

Panthers want to keep the good times rolling



By Phil Stacey

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BEVERLY | Senior co-captain Greg Pierce stepped into the Beverly High football coaches' room before a recent practice to ask a question. But before he could get the words out, he was stopped cold by a playful verbal joust from one of the Panther assistants.

"Nice haircut, Pierce," joked line coach Jeff Hutton to the freshly-shorn Pierce. "You look like Lloyd Christmas."

Referring to the team's star running back as the Jim Carrey character with a bowl cut in the 1990 comedy classic 'Dumb and Dumber' could be seen as insulting by some. But in this instance, it couldn't have been any further from the truth. You see, things are relaxed and confident around the Beverly High football program these days. It's a feeling that comes with winning, a feeling that the Panthers plan on building off of last season's landmark 9-1 campaign.

"That's one of the great things about this team. All of us | players and coaches | know when we can joke around, but we also know when it's time to dig down deep and work hard," said Pierce, who will captain this year's club along with lineman Liam Blodgett. "Other teams may think we lost a ton of great players from last year's team and we're going to fall off the map (this season). That only serves as motivation to us."

Indeed, the 2006 Beverly Panthers had the school's best record in eight years, came one win away from capturing their first Northeastern Conference title since 1988 and boasted a bevy of stars, led by the school's all-time leading rusher, scorer and touchdown maker, two-time Salem News Player of the Year Patrick Bailey.

Last year's junior class | the core of this year's team as 12th graders | have now made it their mission to prove they know how to play football at a pretty high level, too. "We want to prove our own identity," said Pierce, who had 248 yards rushing and four touchdowns in a stellar performance vs. Danvers last fall. "We have a lot of linemen returning; that's the strength of our team. It starts there."

Beverly head coach Dan Bauer, on the eve of starting his fifth season with the Panthers, agreed. His entire team, particularly the seniors, are ready to take the next step. "This senior group, they really want to prove their own mettle," he said. "Their attitude is 'Hey, we not only can do this ourselves | we're gonna do it.'"

The 5-foot-8, 220-pound Blodgett is back at left guard, joined on the right side by fellow senior Levi Anderson (5-11, 220), who was worked into the rotation a year ago. Brian Kutera, a 5-foot-9, 255-pound senior fire hydrant, is back anchoring the middle of the line at center. Massive junior Ken Mahoney (6-1, 255) and senior Paul Drinkwater (5-10, 205) will play the tackles (right and left, respectively), with 225-pound tight end Pat Abate starting for a second straight season.

Pierce takes over the lead tailback role, joined in the backfield by senior fullback Dave Patnaude. The quarterbacking duties fall to sophomore Mark Theriault. Senior Sam Rinaldo will join Anderson as the defensive ends, with Blodgett and Abate rounding out the front four inside. Patnaude will start at inside linebacker flanked by speedy senior Chris Bushey and Drinkwater, with Pierce and junior Joe Santamaria manning the corners. Senior David Gadbois and junior Rashad Sims (who will also see time in the backfield) are the two safeties.

"We're all excited to get the season going. It's exciting knowing we can be playing for a playoff spot (in the NEC Small)," said Pierce.

Last year's record: 9-1

Head coach: Dan Bauer (5th year, 22-20)

Captains: Liam Blodgett and Greg Pierce

Style of offense: Multiple

Style of defense: 4-3

Last winning season: 2006 (9-1)

Last league title: 1998 (10-0, won Northeastern Conference)

Did you know?: After a combined winning percentage of .663 in the 1980s and 1990s (128-65-3 overall), the Beverly football program is nine games under .500 (32-41) with three years to go this decade. Their last sub-.500 decade was the 1970s (37-56-2, a .398 winning percentage).