-Jenks winner.

The Class 6A-1 state championship game is set for 7 p.m. Friday, Dec. 6, at the University of Central Oklahoma's Chad Richison Stadium in Edmond.