



Beverly creates its own storm

On Football , Mike Grenier

Salem News

SAUGUS - Beverly High and Saugus played a football game here Saturday and a swimming meet broke out.

Saugus? On this day, anyway, the town could've been renamed Sog Us. That's how wet and wild it was at Stackpole Field, which was transformed by a vicious storm into the Charles River of the North Shore. Except with a lot more mud.

Both teams had to put up with the ugly and quickly deteriorating conditions, of course, but the Beverly Panthers seemed to thrive in the muck as they methodically dismantled winless (0-7) Saugus, 21-0.

"It was a little crazy out there," said senior fullback and linebacker J. Michael Nardella, who scored the first touchdown of his three-year varsity career on a 38-yard run in the third quarter, pushing Beverly's lead to 14-0. "It's the kind of day where it looks like you might get a 60-yard run but you fall down behind the line of scrimmage and lose five yards."

Fortunately for the Panthers, they kept their feet and their concentration. Beverly didn't turn the ball over - remarkable considering that the wind was whipping the rain sideways - and it controlled every phase of the game. Saugus ran just 10 plays in the opening half and finished with just 102 yards of total offense.

Beverly's Pat Bailey, on the other hand, churned out 145 yards on 23 carries and would've easily surpassed 200 yards if he didn't have an 80-yard touchdown nullified by a penalty. Nardella added 51 yards on six attempts and David Mock snapped off a 54-yard scoring run and had 56 yards on two carries.

"I thought the conditions favored us," said Bailey, flying in the face of the theory that horrible weather is an equalizer that allows a less talented team to stay in the game longer. "Saugus is a passing team and they couldn't do that today (Bret Reid was 3 for 8 for 38 yards and was picked off by Beverly's Greg Pierce). The ball was slippery."

While Winthrop (8-0) has been blowing out everyone in sight in the Northeastern Conference this season, Beverly has quietly piled up a 6-1 record for its highest win total since 1999. That's all good, as they say, but the soft part of their schedule is now behind them.

Beverly's demanding stretch run includes Lynn Classical, Gloucester and Salem, three teams with a combined record of 17-5. They're all winnable games and they're all losable games. The Panthers are going to have to decide whether they're content with six or seven wins or whether they're willing to put in the time and effort that it'll take to go 8-2 or possibly 9-1. It may also take some luck to leap to nine wins because the three remaining foes are legitimate NEC heavyweights.

However, the Panthers have a lot going for them these days. They've developed a hard-earned confidence by winning 10 of their last 11 games dating back to last season. They have the proper chemistry and this is a nicely balanced team with a defense that has markedly improved since last season.

So what are the players thinking? They're not just hoping for a strong finish, they're planning on it.

"We haven't given up," standout defensive tackle Kevin Thomasson said when it was mentioned that Winthrop appears to have the NEC title in its back pocket. "Winthrop could lose and we could keep winning. We have tough teams left to play, but we're looking for a good finish. We've had a big turnaround (since going 4-7 two years ago), but the ultimate goal is to go 9-1."

Bailey emphasized that the Panthers need to clean up some of the things they've been able to get away with against the non-contenders.

"We have to cut down on mental errors and penalties," said Bailey. "We're playing some really good teams the rest of the way. Anything can happen."

Nardella feels Beverly should put Winthrop in the rearview mirror and strive to play its best games against Classical (Saturday at home), Gloucester (Nov. 10 road game) Salem (Thanksgiving Day home game). Beverly will have to play at a very high level to beat all three teams, but it can be done.

"It's too bad Winthrop is controlling the race, but we can't do anything about it now," said Nardella. "We're still progressing as a team. A 9-1 record would be a dream season and would set standards (for future teams). We're capable of competing against anyone."

One thing is certain: Beverly can play in the nastiest weather imaginable. The Panthers dealt with it and now they're eager to move on.

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