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Beverly shakes off slow start, puts away Gloucester

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BEVERLY — When a defending Super Bowl champion with hopes of a return trip to Gillette Stadium hosts a winless opponent, it can be difficult to find an emotional edge.

Try telling that to the Beverly High football team, especially its seniors, a group that finally tasted victory over Gloucester with a 33-21 decision at a chilly, rainy Hurd Stadium on Saturday afternoon.

The Panthers (6-2 overall, 2-0 NEC/CAL Tier 2) overcame some early miscues and ran off 33 straight points after falling behind 14-0.

"This game meant a lot to our seniors because we haven't had much success against Gloucester. We hadn't beaten them since 2006 and the last few years only scored one touchdown, so our guys were excited. Maybe a little too much," Beverly head coach Dan Bauer said. "We're happy with the win."

Beverly's 12th-graders have now beaten every team in the Northeastern Conference at least once in their high school careers and have rattled off eight straight victories in league play dating back to last season.

The upset-minded Fishermen (0-8) started their first drive on the Beverly 5-yard line after a botched punt try by the Panthers. On 4th down, Jordan Pallazola barely got into the end zone to put the visitors ahead, 7-0.

Later in the first, Gloucester recovered a muffed punt deep in Panther territory and quarterback Lenny Taormina rolled out to hit captain Matt Taormina with a 12-yard TD pass for a surprising 14-0 lead.

"There were some miscues that can't happen. In the big games, that'll cost you," Bauer said.

Beverly's offense responded with a calm, collected 68-yard drive capped by junior Kenny Pierce's 3-yard TD.

Truly, the Panthers' defensive front took the game over by refusing to allow Gloucester to gain a first down in the second quarter. That gave Beverly's offense plenty of snaps to dig out of the early hole.

"We went up early, but they shut us down offensively, and that gave the momentum right back," said Gloucester head coach Tony Zerilli.

The electric Brendan Flaherty (110 yards on just 9 carries) scored with 3:20 left in the first half to make it 14-12. After another stand by the Panther defense, QB Dave Rollins connected with Flaherty (25 yards) on a pass, then took it in himself from the 3-yard line to give Beverly an 18-14 halftime edge.

"Our kids regained control," Bauer said. "That score before the half was huge. It's always a morale boost, and you want to go in there feeling good."

Gloucester controlled the ball in the second half and while Beverly ran only one play on offense in the third quarter, it was the highlight of the afternoon.

Flaherty broke three tackles at the line of scrimmage and shook off a defense that had ahold of his jersey before racing 68 yards to the end zone for a 26-14 Panther lead.

"We had six guys on him, and he broke all the tackles," Zerilli said of Flaherty. "He has a guy hanging on him for 10 yards and then he takes off; Brendan's a tough player both offensively and defensively."

Nick Theriault broke a 23-yard TD run to put Beverly ahead comfortably, 33-14, in the fourth and the Fishermen responded with Joe Harmon's 19-yard TD run to account for the final margin.

While Gloucester did recover an onside kick after Harmon's score, Flaherty intercepted Lenny Taormina to secure the victory.

"It was physical all the way to the end," Bauer said. "They didn't quit or back down, and neither did we. There's almost 100 years of football history between these towns (actually, it's 101 years, with Beverly holding a 56-40-5 series lead). It's always going to be a game whether each group is up or down."

For Beverly, Rollins was a perfect 4-for-4 passing for 77 yards and Kenny Pierce finished with 53 yards on nine jaunts. Captain Mark Giles had two receptions and two tackles for loss and Mike Dooling had a sack.