

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL NOTEBOOK

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Pierce filling big shoes for Beverly squad

By Julian Benbow | September 20, 2007

The fourth-down call, with Beverly High trailing Lynn Classical, 18-13, was why Beverly running back Greg Pierce had worked so hard all summer.

It's why he bulked up to 185 pounds. It's why he ran five days a week and lifted three. He knew he'd take more hits this season as the team's starting running back. He knew he'd wake up on the days after games a little sorer. But he also knew that when all-everything running back Pat Bailey graduated and went to Tufts, he would be the one to fill his giant footprints.

This was one of those moments he expected: fourth-and-5, from the 23, with under a minute left in the game last week.

Pierce already had 13 carries to his name. He had run for a 98-yard touchdown in the first quarter and a 65-yard score early in the fourth. He came to the sideline after the second touchdown with a swarm of Panthers slapping his helmet, shoving his shoulder pads and yelling to each other that the game wasn't over as long as Pierce had a chance to touch the ball.

So 5 yards from a first down and 23 yards from a go-ahead score, Pierce took the handoff, dug up the middle, and, with a defender wrapped around his torso, stretched out as far as he could.

He came up about a foot short of the first-down marker.

Classical took possession of the ball and iced its victory with a 62-yard carry by Quivari Jackson, but the game had ended on that fourth down.

Pierce walked slowly off the field. He had his helmet in his hands, so you could see his face, frustrated with himself more than anything else.

A tall, thin assistant coach told him, "Keep your head up."

Pierce responded, more to himself than to the assistant, "I should have had that first down."

The coach told him not to say that. But he couldn't stop Pierce from thinking it.

"I put all the pressure on myself," Pierce said. "I think I let my teammates down in a way. I kind of just feel bad, I wanted to win the game and help my teammates."

But even if his arm could have stretched an extra foot, his team still needed another 18 yards. Sometimes even 214 yards and two made-for-TV touchdowns aren't enough. And that's just part of the pressure Pierce will face for the rest of the season.

There's also the pressure of leaving behind his backup role, in which he had only five or six carries per game, to accepting a new role as the feature back, in which he could end up running 150 to 200 times this season.

And not only is he the go-to guy, Pierce is replacing the best go-to guy in school history.

"It's definitely different," Pierce said. "Last year, of course, we had Pat. Whenever we needed a big play, the whole team looked to Pat. . . . It's just different without him this year, because there's no one else to look to. You're kind of looking at yourself, and it's just different without the big-play guy."

The difference is that Pierce is the big-play guy. And so far this season, he hasn't disappointed. In the season opener against Lynn English, Pierce ran for 250 yards and a touchdown, pushing the Panthers to a 28-13 win.

Last week, when Classical rolled out a core of running backs that made a football game look more like a relay race, Pierce had to be Beverly's answer.

He had to be what Bailey was.

"I think he's handling it real well," said Classical coach Matt Durgan, beaming after Classical's first win over Beverly in three years "He's replacing an outstanding player in Pat Bailey."

Pierce had played with Bailey since Pop Warner, and even then Bailey was the man. They were good friends, but as far as football went, Pierce looked up to Bailey. Before the season started, they talked a little and Bailey told Pierce not to worry, that Pierce was just as good if not better.

But when a player runs for 1,498 yards and leads Beverly to one of its best seasons in recent years, his presence tends to linger.

"Part of the deal is each player's different and each team is different," said Beverly coach Dan Bauer. "Obviously Pat was a special player, no question. But Greg is a special player, too, and brings some different skills to the table than Pat did."

Last season, with Bailey out with an injury, Pierce stuck Danvers for 248 yards and a touchdown. He was backup by definition, Bauer said, but never for lack of talent.

"He was more than a capable backup," Bauer said. "I think he would have started for a lot of people. Crunch time he's ready to take the ball, and loves to take the ball when we need a big play."

That play may come on any down, in any quarter, at any moment. But it's Pierce's play to make.

"I hope my teammates can look at me and think that I can go for a touchdown any play," he said. "I like to think that I have that ability. But I'm not sure. . . . This is only my second game. It's a long season, so we'll see how it unfolds." ■

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