



Backup running back helps Panthers 'Pierce' Danvers

By Phil Stacey
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BEVERLY - No Bailey? No problem.

All the Beverly High football team had to do was "Pierce" the opposing defense to be successful.

Football fans in these parts are used to seeing the Panthers' all-star tailback, Pat Bailey, rack up ridiculous amounts of yardage and find the end zone on multiple occasions in most games. What they probably didn't expect to witness at Hurd Stadium Saturday was Bailey sitting the game out with an ankle injury - or that his backup, Greg Pierce, would make fans forget about Bailey's backfield exploits, at least for one day.

Pierce showed that he's a ready-for-prime-time-player, rushing for a career high 248 yards and scoring four touchdowns as the Black-and-Orange rolled past Danvers, 35-14, before a crowd of more than 3,000 fans.

"None of us had any doubt that Greg was capable of carrying the load for us," said senior back David "Hollywood" Mock, who added a 40-yard touchdown run on his only carry. "We see him every day in practice and know what he's capable of. This didn't surprise us."

Pierce was told early last week by his coaches to "be ready to go" in case Bailey's right ankle - which he injured in the Panthers' last game against Winthrop - didn't respond. By the end of last week Pierce knew he'd be getting the bulk of the carries, and when Bailey's ankle didn't respond during pre-game warmups, Pierce became the Panthers' No. 1 backfield option.

Was the 5-foot-9, 170-pound junior nervous? Well, maybe a little.

"More than a little - at least at first," admitted Pierce with a laugh. "But after the first hit, your mind gets at ease. It's just football like you always knew it."

If his stomach had a few butterflies in it, the rest of Pierce looked like a gazelle as he continually burst through the Danvers' defensive line and sped away untouched.

Sean Gallagher, the former Salem High head coach who now works as a vice principal at Beverly High, watched Saturday's game from the press box and described Pierce as a back who constantly keeps his legs in motion, allowing him to be successful. You'd get no argument from the visiting Falcons on that count.

"That No. 24 (Pierce) showed it's not just The Pat Bailey Show over here," said Danvers head coach Mike Stellato, after his team surrendered 421 yards of offense, including 363 on the ground. "He pretty much had a career highlight tape in one game against us."

Running primary out of Beverly's power formation and following the blocks of his linemen and fullback J. Michael Nardella (72 yards on 8 carries), Pierce found the seams and hit the holes all afternoon. Whether it was going through the gaps or breaking it to the outside, the Danvers (2-4) defenders saw more of Pierce's back than they would have liked.

"We didn't tackle or wrap up," said Stellato. "It's frustrating because we had a good week of practice (defensively). Guys were in the right spots ... they're just not finishing up."

Pierce began his stellar performance with a 23-yard scoring run late in the first quarter, diving into the end zone for the TD. The first of Llazar Cuko's four extra points gave the hosts a 7-0 lead.

Danvers workhorse Colin Lynch, who gained 73 yards despite playing with a badly cramped thigh, tied the game with a 1-yard plunge in the second quarter. But Pierce made a nice individual effort on the final play of the half, taking a screen pass from quarterback Nick Tanzella and juking his way to paydirt from 14 yards out and a 14-7 lead at intermission.

It was Mock who may have turned in the biggest play of the game, however. With his team holding onto that same slim lead entering the fourth quarter and facing a fourth-and-3 from the Danvers 40-yard line, Mock got the call and made it count. Out of Beverly's Jumbo package, the 5-foot-7, 180-pounder took a counter going to the left side, followed left tackle Nick Doig's key block and sped into the end zone from 40 yards out to give Beverly a 21-7 advantage.

"It had been a while since I got into the end zone; sophomore year against Marblehead was my last one," chuckled the 18-year-old Mock. "But I'm glad it came when it did - because it was a big one."

Beverly head coach Dan Bauer pointed to that play when discussing his team's win.

"It showed that we're not a one or two-man team. We have all kinds of guys who can get the job done," he said. "I'm really happy because this was such a complete team win."

From there, an interception from Beverly's David Gadbois led to a 67-yard TD run by Pierce three plays later. Then, after a highlight reel 65-yard scoring run from Danvers' Brandon Ruta (a career-high 161 yards on the day), Pierce finished his day late in the fourth quarter with his fourth score, this one coming from 54 yards out.

"This was our best win because of the way we responded," said Pierce with emphasis. "We needed this win badly. Now the key is to keep it going."

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