

TIGER FLASHBACK

BUFORD

1997

Defending Region 8A champion Buford sporting a (6-1) record brought its pack of Wolves up I-85 to the wet city of Commerce for a game that for all practical purposes would decide the region Division A winner which in turn would receive the top spot seeding in the first round of the football playoffs.

However, Commerce kept the ball for 29 of the games' 48 minutes as they bulled, sloshed and smashed their way to a region title by capturing a win as they destroyed the Wolves in this classic battle by a (28-13) score.

The game began in a warm soft drizzle, but as the night moved on it became more of a driving rain making it difficult to hang onto the slippery pigskin. These elements did not prove to favor the wide open Buford style of offense. However, Commerce's pounding ground attack was much better suited to the evening's conditions.

The Tiger offensive line of Josh Crawford and Craig Mathis at tackle, Eric Moore and Josh Smith at the guard positions, Nick Ladd at tight end and Russ Brown at center dominated the line of scrimmage on this miserable night. The guys in the trenches pound the lights out of Buford behind the running of bullish senior fullback Michael Fitzpatrick who rambled for 137 yards on 18 carries and freshman scat back Monte' Williams who tacked on 106 yards on 15 totes.

On the other hand, the Tiger defense played an inspired game limiting the highly touted Buford offense to 133 yards rushing and 88 passing. The Tiger defense recovered three Buford fumbles, intercepted two of elusive quarterback Tim Wansley's passes and hemmed him up on his patented scramble runs for most of the night until the fourth quarter.

With the game only a few minutes old, Buford QB Wansley's third pass of the game was picked off by Tiger defensive cornerback Bobby Patman at the Tiger 30 to thwart Buford's first entry into Tiger territory only to have a clipping penalty set the Tigers back to their 15. After Monte' Williams knocked out one first down to the Tiger 29, the Tigers, two plays later, coughed up the wet leather with their only turnover of this sloppy night when quarterback Dustin Allen dropped the snap and Buford was in business at the Commerce 29.

Halfback Ricky Mobley immediately gained 20 yards for a first down at the Tiger nine.

Two plays later, Wansley on an option around left end scored from six yards out. With the successful PAT kick, the Wolves who had beaten the Tigers handily the two previous years in Buford took a 7-0 lead with only four minutes having elapsed in the opening period.

But on this night, the Tigers were of a different vintage and they would have none of Buford's previous frolicking in victory, as the young men in gold and black tugged at their britches, re-buttoned their chin straps and prepared to beat the living day lights out of their arch enemy.

After the Buford kickoff sailed into the end zone, Commerce set out on a touchdown drive that covered 80 yards in only five plays. Fitzpatrick found a honey hole over right tackle for 4 and 8 yards for the Tigers' initial first down of this messy evening and one that was really only fit for ducks. QB Allen then skirted right end on an option keeper, but was hit and fumbled the ball out of bounds but for a six yard gain however.

Coach Savage, having found a weakness at the Buford left defensive tackle and an already known strength behind Tiger right tackle and tight end Craig Mathis and Nick Ladd, made use of the new found success and kept going back to the same spot. In other words, "if it ain't broke don't fix it".

Fitzpatrick then exploded for 30 yards over the honey hole at right tackle. Williams darted into the same spot and sped down the right side into glory land for a 32-yard score. On the PAT attempt, the Wolves were penalized half the distance to the goal for being off sides. Savage then decided to go for two. Allen kept right on the option keeper and scored to give the Tigers an (8-7) lead at the 3:26 mark of the first period.

The Tiger defense stiffened forcing a Wansley punt four plays later and the Tigers took over at the Tiger 44. Commerce then mounted their second smash-mouth drive, as they scored on an 8-play, 56-yard methodical, body-slamming, bone-crunching march.

On the Tigers' first snap, Fitzpatrick exploded again up the middle for 21 yards to the Buford 35. Monte' added nine on a sweep right, and four plays later Allen on third and nine at the Wolves 23 plunged in behind right guard and tackle. He slithered free in darting and lunging his way for 17 yards and a first down at the six.

Two plays later Williams crashed off right tackle behind the blocks of Fitzpatrick, Chad Scoggins, Josh Smith, Ladd and Mathis for 4 yards and the Tigers' second venture into pay dirt at the 9:07 mark of the second period. Daniel Carder's booming PAT kick increased the Tiger lead to (15-7).

On the kickoff, Carder's squib kick bounced funny, hit a Buford defender, and was recovered by the Tigers' Josh Smith at the Buford 49 giving the Tigers another golden opportunity to score. After Fitzpatrick burst up the middle for 15 yards, the drive unfortunately bogged down and on fourth and seven, Allen's option keeper was played

well by the Wolves giving Buford possession at their 29 and Commerce had squandered a golden opportunity.

Buford then mounted a 9-play 53-yard drive of its own with Mobley carrying five times for 29 yards. On first down at the Tiger 18, Wansley dropped to pass but the errant aerial was plucked out of the air by safetyman Michael Collins thwarting another Buford scoring opportunity. The Tigers then ran out the clock to end a very successful first half with the Commerce on the long end of a (15-7) score.

Following the second half kickoff, Mobley lost possession of the slimy ball on Buford's first play from scrimmage and Ladd was Johnny-on-the-spot for the recovery at the Buford 37. Almost single-handedly on five of the next six Tiger snaps, Fitzpatrick shoved, pushed and ran over Buford defenders for a first down at the 14.

After two runs netted minus two yards, Allen dropped back to pass and found Ladd on a down and out route to the right for 11 yards just shy of a first down at the five. With fourth and one staring the Tigers in the face, a busted play gained nothing and the Wolves had dodged a bullet but were faced with two problems. They were deep in their own territory, and driving rain continued to drench everything in sight.

Gaining virtually nothing against the inspired Tiger defense, Wansley punted to Williams who returned it 12 yards to the Buford 28. From here the Tigers would not be denied, as Williams took the handoff, skirted around right end, cut back over the middle of the field and outran would-be tacklers to the end zone for the Tigers' third score of the contest. The conversion run by Allen failed, but the Tigers now led (21-7) at the 4:50 mark of the third stanza.

Tiger faithful were on edge, because Wansley, recovering from a cramp, returned to the field and everyone knew that he was going to open up the offense. In nine plays, Wansley passed and Mobley ran the Wolves down to the Tiger four, as the horn sounded to end the third period.

As the fourth quarter opened, Buford faced a second down at the door of the Commerce goal line. However, halfback Mobley again lost the handle to the slippery ball. Tiger defensive tackle James Alexander pounced on the elusive pigskin and now the Tigers had dodged a bullet of their own.

With the offensive momentum seeming to shift somewhat toward the Wolves, the visitors had possession once again when Wansley returned a Nick Ladd punt 21 yards to the Tiger 22.

On the next play, the Buford signal-caller scrambled for what seemed to be an entire minute before finding Mobley all alone in the end zone with the Buford running back cradling the ball for a successful touchdown pass. The PAT kick by Kyle Sewell was wide right but the Tiger lead had now been cut to (21-13) with 9:24 left in the game.

After the kickoff and facing fourth and three, Savage had the Tigers take a delay of the game penalty back to the Commerce 22 to use up some of the clock. Ladd then dropped back to punt.

As the ball was snapped, Ladd got pressure from the right side of the Buford rush. Seeing a potential blocked kick, the senior tight end and left-footed punter stepped outside of the oncoming Wolves, tucked the ball and rambled 18 yards on a great effort to pick up a decisive first down for the Tigers at the Commerce 40 to keep the eventual TD drive alive.

"Heck no it wasn't a called play. He just tucked it and ran," noted Coach Steve Savage.

"It wasn't a fake," said Ladd. "I had a rush coming from the outside and they came too far. I stepped to the side and saw I had running room."

"That was the turning point," said Buford coach Dexter Wood. "I felt we were still in it and could have scored if we had gotten the ball back."

With the drive now still alive, the Commerce offensive line became dominant again as the Tigers covered the remaining 60 yards in six plays. Big plays in the march were Williams run of 14 yards on a great effort, and a 26-yard option keeper by Allen around right end for a first down at the 11.

Allen ran the same play on the next two snaps for four and seven yards the final one for the touchdown with only 2:39 remaining in the game. Carder again drilled the PAT kick and the Tigers now could smell the region title with a (28-13) advantage, as the final nail had been driven in the coffin of the Wolves.

The remainder of the contest was uneventful. However, with two more victories in successive weeks over Union County and Towns County, the Tigers would again wear the region crown in 1997.

Commerce went on to post a (12-1-0) season record also defeating nine other opponents: Madison County, Jefferson, Franklin County, Athens Academy, Oglethorpe County, Dawson County, Rabun County, Greenville and Landmark Christian. The Tigers only defeat came in the third round of the state playoffs when they were beaten at Crawford County on a bitterly cold night in middle Georgia.

Others on the 1997 Tiger squad were: Rob Sanders, Lee Sorrow, Brandon Maddox, Jake Epps, Christopher Wilkie, Clint Chester, Zack Henderson, Lee Thompkins, Chanc Strickland, Adam Stephenson, Jonathan Martin, John Harrison, Steven Evans, Twion Shealer, Tyson Brown, Charlie Epps, Nick Moulton, Stanley Burns, Shawn Whitehead and Casey Gary.

Partially compiled from *THE COMMERCE NEWS* reports

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