

By Pastor Vince Carrig

Sports Writer

Hershey's Gaige Marshall returned a punt 70 yards for a touchdown and the Panthers pounced on six Plainsmen turnovers to put Perkins County's postseason on ice with a 27-7 win last Thursday night in Grant.

Gaige Marshall put the Panthers ahead for good in the third quarter, using a Josh Margritz block to avoid the tackler hurtling toward him, cutting to the right, and racing the punt down the right sideline to give Hershey a 14-7 lead.

The Panthers next scooped up a Plainsmen fumble at midfield on the cold, snow-laced turf and advanced 50 yards to create some breathing room with a 20-7 lead.

Disappearing time and a two-touchdown disadvantage led to three interceptions that sealed the win for the 5-4 Panthers.

"You can't turn the ball over six times in a playoff game and win," Plainsmen Head Coach Chip Kay said after the game. "We didn't have any trouble running the offense, we didn't hang onto the football."



Looking as potent as they did for most of their 7-1 regular season, the Plainsmen advanced 64 yards on their first possession of the game to take a 7-0 lead.

Running back Tim Johnson dragged multiple tacklers for 15 yards, and slipped a couple more Panthers in a 13-yard run to set up his four-yard score following linemen Blake Poppe and Alex Malmkar's blocks.

Few could have imagined, however, that the 2012 Perkins County squad would never score again.

A controversial call killed a potential 14-0 Plainsmen lead. After quarterback Elliot Carlson took off for 38 yards to position Perkins County deep in Hershey territory, he called his own number again. Carlson faked a pass and split Poppe and Malmkar to Hershey's two-yard line. After clearly hitting only the ground, the ball popped loose and rolled into the end zone, where Panthers defender Colton Marshall gladly took custody of it.

By rule, the ground cannot cause a fumble, and video evidence clearly shows Carlson's knee on the ground while still possessing the ball, and that the ground pushed the ball out of his grasp. Despite the quarterback's quizzical look and bitter protests from the home crowd, the referees' call not only gave the Panthers the ball but spotted them 20 yards upfield.

"Does that make a big difference in the game? Yeah, it very well could have," Coach Kay said. "It's a really crucial call that went against us, but you have to be able to deal with that in a playoff game."

Dylan Johnson's sliding touchdown catch with 8:38 left after another fumbled Plainsmen snap made a Perkins County comeback seem difficult, at best. Granted real estate at midfield,

Margritz consistently pounded runs up the middle for 30 of those yards before Colton Marshall threw low to Johnson for a 20-7 Hershey lead.

Senior linebacker Jacob Thompson hid behind a bush before appearing to intercept a pass over the middle and seal the playoff win for Hershey. Thompson actually dropped back into coverage and slid over to his left to allow Hershey to set up shop at the Perkins County 12-yard line with 7:49 left.

The Plainsmen defense and three Panthers penalties made Hershey relinquish the football at the Perkins County 10-yard line, but disaster struck twice on the Plainsmen. Agile linebacker Landan Maassen barely tipped a pass in the backfield, redirecting it into the hands of linebacker Terence Whiting at Perkins County's 19-yard line.

The Panthers exacted payment after the second interception, with Margritz rushing for 14 of the yards they needed and running back Tyler Brown collecting six points with a five-yard run.

The game's final statistics look pretty balanced between the teams, with the Plainsmen outgaining Hershey from scrimmage 302-234 yards. Obviously Hershey's long punt return, the Plainsmen fumbles that stopped penetration into Panthers territory, and the interceptions that capped any Perkins County comeback determined the game's outcome.

Hershey took full advantage of a botched Plainsmen center snap, shoving it 62 yards east to tie the game 7-7. Panthers 6-foot-3 senior receiver Dylan Johnson caught a pass that quarterback Marshall zinged over the middle for 20 yards, extended his route for a 26-yard hookup, and then faked "outside shoulder" in the right corner of the end zone to catch a high touchdown pass over his inside shoulder.

Dylan Johnson put up "go-to" receiver numbers: six catches, 92 yards and two touchdowns.

The Plainsmen defense played tough in the first half, forcing Hershey to punt once and run out of downs another time.

Plainsmen defensive end Colton White stuffed a short pass to Hershey receiver Margritz, and a gang tackle forced a fumble at the play's end. At the Panthers' 44-yard line with Hershey ahead 14-7 and 14:03 remaining, referees allowed Hershey to keep the ball.

Colton White led the Plainsmen with two tackles-for-loss.

A holding penalty erased a 36-yard run by Carlson that would have put the Plainsmen in business at the Hershey 41-yard line at the beginning of the third quarter.

Plainsmen seniors Elliot Carlson, Vinny Ross, Alex Malmkar, Blake Poppe, Colton White, Alex Johnston, Ty Summers, Austin Thelander and Cole Whalen played excellent football during their final year in the program; their departures leave big holes to fill on the roster. Running backs Tim Johnson and Kaleb Vak figure to lead the 2013 offense that has a quarterback who can throw and run in Christian White. Chase Miyamoto and Matt Sestak played crucial varsity minutes and should anchor the wide outside of both the offense and defense. Trevor Walker and Chris Throckmorton asserted themselves on defense this year and will likely play 100+ snaps per game next year.

The 2012 Hershey Panthers earned themselves a home playoff date against 7-1 Blue Hill last night (October 31). The Bobcats ran away from Kimball, 41-7, last Thursday night. The winner will face either Sutton or Hastings-St. Cecelia, teams that won their opening round games by a combined 90-0 score.

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Hershey punt return, PC turnovers put Plainsmen playoff run on ice

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Rushing leaders—Perkins County: Carlson 22-129 (38); Johnson 18-116 (15) TD; Johnston 5-40 (22); Hershey: Margritz 17-69 (9); Marshall, G. 10-69 (16); Brown 6-19 (6) TD.

Passing leaders—Perkins County: Carlson 3-13-17-0-3; Hershey: Marshall, C. 9-16-105-2.

Receiving leaders—Perkins County: Thelander 2-13 (11); Johnson 1-4; Hershey: Johnson 6-92 (26) 2TD; Maassen 1-8; Margritz 2-5.

Tackling leaders—Perkins County: Malmkar 9 (3); Ross 4 (1); Sestak 3.5 (3) White 3.5 (1); Johnson 3 (2); Miyamoto 3 (2); Johnston 3 (1).



