

Panthers ready for historic home opener under the lights tonight

By Phil Stacey
Sports editor

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Lost amid the hoopla surrounding Beverly's first-ever night game at Hurd Stadium tonight against Melrose (7 p.m.) — such as the thousands of fans expected to show up for this historic event, the carnival-like atmosphere that's sure to be prevalent and the fact that it's the team's 2009 season opener — one small fact still remains.

The Panthers still have to go out and play 44 minutes of football.

"There's obviously going to be a lot of excitement, especially before the game starts," said Beverly High head coach Dan Bauer, who begins his seventh season tonight in Pantherland looking for career win No. 36. "And while we're always happy to have a lot of people come out to the games and the excitement (surrounding) it, we have to find a way to get through all of that and focus on what we need to do on the field."

That task: defeat the Red Raiders of Melrose, who play out of the always-tough Middlesex League, went 8-2 a year ago and already have a game this fall under their collective belts.

Bauer and his staff went out and scouted Melrose's opener last weekend against Wilmington, a 20-18 setback for the Raiders in which they were denied a chance at going to overtime when a 2-point conversion rush was stuffed late in the contest.

"What I came away with from watching them is that they're physical and already have been in actual game conditions that we haven't yet," said Bauer. "They have some newer players at some of the key spots, but I thought they executed their offense, ran the ball well, threw it successfully and protected their quarterback. On defense, they were stunting and coming after (Wilmington's) quarterback and caused them some problems. They're tough kids."

In particular, Bauer was impressed with Evan Butters, a running back who rushed for 109 yards and two scores on just 13 carries.

These two teams have met before: Beverly beat the Raiders in Melrose on opening day six years ago, 20-6. That was Bauer's first game as the Panthers' head coach; ironically, it came after working on Melrose coach Tim Morris' staff for two years.

"Tim's a great guy and a really good coach, and playing a team that's as tough as his always is will prepare us for what we'll be facing (in Northeastern Conference play) the rest of the way," said Bauer.

To prepare for tonight's clash, the Panthers have practiced under the temporary lights that have been set up at Hurd since Tuesday morning (5 sets of lights on each side of the field, with others in reserve if needed) for the past two nights. Bauer said his team was enthused and "flying around the field" on Tuesday, but was more used to the novelty by the time they went through their pre-game walk-through last night.

Depth will be a key for the hosts tonight, who will be looking to rotate a lot of players on both sides of the ball in order to keep fresh bodies on the field at all times. Strong preseason showings by many players will have them in the lineup frequently tonight, including juniors Chris Mitchell and Andy Brown catching the ball and playing in the secondary; sophomore Nick Quarterone and junior Joe Wioncek at linebacker, as well as junior George Kastrinakis and 295-pound senior Mark Pappas on the D-line.

"We're expecting a very good crowd; I think a lot of people are eager to see what's going on (tonight)," Bauer said. "But for us, no matter how you execute, it's about making plays and minimizing distractions. We're ready."

COMMEMORATIVE T-SHIRTS ON SALE TONIGHT

Tonight's first-ever night game in the 72-year history of Hurd Stadium will be one that fans can remember forever — in the form of a T-shirt. They'll be sold to fans for \$10 each with the two teams' helmets and the date signifying the historic event tonight.

Tickets for tonight's game will be sold at the gate. Prices are \$7 for adults and \$5 for students. A large crowd is expected, so fans are advised to plan ahead and get there early.

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Photos



Beverly High players prepare for tonight's game against Melrose, the first ever game under the lights at Hurd Stadium. Staff Photographer