



Beverly cooks up a holiday feast, roasts Salem

Salem News

Phil Stacey

BEVERLY - Mothers, forgive your sons if they were Beverly High football players who weren't all that hungry for yesterday afternoon's holiday meal.

After all, the Panthers stuffed themselves earlier in the day at Hurd Stadium, indulging in a virtual football feast by devouring large portions of everything they wanted, including:

- * Plenty of big hits on defense
- * A monster two-way effort from captain J. Michael Nardella
- * A tremendous advantage in number of plays and time of possession
- * And of course, a multitude of rushing yards from Pat Bailey.

For Beverly, it all added up to a scrumptious 28-7 triumph over Salem in the 108th version of "The Game" before an estimated crowd of 7,000 hardy souls.

"I don't think you can call it a perfect game from our standpoint," said Beverly High head coach Dan Bauer, before adding, "But it was pretty close."

Where do you start when trying to dissect this showing, one that matched Beverly's best season since 1998 as it finished the year 9-1?

It probably makes sense to start with Bailey. The 5-foot-7 1/2, 160-pound mercurial senior tailback made sure no one in attendance would forget the final game of his brilliant high school career, rushing for 243 yards and a pair of fourth quarter touchdowns to put the game out of reach. He also contributed five tackles from his spot in the secondary.

It was his two touchdowns - a 28-yard toss on the first play of the final quarter, and a 58-yard power run where he bounced to the outside - that did the most damage against a tiring Salem defense, one that was on the field for over 33 minutes yesterday.

"That's where Bailey kills you," said Salem senior defensive end Franklin Abreu, who had a terrific final game yesterday by being in on a dozen tackles. "He's that explosive where all he needs is a little hole in the gap ... and he's gone. He can beat any defender when you give him that space."

Bailey finished the year with a BHS record 1,498 rushing yards (in just 8 1/2 games, no less) and 17 rushing touchdowns. All

told, he culminated his career by claiming school records in carries (507), rushing yards (3,684), touchdowns (45) and total points (272).

While Harvard, Tufts and many other colleges hope to land the services of this superior student-athlete for the next four years, Bailey leaves behind a Beverly legacy that places him among the greatest - oh, let's just skip that nonsense and officially anoint him as *the greatest* - to ever lug the pigskin for the Orange and Black.

"This hasn't all hit me yet ... the fact that it's over," Bailey said in the warmth that was the Beverly high locker room 45 minutes after his final game. "I know it's going to hit me all at once, and when it does it's going to be emotional.

"But for now, it's nice to know we went out and did exactly what we wanted to do. I'll tell you, J. Michael and our linemen opened up a lot of holes and helped get me to the next level."

Often overlooked because his name isn't Pat Bailey, Nardella also showed why he's also a standout football talent yesterday. His team-high nine tackles and a sack from his middle linebacker position has become a regular occurrence for Nardella, but he also added 64 huge yards on nine carries, including a 1-yard blast with four seconds to go until halftime that gave the Panthers a 14-0 lead.

Nardella might have set the tone for the day on the very first play, an inside handoff that saw him rip off 17 yards and put Beverly into Salem territory a mere 13 seconds into the proceedings. Beverly wound up going 62 yards in 11 plays, with quarterback Nick Tanzella taking it in from a yard out and a 7-0 lead.

"We had all the momentum right from the start," said Nardella, "and we weren't going to let it go. Their line was bigger than ours, but our guys are smart and quick and stayed with their blocks to open up the holes for us backs."

Making Bailey, Nardella and even junior running back Greg Pierce (31 yards on 5 carries) so dangerous was the fact that Beverly controlled the football as if it were on a string. The Panthers chewed up more than 16 of the 22 first half minutes, running an amazing 39 plays to Salem's 13. All told, they had control of the ball for almost 33 1/2 of a possible 48 minutes.

"Field possession was absolutely huge," admitted Salem head coach Scott Connolly, whose team finished 5-5. "For our defense to be out there so long, especially in the first half, was a killer. Our philosophy was to bend and bend and bend, but try not to break. That worked until the fourth quarter.

"Bailey's one of the best players in the state, and Nardella plays like a linebacker at fullback. Give those guys enough chances, and sooner or later they're going to hurt you."

Beverly was stingy all day was when it came to allowing yardage to the visiting Witches. The Orange and Black surrendered just 85 yards of offense over 48 minutes of play, with Salem's lone score coming on a fourth down pass from quarterback Nick Charlton to captain Anthony Silva in the back left corner of the end zone, good from 12 yards out.

"We gave it everything we had today," said Silva, fighting through tears afterward. "This team was all heart. We just didn't have enough to beat those guys."

Not on this day, when seemingly everything went the Panthers' way.

What a feast it was for the hosts.

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