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High School Football Game of the Week: Run To Glory

Expect Beverly and Peabody to bring their ground games tomorrow as both teams look for their fourth win of the season

By Dan Harrison
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In this new age of aerial football, tomorrow's bout between rivals Beverly and Peabody High at Coley Lee Field (2 p.m.) should be a tribute to the ground-and-pound games of the past.

As in, when smashmouth football reigned supreme and most people had never heard of terms like "empty set" or "bubble screen."

Symmetry seems to be a major theme as both teams have undergone major offensive overhauls in recent years. Beverly (3-1) switched from a spread offense to the Wing-T last season and, after a rocky start, flourished under the new system hoisting the school's first ever Super Bowl championship. Now, after graduating all but one of its offensive linemen from a year ago, the Panthers have picked up where they left off last fall.

Meanwhile, Peabody head coach Scott Wlasuk recently opted out of the Single Wing offense in favor of the Pistol this offseason. The results speak for themselves; the Tanners are 3-0 for the first time since 2004.

If the hosts want to make it four straight wins tomorrow, it's going to have to find a way to slow down the scorching-hot Beverly offense.

Coach Dan Bauer's Panthers rumble into Peabody averaging 35 points over its last three contests — a span that has seen them pile up 862 yards on the ground from its four premier backs: Brendan Flaherty (134 yards), captain Nick Theriault (186), Kenny Pierce (241) and Dom Abate (301). That quartet has combined for 13 scores in wins over Lynn Classical, Lynn English and most recently Winthrop in which the four speedsters are averaging seven yards a carry.

"I'm very impressed with them. They have so many weapons," Wlasuk said in referring to the four-headed monster that is the Beverly High rushing attack. "But I've also been very impressed with how their line has performed.

"With all the weapons they have, the coaching and them coming off a Super Bowl (year), it's going to be big challenge ... and we're looking forward to it."

With tons of pre-snap motion and formation changes combined with post-snap misdirection they'll be up against, the word for the Tanners' defense this week has been discipline.

"Everybody has to stay focused on their responsibility and not do too much. I call it field discipline," explained Wlasuk. "The other key is getting people to the football and all the fundamental stuff like good pursuit angles and pursuit lanes, and making sure we get several people to the football."

The Peabody High offense is fresh off a 41-26 win over Gloucester — its highest point total since Oct. 28, 2005. Senior Nat Gaye ran up and down Newell Stadium last week against the Fishermen (237 yards, 3 TDs) but quarterback Jason Hiou could prove to be just as important in tomorrow's matchup.

"They're physical and fast as evidenced by what they've done, not just last week but over a consistent basis. They're tough, real respectful kids, and coach Wlasuk does a nice job," noted Beverly coach Dan Bauer.

"The thing that jumps out is their run game. Obviously Gaye is outstanding, and (Hiou) can run very well, too, so we have to contain him. He's a heady player and looks like he makes a lot of good decisions."

Bauer also praised the two-way play of fullback/linebacker D.J. Henricks, who has opened holes and helped Peabody gain 639 yards on the ground in three games while anchoring the defense.

Both Wlasuk and Bauer are familiar with the players on the opposing teams and have a mutual respect for one another. Peabody joined the Panthers at a skills clinic held in Beverly over the summer as players and coaches from both squads got to know the other better.

But come tomorrow afternoon, the pleasantries will have to wait because it's going to be a physical battle — a battle that one team is going to leave disappointed.

beverly (3-1) at peabody (3-0)

When: Tomorrow, 2 p.m.

Where: Coley Lee Field, Peabody

All-time series: Beverly leads, 30-26-3

Last meeting: Beverly won, 33-16, in 2008.

Keys to the game: Can Peabody run between the tackles to set up its speed guys on the outside? Can the Tanners stop all four Beverly backs and the potent Panther offensive attack?

Did you know?: This may be the 60th game of the series, but just the fifth time in the last 20 years that the Panthers and Tanners have met on the gridiron.