By EARL WATT

• Leader & Times

WICHITA — The Redskin offense started slow but finished strong in the first round of the Kansas Class 5A playoffs, but the hole dug early was too much for Liberal in a 55-40 loss to private Catholic school Kapaun Mt. Carmel.

Liberal trailed 55-22 with 10:32 remaining in the game when they put together a 15-play, 80-yard drive that took three minutes and used a 35-yard reception to Rex Heronemus and a two-yard touchdown plunge from Britton Abbott to cut the lead to 55-28.

Liberal recovered the onside kick at the Kapaun 29-yard line and after passes to Cristian Erives (five yards) and Nolan Larkin (15 yards), Heronemus took the hand-off and trucked the final nine yards into the end zone for a touchdown and a 55-34 score on a three-play drive that only took 50 seconds.

Kapaun attempted a 31-yard field goal with 4:11 to play, but it was partially blocked, and Liberal took over at the Redskin 20 yard line.

Liberal went on a 13-play, 80-yard drive with three key passes to Larkin (10, 10 and 18 yards) and when Abbott dove over the goal line with 1:32 remaining in the game, the Redskins had reduced the Kapaun lead to 55-40.

Liberal appeared to recover the next onside kick, but a large pile-up took time for the officials to reach the bottom, and by the time they did, Kapaun's Michael Lickteig emerged with the ball, and the Redskins rally ended with a first down by the Crusaders that allowed Kapaun to run out the clock.

Liberal switched strategy at the start of the game when Kapaun deferred after winning the coin toss, and instead of taking the ball, Liberal chose the wind.

Kapaun used the clock while facing the stiff breeze and did not throw a pass in the first quarter.

Kapaun scored twice in the first 12 minutes while the Redskins were only able to use the wind for eight plays including a three-and-out on their first possession.

Liberal cut the lead to 14-6 early in the second quarter, but Kapaun quarterback Brock Monty threw his first pass of the game to Devin Dempsey in the flat after recovering an onside kick at their own 44 yard line, and Dempsey sprinted untouched 56 yards for a touchdown and a 21-6 Crusader lead.

With 6:44 to go in the first half, the Redskins put together a 12-play, 80-yard drive after another missed Kapaun field goal that ended with an eight-yard touchdown run by Heronemus. Trenton Hammond caught the two-point conversion pass, and the Redskins had narrowed the gap to 21-14.

Liberal's defense forced Kapaun to a three-and-out, and Liberal had a chance to tie the game before halftime, but the Redskins could not escape the shadow of their own end zone after covering the punt at the 9 yard line, and the Redskins punted to their own 40 yard line with 1:22 remaining.

Kapaun only needed 32 seconds to score after an eight-yard run by Alexander Norris and a 32-yard touchdown pass from Monty to Jack McGrath. Kapaun bobbled the snap on the field goal try but was able to scramble into the end zone, and the Crusaders were able to take a 29-14 lead at half.

The Redskins opened the second half with what appeared to be a promising return by Hammond, but Kapaun was able to strip the ball near midfield and recovered the fumble at the Crusader 44 yard line.

Six plays later, Monty ran 10 yards for a touchdown and a 35-14 Kapaun lead.

Liberal answered with a 13-play, 83-yard drive that included a fourth-down conversion and a 17-yard pass to Larkin and ended with a seven-yard touchdown run by Abbott to narrow Kapaun's lead to 35-22.

But the Crusaders were able to score the next 20 points when they recovered another Redskin fumble and the Redskins failed to convert on a fourth-and inches.

That's when Liberal strung together 18-straight points of their own for the 55-40 final.

Kapaun took senior standout Hammond out of the game with double and triple coverage. Hammond ended the game with one catch for nine yards and one run for five.

Senior Larkin had a career night with 16 receptions for 195 yards. Larkin was able to catch crossing routes and turn upfield for big gains and key fourth-down conversions all night.

Senior Lorenzo Pando made seven catches for 88 yards. Junior Erives had five catches for 42 yards, and junior Heronemus came out of the backfield to make four catches for 63 yards.

Abbott ended his career as a Redskins with 27 rushes for 44 yards and completed 33 of 52 passes for 396 yards.

The playoff appearance for the Redskins was the first since 2009.

The Redskins ended the season at 5-5.

Kapaun advanced to the sectional to face Salina Central who defeated Andover 48-12.