By EARL WATT

• Leader & Times

GODDARD — Just before half, Liberal was clinging to a 16-7 lead, and the Tigers were driving, and coach Cliff Abbott was already losing his voice trying to get the official's attention that the clock had not run for two plays.

With only 16.9 seconds remaining in the half, and Goddard at the Redskin 20-yard line, the officials agreed with Abbott, and during an Eisenhower time out asked the clock to be reduced by nine seconds.

With the next play about to take place, the clock still showed 16.9 seconds, and Abbott again asked when were they going to take the time off the clock. The head official told Abbott that they had checked with the timekeeper, and the time was right.

Just before Abbott erupted, the head official let Abbott in on the joke, pointed at the clock, and the time read 7.9 seconds.

In the tenseness of the moment, Abbott was able to crack a smile in a game that had all the drama of a playoff match-up and an officiating crew that tried to bring the tone down a notch.

That was a tough task in a game that remained in the balance until the final play and had four lead changes in the final five minutes.

When Liberal needed to make a play, Abbott made sure that the ball would be in the hands of

the top overall yards leader in Kansas with Britton Abbott and one of the top receivers in the Midwest with Trenton Hammond.

When Liberal needed a touchdown with 9.6 seconds to play, there was no doubt where Abbott was going to pass the ball.

"None at all," coach Cliff Abbott said. "It was going to Trenton, or Britton was going to run it. We felt we could get it there then or on the next play. We still had two time outs. Everybody in the stadium knew those two were going to have the ball, and that's who you want to have it — in the playmaker's hands."

And the "Playmaker" did just that. Crunched against the sideline in the end zone with three Tigers around him, Hammond reached up and made the game-winning catch.

For Abbott, there was no question whether or not Hammond made the play.

"Without a doubt," he said. "I was looking down the line, and his left foot came in bounds, and the defenders fell out with him. I was just hoping he kept the ball when he went down, that was one thing I didn't know. When I saw the official getting in position to see that, it was a touchdown. It was an unbelievable experience for them. I am proud of them for never quitting, it has been a four-year process to get to right here."

Abbott expected the Tigers to play softer defense on the final drive so they would not get burned deep, and Britton Abbott took advantage, throwing under the coverage all the way down the field.

"What I felt is they would play a little softer," Cliff Abbott said. "They were giving up some soft, but it got harder inside the 20, and that was when the athleticism of our receiver came out on top."

Liberal needed to rally after letting a 22-7 lead slip away in the fourth quarter that included a failed fourth-down-and-two attempt at Liberal's own 10 yard line. Eisenhower scored on the next play to take a 24-22 lead.

"We will be aggressive with the ball," Abbott said. "The last thing we want to do is punt it. I really thought we could get the two yards. I didn't want to punt into the wind. We might have moved it 15 yards. Playing the averages, they have a 70 percent chance of scoring. I wanted us to have the ball. They overcame their coaching and made big plays when they needed to."

With only one regular season game to go, Liberal has secured a playoff berth, guaranteed a winning regular season, and broke a 19-game losing streak in the Western Athletic Conference this season.

The march back to the post-season began after the Carroll game a year ago.

"It has been one where we set a goal right after the season last year," Abbot said. "We felt with a senior-led team coming in and our maturity, the coaching staff staying together, we could do some things that havent' been done. Now we are in the playoffs. We want to go deep and get to the state championship. I know that is a bold statement, but if they keep playing to the end, they will be fine. They have two of the best players in the state, and the best offense in the state.

"We have a great challenge coming to Liberal next week. (Carroll is) undefeated and the defending state champs. We need a great week of preparation. We are already in the playoffs, so let's roll the dice and see what happens."

Kick-off for the District 8 championship is slated for 7 p.m. at Redskin Field.