

Strike up the band: Beverly's Ben Comeau stays in tune

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Beverly, Mass. -

When Big Ben strikes, people listen.

Whether he's stopping the opposition with a bone-crunching tackle, or belting out tunes with his school's marching band, Ben Comeau has an uncanny knack for hitting all the right notes.

For the past four years, the Ashton Street resident has worked double duty for Beverly High, alternating between the varsity football team and the marching band, culminating in one very exhausting weekend for the senior.

Teamwork plays a big hand in both ventures, as Comeau goes from flattening opponents in one setting, to hitting E flats in another, all with seamless precision.

"It's kind of similar," said Comeau. "Just the whole team atmosphere, having friends on both sides is good."

The lone member of this year's squad to pull a double shift, Comeau joins an exclusive clique of Beverly athletes who have managed to handle both duties over the years.

"It's kind of rare," he said. "Not many people are into both, I guess."

After enduring a tough 35-0 loss to Gloucester the previous week, Comeau and the Panthers got back to basics at Hurd Stadium last weekend, pulling out a convincing 22-0 victory over Revere, Oct. 4. The win was the team's second shutout of the season, improving their record to 3-1 on the year.

"It was a pretty big win, because we came off (a loss to) Gloucester, which was a big disappointment for us," Comeau said. "We just came out reeling, I think. Our defense did really well."

An effective two-way starter at both offensive and defensive tackle, Comeau has been a cornerstone on the Panthers gridiron. The 6-foot-2, 185-pound senior puts his frame to good use, hitting virtually everything that moves.

But when it comes to halftime, Comeau shifts into a musical direction. As the rest of his team heads to the locker room, Comeau can usually be seen making a sharp left detour, heading over to the band's equipment truck. In an instant, he pulls off his shoulder pads and throws his game jersey on, while a nearby assistant hands him his axe — a sousaphone.

"It's the tuba for a marching band," said Comeau, describing his instrument of choice. "It's a big white upright tuba."

Comeau has broken down his halftime transformation into a science, so much that it has become second nature to him.

"I run off, I throw my pads and my helmet off," he said. "I throw my shirt back on and they already have the sousaphone ready for me."

With his instrument in hand, Comeau, still dressed in his game jersey and leg pads, marches out with the Beverly High Band, performing three to four songs for the capacity crowd.

Following the performance, Comeau is once again in motion making another quick change before returning to the field, minutes before the rest of the team.

The transition from jock to musician has been a challenging one, but nothing he can't handle.

"It's always been kind of tough," Comeau said. "This year is definitely the hardest, because I'm on the varsity full-time now, so just coming off the field from playing to playing (with the band) is pretty hard."

According to Comeau, the coaching staff usually huddles with him prior to the start of the half to go over any adjustments the team decided to make during the break. His thunderous hits have drawn a big reaction from the hometown crowd, especially from the section of the bleachers reserved for the band.

During the team's home opener, the band could be heard chanting Ben's name after he sacked Lynn Classical quarterback Keyshawn Avery with another huge hit.

According to Beverly High coach Dan Bauer, it's an exceptional workload for a steady contributor.

"Ben's always done that," Bauer said. "He made that decision as a young man. I think it's important that kids are well rounded. That's pretty tough to do. He's going both ways and plays well both sides, and he plays a position that requires a lot of energy. He went out and did it and that's great.

"We've had a couple in the past that have done it," he added, "but this year Ben is the only one."

A member of the school band since the 5th grade, Comeau was deemed "too big in middle school" to play Pop Warner Football. As a result, he didn't advance to the gridiron until his freshman year at Beverly High, making the gravitation to music a little easier. It has since become an alternative outlet that he has come to enjoy.

"I started out playing saxophone, and during my sophomore year there was a lack of sousaphones, so I just jumped on it."

A brass instrument invented by composer and conductor John Philip Sousa, and the instrument maker J.W. Pepper, the sousaphone is basically a tuba that coils around the body with a flared bell that faces forward.

So what was it that attracted him to the sousaphone?

"I don't really know," he said. "I just got drawn into it."

With all his extracurricular activities, Comeau's schedule remains busy. He has football practice every day with the team, while also jamming with the marching band for three hours every Thursday. In addition to his work on the football field, Comeau is a member of the school's jazz band chorus vocal ensemble. He's also co-captain of the Beverly High wrestling team.

A senior, Comeau is already looking ahead to his post-graduate plans.

"I'm looking at a bunch of schools," he said. "I want to be a physical therapist."

Although he's not sure if he will continue to follow a musical path, Comeau hasn't ruled out returning to the football field or wrestling mat in the college ranks. But for now, anyway, this Panther will continue to rock and roll with Beverly High every weekend.