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SA jumps on Nitro, wins 28-0

Thompson punt return for touchdown ends suspense early

By [Doug Smock](#), Staff writer



Lawrence Pierce Photo

St. Albans QB Wade Walters rumbles down the field as Nitro's Ethan Clark comes up for the tackle.

Considering how St. Albans held Nitro to 79 total yards and forced the Wildcats to punt 10 times, Friday night's edition of the "Battle of the Bridge" was probably not going to be close, no matter how it started.

But Devon Thompson sucked the suspense out of the proceedings before the end of the first quarter of the Red Dragons' 28-0 victory. The 5-foot-10, 170-pound senior returned the game's first punt 71 yards for a touchdown, and he later ran 30 yards on a fake punt to keep another drive alive.

Three plays after that, Markus Guy scored the first of his two touchdowns to give the Red Dragons a 14-0 lead with 28.9 seconds left in the quarter. There was a lot of football left, but very little drama.

"Devon set the tone for us a little bit, got everybody excited," said SA coach Derek Christian. "And we just tried to keep building off of that."

Minutes after parachutists arrived with the game ball and an American flag, Nitro was forced to punt in three plays. Thompson fielded the Kevin Sloan kick, evaded an initial wave of tacklers and was off to the MacCorkle Avenue end zone.

Nitro had one of its few highlights on the Dragons' first offensive possession, getting a blitz-induced Josh Lanham interception of a Wade Walters pass. Nitro could not move the ball from the SA 36-yard line and had to punt again. When the Dragons bogged down near midfield, the game took on the feel of a defensive struggle.

But it wasn't to be. On fourth-and-6, the Dragons lined up to punt but the snap went to Thompson, the up back. He hit the left corner before the Wildcats could diagnose the play and rambled for 30 yards to the Nitro 21. Guy scored three plays later.

"They really wanted me to score on that, so I tried my best to do what I can," Thompson said. "We usually go through the middle, but I had to go around the edge. I didn't score, but I gave field position for the offense to score, and that's the main thing."

"Each week, that's what has killed us - mental mistakes," said Nitro assistant coach John Painter. "We worked on that all day Wednesday, the punt return and the coverage. And we knew they might fake-punt it, and they did, and we didn't execute it."

St. Albans tacked on a Drew Kirby 12-yard run in the second quarter and a 1-yard run by Guy in the third to seal its first victory after losses to Ripley and Riverside. By then, the Dragons' dominance of the line of scrimmage was well established, as well as the valiant yet futile effort by the Nitro passing game.

With Guy churning for 137 yards on 27 carries, the Dragons chugged for 247 on the ground. They outgained the Wildcats 288-79 and enjoyed a 17-4 bulge in first downs.

"We're starting to pick it up a little bit," Christian said. "Our younger guys are starting to understand the speed of the game, and hopefully they're getting a feel for it, the intensity level they need, and that kind of thing."

"[Ripley and Riverside], one of those teams had 22 seniors and Ripley had 25 seniors. I looked out there tonight, and we had five sophomores and three freshmen. We're kind of young there, but we're not using that as an excuse."

It was another tough day for Nitro (0-4), whose head coach, Bob Gobel, had surgery for a torn tendon in his leg earlier Friday. With quarterback Mark Chandler long since suspended and transferred to Huntington, Zach Cloxton and Bodie Johnson combined to go 3-for-22 passing for just 19 yards. The Wildcats committed two turnovers and suffered seven three-and-outs.

Cloxton did have an interception on defense, picking off Walters in the end zone to stop another SA threat.

"When you have a quarterback that's led your team through the first six weeks, in camp and into the season, and then all of a sudden you have to throw in a couple of quarterbacks that haven't had any

reps ..." Painter said. "Again, it's about execution and of just repping. Right now, we just haven't got the reps in.

"I just told the kids that we've got to throw and catch every day, and even a little extra. We have to get better at that if we're going to try to move the football."

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