



Panthers 'Pierce' English in season opener

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BEVERLY - A stifling hot weightlifting room that didn't have a fan in sight.

A calendar that teased them at the time of a season that was still months away.

And of course, a whole lotta Greg Pierce.

Whether or not the visiting Lynn English Bulldogs knew it or not, those were the three main elements that defeated them on this steamy Saturday afternoon when the host Beverly High football team controlled play for the entire second half en route to a 28-13 season opening victory at Hurd Stadium.

"It's all about getting it done in the second half. That's what we've been talking about since the first day of practice," said a drenched Beverly High co-captain, two-way lineman Liam Blodgett, afterward. "We weren't going to let this heat affect us. We were going to be the ones taking it to them, not the other way around."

As the Bulldogs - many of whom played on both offense and defense - seemed to get worn down in the 90-degree temperatures (several English players suffered from cramped muscles during the contest), the Panthers seemed to feed off of that and proved to be quite recalcitrant to the visitors from Lynn.

Particularly carnivorous for the Orange and Black was Pierce, the senior tailback who gained a career-high 250 yards and scored three touchdowns. Two of those came in the fourth quarter, including a game-sealing 41-yard scoring romp with under two-and-a-half minutes to play.

His linemen - tackles Paul Drinkwater and Ken Mahoney, guards Levi Anderson and Blodgett, Brian Kureta at center and tight end Pat Abate - opened up the holes necessary for Pierce to tear it up on the ground. That was especially true in the second half when Pierce ran the ball 13 times for 152 yards, an average of 11.7 yards a carry.

"We pride ourselves on nobody being in better shape than us," said Kureta. "Nobody is going to outwork us, especially in the second half."

Just how do the Panthers know this? They believe all of the work they put in as a collective group during the offseason will pay off now that the games count for real.

Many of the team's varsity veterans spent the summer getting ready for this season by working out, lifting weights and running when the temperature was much like Saturday's swelterfest. They'd lift three days a week and run the other three (and sometimes four). They did this not because they necessarily wanted to be cooped up in tropical conditions, but because they knew all of those sweaty sessions in June, July and August would pay dividends come September - and hopefully beyond.

The Panthers were so dedicated to these offseason workouts that more players than ever before - 27 in all - became members of the esteemed "Panther Club", given to those who take part in at least 90 person of the team's offseason workout sessions.

"We prepared all summer for a day like this," said Blodgett. "(Assistant) Coach (Art) Irzyk used to say to us, 'It's gonna be hotter in this weight room than it's ever going to be when you're playing. If you can stand this, you can stand any conditions.' We had no fans, a closed door ... it was brutal. But it's paying off now."

Pierce knew saw that offseason work pay off, too. "When the fourth quarter rolled around, we could see that those guys (English) were dying," he said. "We were hot, but still all right. That's when we really picked it up."

That's where Beverly salted the game away, actually. Beginning with 58 seconds left in the third quarter, they marched 71 yards in nine plays, picking up an astonishing six first downs on the drive. All nine plays were runs, highlighted by a 17-yard fullback trap by sophomore Steve Dubois and a seven-yard blast up the gut by Pierce, making it 21-13.

After forcing the Bulldogs to punt on their next possession, the hosts delivered the final blow with an effective 5-play drive, ending with Pierce's 41-yard scamper for a score.

The seniors on this year's Beverly team are eager to very much make their own mark in program history. But if there's one area they definitely want to copy last year's 9-win squad in, it's the ability to own the fourth quarter of games.

So far, so good.

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