

Four cracks at the 1-yard line for the win ... somehow Pitt still falls short

By [Chris Mueller](#) November 18, 2017

BLACKSBURG, Va. – The entire Pitt sideline gazed at Lane Stadium’s south end zone in disbelief as the clock struck zero in Saturday’s game against Virginia Tech. **Qadree Ollison** lowered his body to the turf with his head down.

The entire Hokies sideline exploded to the VT logo at midfield in jubilation.

With first-and-goal at the one-yard line, the Panthers were three feet away from an improbable win over one of the ACC’s best.

But ultimately, that was as close as they’d ever get.

“We have four downs from the 1, we’ve got to punch it in,” **Pat Narduzzi** said after the **20-14** loss. “You’ve got to block them. You need a yard. We can sit here and talk about play calls. You’ve got to block them. ...We know (Virginia Tech) is a good football team. We know they’ve got a good run defense. ... But it’s a yard.”

The loss to North Carolina nine days prior was as bad as they typically come. This one was far, far worse.

“We had four plays to get a yard,” **Darrin Hall** recalled. “We thought we had the game won.”

This was bitter.

“This one definitely stings,” said **Kenny Pickett** “A lot of hard work gets put in by a lot of people.”

This was gut-wrenching.

“We were (on the sidelines) and guys’ emotions were all over the place,” **Seun Idowu** said. “You’re pretty excited to see something good happen, but then they end up getting a stop at the end of the day. That hurts.”

This was reality.

Jester Weah’s 75-yard catch in the fourth quarter set the Panthers up the first-and-goal trailing 20-14 with 52 seconds left. It was initially called a touchdown, but overturned after official ruling indicated his knee hit the ground at the one-yard line.



So, the offense came back on to the field with 62 seconds left on the clock.

As the noise from the raucous crowd became deafening, Pitt’s offensive line dug its hands into the turf inches across from Virginia Tech’s salivating defensive front. Pickett, who replaced **Ben DiNucci** in the second quarter, approached the line slowly.

Just two quarters before, Pickett, a 19-year old freshman, was thrust into action against the ACC’s No. 1 defense. This wasn’t high school anymore. This

wasn't one snap against Syracuse or three series against N.C. State.

This was first-and-goal with the game, and season, on the line.

Hall stood 5 feet behind him with his beat up body ready to explode at the first sign of Pickett's movement. The Hokies had limited him to just 14 net yards on 13 carries before the final drive, after registering eight touchdowns and three 100-plus yard performances in as many games.

There was a point to be made here. A score to win would give him the last laugh.

"We went out there with a better goal than what happened," Hall said.

Ollison came in motion, left guard **Alex Officer** pulled from the backside and Hall toward a lane before he was met by a combined 496 pounds from Virginia Tech's **Zion Debose** (35) and **Tremaine Edwards** (49). Hall was stopped in his tracks, but dug his feet in and refused to go down until several other Hokies came to help:



Narduzzi then used his last timeout as the Panthers collected whatever was left of their breaths in the huddle and again walked to the line of scrimmage.

In nearly an identical formation, Hall took the ball right and tried to slip through a hole within the offensive line's zone blocking scheme.

Morrissey and right guard **Alex Bookser** created a pile in the middle that Hall potentially could have leaped over, but he instead bounced outside near the 'B' gap where tight end **Chris Clark** was blown 3 yards back.

“I get paid to get a yard,” he said. “I have to find a way to do it.”



Without a timeout and under 30 seconds left, Pickett frantically directed the offense into formation. The clock was ticking. No player could hear anything but the crowd, yet everyone knew where the ball was going.

Right back to the person who initially placed them in that situation.

“I threw a fade up to Jester,” said Pickett, with a slight quiver in his voice. “It’s either a touchdown or it’s incomplete and you’ve got one more shot at it. That was our mindset.”



Greg Stroman, who had intercepted Pickett earlier in the fourth quarter, won the one-on-one battle over Pitt's lone senior receiver. It left one final try at avoiding disaster with three seconds left in regulation. All eyes of the 58,948 in attendance were focused on what Pitt would do next.

As the offense broke the huddle, it became apparent that **Shawn Watson** wasn't placing the game on the shoulders of Pickett to make a big-time throw.

The Panthers lined up in a shotgun set with Hall and Ollison on both sides of the quarterback. Tight ends **Tyler Sear** and **Devon Edwards** – both of whom have only played sparingly this season – entered as extra blockers. There wouldn't be any pre-snap jet motions from **Quadree Henderson**, **Maurice Ffrench** or **Rafael Araujo-Lopes** – all of whom were left on the sideline – to create deception.

After three consecutive stops, the Hokies were *daring* Watson to run it again. And they got their wish.

Just like that, it was over:



There's several questions that arise from the game's ending and it starts with Watson's playcalling.

With Pitt's inability to run the ball all afternoon – including on first down – why did Watson try his hand again on second down without any timeouts? It forced his freshman quarterback into throwing a quick corner fade without time to compose himself. If Pickett were to spike it, the Panthers would have faced fourth down.

With an offensive line that has struggled to block at times, why wait until fourth down to run behind left tackle **Brian O'Neill**? He's Pitt's best offensive lineman. And why run Hall laterally on that play? He's a downhill runner who doesn't have enough speed or agility to bounce outside, especially against this defense.

O'Neill – one of the team's unquestioned leaders – was visibly frustrated as he spoke to the media. He didn't want to be asked about playcalling or what-ifs after what had just transpired. In his opinion, it came down to executing whatever was called.

“It's a thousand percent that,” he quipped. “I don't care what the play call is.

As a linemen, you expect to score when you have the ball on first-and-goal at the two. You can put that on (the offensive line) and you can put that on me for not getting the ball in. It's nobody else's fault other than mine as the leader of the group. I'll take that for the team."

"It was goal line, big-on-big and we didn't execute," he then told me. "There's nothing else I can really say other than they didn't give us anything we weren't ready for. We didn't execute."

With one game against No. 3 Miami left on its schedule, Pitt is now officially eliminated from bowl contention.

But it didn't need to be.

This game exemplified the impact of losing **Nate Peterman, James Conner, Scott Orndoff** and **Matt Canada** all at once. Pitt never had scoring problems with them. The offense was the primary reason the Panthers went 8-5, bailing them out when Narduzzi and **Josh Conklin's** defense would regularly give up 40-plus points. Best believe Conner would have found a way in from the one-yard line if he were out there on Saturday.

It's different now. There's been collective struggles on both sides of the ball, but one of the primary factors to Pitt's 4-7 record is offensive inconsistency. The Panthers scored a combined four touchdowns in three-straight losses to Penn State, Oklahoma State and Georgia Tech. Within seven points of N.C. State in the third quarter, they went scoreless. Against Syracuse, they couldn't finish down the stretch. A reliable No. 1 quarterback never emerged, while a reliable No. 1 running back didn't until eight games in. The offensive line is still struggling with basic pass protections.

By Week 11, teams are supposed to be playing their best football. The Panthers are doing anything but. And on Saturday, it cost them both a marquee win against a quality opponent and a chance at bowl eligibility.

Narduzzi:

Pickett:

Hall:

O'Neill: