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Phil Stacey column: Defense? That's right, defense does it for Swampscott

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BEVERLY — You're flat-out lying if you say the first thought that comes to mind when you hear the words "Swampscott football" is defense.

The team's vaunted spread offense? Sure, that's absolutely believable. So is the man who brought it to the Big Blue (and the North Shore, for that matter) more than a decade ago, head coach Steve Dembowski.

All-time legendary standout Dick Jauron? The team's many state championships? One of the best football coaches in state history in Stan Bondelevitch? Those are all acceptable answers to the above query.

But defense? Associated with modern-day Swampscott football?

People just don't think of it.

Well, maybe now they should.

"We're pretty aware that our defense doesn't get much attention," said Big Blue senior defensive end Mark Lausier, after he and his mates played lockdown football over the final 22 minutes Saturday afternoon, knocking off host Beverly, 21-13, in a battle of Northeastern Conference/Cape Ann League Tier 2 unbeatens.

"We came here with a passion *and* with a vengeance."

You could have won huge money in Vegas if you bet that Beverly quarterback Dave Rollins would have more passing yards than his highly publicized counterpart, Big Blue all-star Michael Walsh (108 to 107). But you might've gotten similar odds if you wagered that Swampscott would come into Hurd Stadium and not only beat the high-octane Panthers, but shut them out for the entire second half.

As it turned out, Walsh had all three of his team's touchdowns — two rushing, the other after catching a 49-yard pass from Baker — and more than 200 yards of all-purpose offense in a so-called "quiet" performance. Perhaps more important, though, was that he didn't *have* to be the superstar on this day, because his defensive mates donned Superman's cape for the final two quarters.

"We had to fill our gaps, do our jobs and most of all, be physical," said linebacker and senior captain Zach Kalapinski, the heart of the Big Blue defense who finished with an unofficial 11 tackles. "That (second half) was our best half of football, and we needed it to be."

In giving Dembowski his 100th career win, Swampscott didn't exactly shut down the Panthers. It surrendered 224 rushing yards and 340 total yards; allowed Beverly's big, bruising junior speedster, Brendan Flaherty, to rush for 137 yards (and a TD) and catch another four balls for 90 yards (and another TD); and, auspiciously, an 83-yard touchdown drive by the Panthers on the game's opening series.

But from that point on, the Big Blue D tightened up by clogging running lanes and forced Beverly ballcarriers to the inside of the field, where gang-tackling became a Swampscott theme. They came up with big third and fourth down stops, batted down passes and made the day's biggest stop on 4th-and-2 inside their own 8-yard line with under four minutes to play.

"Honestly, we haven't played like this defensively since 2007 — and I think we all know what happened that year," Dembowski said. For those wondering, that was Swampscott's last Super Bowl championship season.

Aidan Lang, Matt Gambale (rotating with David Carrasco) and Kalapinski monitored play from their linebacking spots while defensive ends Joe DeSalvo ("a monster," said his head coach) and Lausier, as well as defensive tackles Mike Wynne, Patrick Sheehan, Spencer Webber and even freshman Mark Rittiboon, made key initial hits.

"Our linebackers picked the right week to step their games up," said captain A.J. Baker, who unofficially had a half-dozen tackles from his spot in the secondary.

Speaking of the secondary, it was Baker, Richard Sullivan, Robert Serino, Nick Meninno, Aaron Cronin, Frank Legere and Walsh who stayed fresh, stepped up and delivered key stops.

Baker talked about the "under the radar" guys who had sterling performances, and Legere fits that bill perfectly. A player who didn't even come out for the team until the second week, Legere rotated between strong safety and outside linebacker and came up with a huge pick in his own end zone off a tipped ball in the second quarter.

"You learn to respect a team you've lost to three straight years," Lausier added. "That's why this was such a special win for us. It may not have been our best game and it's not our last game, but it's one we'll always remember. It's incredible to finally beat them as seniors, especially at their place."

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