

Comeback Cats: Big plays help Panthers shock Swampscott

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SWAMPSCOTT — After watching arch rival Marblehead stumble Friday night, the Swampscott High football team did not want to fall into the same trap and squander a chance to clinch a share of the Northeastern Conference Small title yesterday.

What the Big Blue wanted, though, didn't account for a hungry, talented and sharp-looking Beverly squad.

The visiting Panthers got a late 64-yard touchdown catch by Curtis Manuel and an interception by Mark Hannable to seal the deal in a 27-21 upset at Blocksidge Field.

It was a signature win for the Black and Orange (6-3 overall, 3-2 NEC Small) and the program's first triumph over Swampscott (7-3, 3-1) at Blocksidge since 1999.

"Our kids rose to the occasion and answered the bell," said Beverly head coach Dan Bauer, whose squad finishes with "The Game" against Salem on Thanksgiving.

The Big Blue now turn to their 101st Thanksgiving Day meeting with Marblehead. Both squads are 3-1 in league play, and the winner will represent the NEC Small in the playoffs.

"All of our goals are still right in front of us. The league title is still attainable, even though it won't be unblemished," said Swampscott head coach Steve Dembowski. "We didn't secure ourselves a piece of the championship today, and that hurts."

Trailing 21-19, Beverly got the ball back near midfield with 4:17 to play. Hannable (10-of-20, 230 yards, 2 TDs) threw it deep to Manuel, who split two Swampscott safeties, made a leaping grab and kept his feet on the way down before turning and sprinting 64 yards to the end zone.

Hannable ran in the two-point try to make it 27-21, then picked off Matt Barbuzzi to end the Big Blue's comeback bid when he stepped in front of Randell Kelleher and snared the pigskin.

"They'd been doing crossing routes the whole game and I was late to every single one of them," said Hannable. "I read the eyes that time and I was able to step in and pick it."

Rugged running from sophomore Nick Theriault, who enjoyed a breakout game with 159 yards on 20 carries, helped the Panthers salt away the clock.

The Big Blue led 21-13 with 8:06 left after Barbuzzi (17-of-29, 187 yards, 2 TDs) found Peter Yasi for a 3-yard score. Beverly then got a 50-yard kickoff return from freshman Brendan Flaherty to set up Theriault's 9-yard TD, but the two-point conversion failed to keep it 21-19.

A fake punt pass from Kyle Shonio to Kelleher was just short of the marker on fourth down of the ensuing drive, setting the stage for up Manuel's go-ahead score. Swampscott was also marred by eight penalties while Beverly was the beneficiary of big plays from Manuel, Theriault and Justin Marrs, who opened the game with an 80-yard TD reception.

"All year we knew Beverly had good players and we gave them too many big plays," said Dembowski. "We had communication mistakes, mental mistakes, missed tackles — and the penalties didn't help. You can't give a good team that many chances."

Manuel intercepted Barbuzzi and broke up a sure TD on a fake field goal early on when he batted the ball away from A.J. Baker. The tenacious Beverly defense had two end zone stands and made sure to stick yard-after-catch threats like Kelleher (8 catches, 65 yards) and Baker (5 catches, 69 yards) immediately after their receptions.

"To beat a great team like Swampscott going into Thanksgiving is a great feeling. I think we just wanted it a little more," said Hannable.

For the Big Blue, Shonio gained 106 yards on 23 carries to become the first Swampscott back to rush for over 1,000 yards in a season since 2005.

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Photos



Jake Abate, right, celebrates with teammate Brendan Flaherty during the Panthers' 27-21 victory over Swampscott. It was Beverly's first win at Blocksidge Field since 1999. Staff Photographer