



Salem hopes for a historic upset vs. Beverly tomorrow

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BEVERLY — Looking for the greatest upset in Beverly-Salem Thanksgiving football history, as far as the Witches are concerned?

Look no further into the annals than the 1949 game.

Salem came into the holiday that season having lost seven straight games and was facing a Beverly squad that was playing at home and held a sterling 8-1 record. But with the lead changing hands three times in the final three minutes of the contest, the visiting Witches pulled off a 26-19 victory on Ray Marraffa's last-minute touchdown.

A victory by the 2008 Witches (3-7) over the host Panthers (7-3) tomorrow morning at Hurd Stadium (10 a.m. start) in the 110th playing of the North Shore's oldest rivalry might not be as titanic an upset as their football playing brethren of six decades ago. But it would be a sweet ending to what has been a sour season for coach Scott Connolly's team — which, like the '49 club, has dropped seven consecutive contests.

"A win (tomorrow)," said Connolly, "and a lot of that hurt goes away."

Beating the Panthers on their own turf, however, will be anything but easy for Salem. The Witch City Kids have dropped five straight holiday showdowns against their arch rivals from across the bridge; they haven't lost six straight in the series since 1950-55.

Salem has also hurt itself with turnovers at inopportune times this season, leading to terrific field position for their opponents. They're also giving up nearly 10 more points per game than they score.

So what do the Witches plan on doing tomorrow morning?

"There's no sense for us to hold anything back. We can open up the playbook and let it rip," said Connolly. "Sure, Melikke (Van Alstyne, the Witches' captain and the North Shore's leading rusher with 1,322 yards and 13 TDs) will get his touches, but we're also going to mix things up and try to catch their defense off balance."

Beverly, which has used new schemes both on offense (an effective spread attack) and defense (a 3-5 alignment) this fall to produce its third straight winning campaign, is treating Salem as a very dangerous opponent.

"This game means so much to both teams that they're willing to do whatever it takes to get that win," said sixth-year Beverly head coach Dan Bauer, who has never suffered a setback against Salem. "They've got kids — certainly Melikke, but other

guys, too — who can beat you."

Having watched reams of film on the Panthers, Connolly says the Black-and-Orange's defense is full of playmakers such as Nick Kozlowski at strong side linebacker, Theritchnide Roc at defensive end, Dylan Terry in the secondary and All-Conference lineman Ben Comeau up front.

Offensively, he guesstimates Beverly runs the ball 70 percent of the time out of the spread formation, with dangerous Rashad Sims (1,066 yards, 12 TDs) a threat to score from anywhere on the field. "If you let Sims run downhill, you're in trouble," said Connolly.

Quarterback Mark Hannable (1,053 yards, 9 TDs, 65% completion rate) has managed the offense well, looking to Justin Marris on tunnel screens, Terry on jet sweeps and out of the slot, and Steve Dubois on short screens.

"The bottom line is we have to put pressure on them and disrupt what they want to do on offense," said Connolly. "We have to attack the few weaknesses they have."

To do that, Salem will look to take an early lead, relying not only on Van Alstyne — the school's all-time leading rusher — but also sophomore QB Brad Skeffington, sophomore game-breaker David Kendrick and bruising blocking back Eugene Dela Cruz.

Defensive end Chris Dunston, tackle Louis Montalvo, Van Alstyne at free safety and Ben Henderson at cornerback — all seniors — will lead a defense that hopes to slow the hosts down.

"This game means everything to all parties involved," said Bauer. "A win is a way for the seniors to end their careers in style, and for them to pass the torch on to the underclassmen as they look towards next year.

"To me, this game is another season unto itself. Both of us are 0-0, and it's one game, winner-take-all."

Beverly leads the all-time series, 53-49-7.

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