



## Running star Pierces Salem with his arm -- and his legs

Phil Stacey

— SALEM | Irony smiled down upon the Beverly Panthers late yesterday morning.

How else will you be able to explain the biggest play of the 109th meeting between the Beverly and Salem football teams to folks 10, 20, even 50 years from now?

What other term can you use to describe why co-captain Greg Pierce | who ran for 206 yards and a pair of touchdowns yesterday, becoming the Panthers' single-season rushing leader | will best be remembered for a pass he threw?

The play was called '128 Halfback Pass'. In reality, it was "the backbreaker that killed us," according to Salem captain Garrett Cauley | and lifted Pierce into the pantheon of legends who have starred in 'The Game'.

On the contest's definitive play, Pierce fired a 50-yard halfback option pass to fellow senior Sean Deady three snaps into the second half. It not only gave his team a two-touchdown lead, but also paved the way for Beverly's fifth straight victory over Salem on the holiday, a 28-14 triumph before nearly 8,000 fans at foggy Bertram Field.

"That's hands down the best touchdown I've ever been a part of," Pierce, his white road uniform caked with mud, exalted afterwards.

In an attempt to slow down the mercurial Pierce | who finished his senior season with 1,648 yards and 16 touchdowns on the ground | on toss plays, Salem's cornerbacks were cheating up and playing aggressively. Pierce would still get his yards, but Beverly's downfield receivers were also staring at plenty of open space, due to the Salem corners biting up.

So a play that the Panthers have had in their playbook since the start of the season and had practiced every week, but never used in a game, will now go down as one of the great plays in Beverly/Salem lore.

For the full story of how it happened, let's rewind a bit.

Beverly (6-5) had dominated the first half, both statistically and at the line of scrimmage. A 3-yard quarterback sneak by sophomore Mark Theriault on the Panthers' first series gave them a 7-0 lead, and a 47-yard gallop through the left side by Pierce made it 14-0 early in the second quarter.

Salem, however, put together an impressive scoring drive just before halftime. Senior quarterback Colby Boulay | playing on his 18th birthday | hit Chris Maxson (6 catches, 84 yards) with a pretty 25-yard strike across the middle, then connected with Melikke Van Alstyne for a 12-yard screen pass to make it first-and-goal. A pass interference call against Beverly on third down gave the Witches new life, and Van Alstyne scampered over right tackle from 2 yards out, making it 14-7 at intermission.

Looking to take the momentum back they felt was rightfully theirs, the Panthers wanted to do something big early in the second half.

Cue 128 Halfback Pass.

"Coach told me yesterday we'd run it if the corners were blitzing on every toss," said Pierce. "It was a great opportunity to use it early in the second half."

Left guard Liam Blodgett said Pierce, his fellow captain, approached him in school Wednesday giddily, saying they might actually use the play if given the chance.

"We had been practicing it all year, but by the eighth or ninth week of the season, I was like, 'Are we ever even going to use this play?'" said Blodgett. "But when Greg told me we were doing it, I liked our chances."

The visitors were facing third-and-8 from the 50-yard line when Theriault brought the play into the huddle.

"Theriault said, 'Pierce, how's your arm?'," said Panthers center Brian Kureta. "I thought he was talking about his right forearm (which suffered a nasty cut two weeks ago against Winthrop and required 44 stitches)."

Off the snap, Theriault tossed the pigskin to Pierce, who was cutting right. At his own 43-yard line, Pierce pulled up, cocked his arm and fired.

Deady, the 17-year old wideout who came into the game with a team-high 14 catches for 171 yards and a touchdown, had sold the play off the line of scrimmage, giving his man a "stock fade"; parlance for a fake before eventually blocking for his runner.

Instead, he curled and turned upfield | and found himself eight yards behind the Salem defense. Pierce's pass was on the money, hitting Deady in stride at the Salem 22-yard line. He sped into the end zone for a 21-7 lead.

"I was a little nervous, but I beat my guy off the line with a stutter step and kept going," Deady said. "The corner (Van Alstyne) charged up to play the toss. I told myself 'Just catch it'. It was one of the best passes. Once I caught it, I just kept running."

"When Deady ran that stock fade, it was like, 'Oh no.'," admitted Salem's Matt Paine, who had a game-high 13 tackles. "I knew then it was either going to be a touchdown or an incomplete pass | and it wasn't incomplete."

Deady, whose McKay Street home was decorated with all kinds of Beverly banners and a silver No. 17 (his uniform number) yesterday, said the 100th Beverly/Salem game in 1998 was the first he ever attended, and he wanted to "be like those guys someday."

Now, he is. It couldn't have been any more perfect for the Panthers than if David Bowie started blaring out of the PA system at Bertram Field that very instant.

"We can be heroes, just for one day ...

"It's the best feeling, knowing every time I come back to a game on Thanksgiving, whether it's here or in Beverly, and I'll remember that touchdown," grinned Deady.

Classy in defeat, Connolly praised the Panthers for their play-calling, picking an opportune time to steal all the momentum away from his Witches (5-6).

"There's a lot involved in a play like that; it just doesn't happen. A lot has to go right," said Connolly. "But Pierce hit Deady in stride; it was a great pass. Melikke flew up to make the play, but couldn't get back in time to catch (Deady)."

Beverly added a fourth quarter touchdown on a 5-yard run from Pierce, and Salem scored once more on a 1-yard keeper by Boulay. But the game, for all intents and purposes, was over the minute Pierce found Deady wide open.

They make an interesting contrast in styles, Pierce and Deady do. Pierce is an all-star tailback who will continue his career at Bowdoin College, studying economics. Deady, a steady but unheralded receiver, played the last football game of his life yesterday; he's likely headed to Michigan State, where he'll take classes pertaining to marketing and accounting.

Now, however, they're forever linked by the bond that comes with being heroes in the biggest North Shore football game of them all.

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## Photos



Beverly High wide receiver Sean Deady, who caught the game-changing 50-yard touchdown pass on a halfback option, hugs fellow senior Paul Drinkwater after the Panthers beat Salem, 28-14, for the fifth straight time on Thanksgiving Day. Staff Photo