



It's still "The Game": Beverly/Salem remains the premier Thanksgiving football showdown on the North Shore

By Phil Stacey , Sports editor
Salem News

Nothing to play for?

You say there's nothing to play for?

You obviously have no clue what the Beverly vs. Salem football rivalry is all about.

Take the records - both the visiting Panthers and host Witches enter tomorrow's game with identical 5-5 marks - and toss them aside. Literally.

What happened in the previous 10 games means nothing when these ancient adversaries separated by a pair of bridges meet on the gridiron. Come 10 a.m. tomorrow at Bertram Field in Salem, they'll mash helmets for the 109th time in a contest that needs no further explanation than by simply calling it "The Game".

After all, when Beverly and Salem collide on the football field, it is a one-game season unto itself. One team leaves the field ecstatic and undefeated in the only contest that truly matters to either of them; the other squad finds itself beaten and desolate.

Former Salem head coach Sean Gallagher - a one-time captain of the Witches' captain who, ironically, is now the principal at Beverly High - said with a completely straight face during his team's Super Bowl season of 1999 that it meant much, much more to him and his players to beat Beverly on the holiday than emerge victorious in the playoffs.

That statement might seem preposterous to those who haven't played in this rivalry or had its emotions run through their bloodstream each Thanksgiving.

But to those fortunate folks, no matter whether they wear the Black-and-Orange or chant 'The Witch is back!', they understand what Gallagher said completely.

The seventh-oldest continuous high school football rivalry in the state of Massachusetts, Beverly-Salem isn't merely a game; it's an event, a celebration of epic proportions in two cities each year on the fourth Thursday in November.

For four quarters, players from both sides battle between the lines for bragging rights they'll cherish 10, 20, even 50 years from now. Each year there are new heroes written into history, forever linked to the fabric of this most historic of contests.

Once the game is over, tears flow as freely as gravy onto turkey and mashed potatoes, whether you've won or lost. Contemplative seniors, suddenly realizing that they've in all likelihood played organized football for the last time, are hit with the magnitude of the moment, and their emotions spill out unabashedly like water out of a broken spigot.

So what are some of the plot lines we can look for tomorrow morning? Here are a few to chew on as you settle in among the 8,000 or so fans expected to be in attendance:

- * Beverly will be looking for its fifth straight victory over the Witches, something they haven't done since 1954.
- * Beverly, which holds a 52-49-7 all-time advantage in the series, hasn't had a four-game lead over the Witches since - are you ready for this? - 1928, when they had won 16 games over the arch rivals and tied twice while losing 12 times.
- * Salem head man Scott Connolly, another former Witches' captain (1990), will be looking for his first Turkey Day win as a coach.
- * On the other hand, Beverly's Dan Bauer, who grew up in St. Louis, has never lost (4-0) against the Witches. His father, Dan Sr., is visiting from Missouri and will be the sidelines (wearing a black Panther jacket and hat) for tomorrow's showdown.
- * Salem senior quarterback Colby Boulay would love nothing more than to lead his team to victory on his birthday tomorrow. Having transferred to Salem High from North Shore Tech prior to his senior year, he said he hasn't played a Beverly team since he was "13 or 14 years old. I can't wait to face them again."
- * Beverly co-captain Greg Pierce needs just 57 yards to break the school's all-time single-season rushing record. He comes into the game with 1,442 yards and 14 touchdowns on the ground.
- * Salem counters with its own speed demon, junior tailback Melikke Van Alstyne (1,009 yards, 10 TDs). If Van Alstyne, like Pierce, finds open holes or can get to the outside, this one could turn into a track meet.
- * Both teams have behind-the-scenes seniors who don't get the recognition they deserve, simply because the positions they play are not what you'd call "glamorous". Well, guys, here's your chance for a moment in the sun.

They include Paul Drinkwater, Dave Patnaude, Pat Abate, Sam Cohen, Greg Ormiston, Sam Rinaldo, Kyle Tuneberg, Sean Dedy, John Kleemola, Liam Blodgett and Levi Anderson for Beverly; and Chris Al-Nabulsi, John Pegnato, Taylor Charlton, Kevin Holding, Justin Louf, Matt Paine, Sam Dibble, Felix Gomez, Garrett Cauley and T.J. Lambert for Salem.

* A pair of Panthers, juniors Mark Perry (No. 56) and Ben Comeau (No. 59), won't join their teammates in the locker room at halftime; they'll join their "other" teammates as members of the BHS band. Perry wails away on the saxophone, while Comeau does his thing on the tuba.

* Hard as it may be to believe, Salem has won only once in their last seven home games on Thanksgiving, suffering five losses and a tie.

Nothing to play for?

I beg to differ.

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