

## Sports

# The longest half-yard

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Wed Sep 19, 2007, 05:24 PM EDT

BEVERLY, MASS. - On two separate occasions, Greg Pierce burst through the Lynn Classical defensive front for touchdown runs of 98 and 63 yards last Saturday. But it was a four-and-a-half yard run that Pierce and the Panthers will remember.

The Panthers star running back, who ran for 210 yards on a mere 13 carries, was asked to get five yards in a fourth down situation late in the fourth quarter against Lynn Classical, with Beverly trailing 18-13 and the ball on the Classical 23-yard line.

Pierce, despite a valiant effort, fell half a yard shy. It was a great defensive effort by Classical, who went on to win in Lynn, and an unfortunate capper to Pierce's night.

But, as is always the case in football, it isn't one play or moment that defines the game. Beverly head coach Dan Bauer admitted as much, praising the play of his outstanding tailback.

"You can't ever look at one play and say, 'That's what cost us,'" Bauer said. "Greg had an outstanding day, and you have to give credit to our offensive line, too. Classical tried to stop him and they couldn't do it."

Classical was able to give itself a comfortable enough lead to fend off the Panthers.

The hosts jumped out to a 6-0 lead in the first quarter when Alex Watter connected with Quivari Jackson for a 50-yard touchdown pass, but missed the point after.

Pierce and the Panthers certainly responded. Curtis Manuel picked off a Watter pass later in the first quarter and Pierce, who had to battle through a stacked line ready to play the run with Beverly backed up to its own 2-yard line, broke free for a 98-yard touchdown run. Beverly's PAT failed, too, leaving the score knotted 6-6.

"The big positive you take away from a game like this is that the kids battled," Bauer said. "When they were down, they got right back up. It's easy to quit, and none of the kids did that."

Classical scored twice more in the second quarter, this time on Cameron Smith touchdown runs from one and 12 yards out. After both scores, the Beverly defense thwarted two-point conversion attempts.

At the half, it was 18-6, giving the Panthers their first gut check of the young season.

Beverly had shown a propensity to break out in the second half, scoring 14 points in the third and fourth quarter of its first game against Lynn English.

The defense certainly did its part, holding Classical scoreless, and Pierce broke free for a long run again in the fourth quarter, this time from 63 yards out. The touchdown and point after made it 18-13, and Beverly got the ball back with time winding down and a chance for a miracle fourth quarter comeback.

"As a coach, you have to be happy with the way the team responded in the last quarter," Bauer said. "The defense really stepped up. Offensively, we got going a little late, but we gave ourselves a chance."

Pierce's last gasp run on 4th-and-5 came up a half yard short of the first down, giving the ball back to Classical

with just enough time on the clock to take a knee.

“I’m not disappointed,” Bauer said. “It’s never easy to lose, but it wasn’t because of a lack of effort. We still need to improve on some things. That’s the case after every game.”

Especially since Bauer said every contest can be labeled a big game.

“In this conference, with the quality of opponents every week, they’re all big games for us,” Bauer said. “We can’t look past any team and expect to win.”

That certainly applies to the Gloucester team Beverly faces this weekend.

The Fisherman overpowered Marblehead last week, thumping the previously unbeaten Magicians 48-15. “They’re as good a team as you’re going to find in our area,” Bauer said. “They’re line is a big, disciplined group. Defensively they have a lot of team speed. They do have a new quarterback, but they have some offensive talent that’s experienced and dangerous.”

Bauer said the key will be to keep the Gloucester offense off the field with sustained, point scoring drives. If Beverly can keep the ball in its own hands and prevent big plays by the Fishermen offense, the Panthers will more than give themselves a chance.

“Last year it came down to the final play of the game and we came out on top,” Bauer said of the Panthers 20-18 win a year ago, when they stopped the Fishermen on three consecutive running plays at the Beverly 1-yard line to preserve the win. “This is a rivalry that dates back something like 80 years. You don’t have to give the kids any extra motivation. If they can’t get excited about this game, you can’t do it for them.”

The Panthers win in Gloucester last year was their first since 1994. Bauer hopes the team can repeat that effort. Last year, both teams entered the game with one loss. This year, the Panthers have a blemish but Gloucester boasts a 2-0 record, having outscored its opponents 82-29.

“It’s not going to be easy,” Bauer said. “But that’s why you play the game.”

Kickoff is scheduled for 1 p.m. at Hurd Stadium.

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