

TIGER FLASHBACK

DULUTH

1976

On October 29, 1976, the Commerce Tiger defensive juggernaut having surrendered only 70 points all season in nine games barreled down I-85 to Duluth for the tenth game of the season and this contest had all the marbles on the line for the Region 8A championship title.

Commerce had lost its only game of the season in the second contest with a (16-6) defeat at the hands of Stephens County which was in a higher classification.

Therefore, Commerce was undefeated in region play, while Duluth had lost a region contest against Central Gwinnett by a (14-0) score. Commerce had earlier defeated the Black Knights by three points (17-14). Both teams had only one loss for the season---- Commerce was (8-1-0) and Duluth came into the game at (6-1-0).

Hence, for Commerce to win the Region 8A title, the Tigers had to either defeat or tie Duluth in this final game of the season. The stage was set for one of the great monster defensive battles in Commerce Tiger football history.

Duluth was led by tailback George Rogers, 6'2" and 215 lbs. of lightning speed and horrific power. He was an awesome looking sight in a high school football uniform. He would later win the Heisman Trophy in 1980 at the University of South Carolina.

The Wildcats were a powerful offensive unit and had a fine defense as well, as both teams were prepared for this great battle.

Not only did Duluth have Rogers, they had an excellent all-round team. He was not a one man show, but he was the star attraction.

Commerce, on the other hand, had a small team except for one defensive lineman of over 200 lb. in Lamar Hiland. Commerce was a better defensive team than an offensive one and was led by All-State nose guard Ricky Hill.

The 11 man Tiger defensive squad was extremely quick but could not match the speed of Rogers if he turned the corner.

However, the Tigers were a very smart team on defense that played great fundamental football under Coach Ray Lamb. It was a team that feared nobody. However, it was a

good wishbone offensive team but not the offensive show that Duluth and Rogers presented.

The defensive plan of attack was to stop Rogers before he got started. Otherwise, Commerce could have a bad night if Rogers got on a roll, as he had done to other opponents that season.

On their first possession, Duluth quarterback Tony Hiles, on an option keeper around the left side, sailed 61 yards down the field before being dragged down inside the Tiger ten. The Commerce defense stiffened and Duluth kicked a short field goal which stood up until the fourth quarter.

On this night, the Tigers known more for their defense in 1976 than their offense looked like a hive of hornets after a bull every time that George Rogers touched the ball.

He was limited to 21 yards on 19 carries for the evening. He lost two fumbles and threw one interception, as the swarming defense of Commerce gang tackled the great running back time and time again for losses or either short yardage. It was gang tackling at its best. It was probably one of the worst offensive nights ever for Rogers.

In the only other scoring threat by either team in the first half, a second quarter Rogers' pass was intercepted at the Tiger two yard line by safetyman Donald Rucker to squelch a Wildcat drive.

Also, a fourth down and three option keeper attempt by Tiger quarterback Mike Johnston two series later in the second quarter came up a yard shy at the Duluth 26, as the Tigers were unable to capitalize on the scoring opportunity, and the Wildcats a short time later took a (3-0) lead into intermission.

On the first Commerce drive of the third stanza, Tiger halfback Rucker fumbled away a serious Commerce threat at the Duluth eight, however the stupendous Tiger defense never allowed Duluth to cross the Tiger 40 yard line during the entire second half.

Late in the game with Commerce still trailing 3-0, the Tiger defense bottled up the Duluth offensive machine deep in Wildcat territory.

A short Wildcat punt out to their 34 yard line set up the tying field goal for Commerce. A short drive of 20 yards to the 14 behind the running of Johnston, Rucker and halfback Steve Johnson set the dramatic stage for the Tigers to gather in the region crown.

With 2:44 left in the game, Commerce defensive tackle and kicker Lamar Hiland entered the game. Johnston took the snap from center and placed the pigskin on the tee where Hiland then booted a dynamic 31-yard field goal for the (3-3) tie.

Following the successful field goal, four desperate offensive plays by Duluth netted

minus 3 yards, as the Tigers took over at the Wildcat 35 where QB Johnston took a knee on four consecutive snaps to ice the game for Ray Lamb's troops.

This effort by the Tigers ended one of the greatest and most monumental defensive struggles in the annals of Commerce football. With the tie, Commerce was the 1976 Region 8A football champion.

Commerce had 140 yards rushing on the night and Duluth had 143 with 61 yards coming on that one play by QB Hiles early in the game. Commerce had no yards passing, while Duluth collected a meager 44 yards in the air.

George Rogers was a great running back, but on this night he was bested by a small, swarming defense that carried out the Coach Lamb's game plan to perfection.

Tiger defensive stalwarts were: Nose guard-Ricky Hill who had 17 tackles, linebacker David Sanders had 11 tackles, defensive ends Tommy Lewis and Kelly Minish had six and five tackles respectively. The Commerce defense had 4 takeaways in the contest—3 fumbles and 1 pass interception.

Halfback Bob Nelson with five tackles had one of the great plays in the game right in front of Tiger Coach Ray Lamb. Nelson and Rogers had a monstrous head gear to head gear collision as the running back skirted left end. The hit by Nelson was so violent that Rogers erupted with some internal ooze from his nostrils out the front of his helmet. Coach Lamb later stated, "It was a snot-bubble lick."

Other defensive starters were: tackle-Scott Hix, linebacker-Charles Whitlock, and halfbacks Dean Allen and Steve Johnson.

Donald Rucker was the primary horse that the Tigers rode during this game, as he garnered 116 tough yards in 24 carries on this eventful evening.

Of the seventeen region titles that have been won over the years by Commerce, this is the only time that Commerce has ever clinched a region title with a tie score.

By the way, the crowd number was a monstrous one in this epic defensive slugfest. On this cold night in Duluth, there were many there to see this struggle who were not followers of either team but just wanted to see a great football matchup.

And hey, they got their moneys worth on this night.

The 1976 Tiger team also defeated White County, Madison County, North Gwinnett, Jefferson, Central Gwinnett, East Hall, Oconee County, Monroe Area, Cartersville, Sylvan and Cedar Grove before losing the state championship game in the mud at Turner County.

Others on the 1976 Tiger team were: Dean Allen, Doug Martin, Danny White, Barry Lord, Terry Canup, Kenny Flint, Andre Rollins, Scott Hix, David Adams, Bret Evans, Terry Elrod, Mike Barrett, Cleve Hendrix, Brad Brown, Gene Doss, Richard Beasley, Sheldon Spivey, Bob Perry, Carl Pittman and Charles Whitlock.

July 2008, Jeff Prickett