

# TIGER FLASHBACK FRANKLIN COUNTY 1989

A new era was unfolding in Commerce in 1989. Ray Lamb had been at the Tiger helm for 22 years (1967-1988) and had been ultra-successful in Tigertown with a (190-58-9) record and .766 winning percentage. However, Coach Lamb had moved on to Monroe Area for the 1989 campaign and now Commerce after almost a quarter century had a new head football coach.

Steve Savage, former Tiger football player in the early 1970's and for eleven years an assistant coach under Lamb, was now the Tigers' head man and about to launch his own successful tenure as the Tigers' head football master.

Indeed, the Commerce Tigers were about to enter into the "Savage Era" and one that at this point has also been ultra-successful, for in 10 years (only exceeded by Lamb in tenure out of the total of eleven total Tiger coaches since 1940) Savage has also amassed a fine winning record of 80-37-0 and a .684 winning percentage through 1998.

However, in 1989 as a new era dawned in Commerce football, no one knew just exactly how the Tigers would fare under this new first time head coach. But Commerce football enthusiasts found out rather quickly that things would be about the same as under Lamb, WIN! WIN!

On September 1, 1989 the Franklin County Lions roared down Highway 59 toward the fair "city on the right track" with intentions of gaining some revenge after having lost to the Tigers in the three previous encounters dating back to 1986. Regrettably, Coach Jeff Davis' charges failed to come to grips with the savageness at which this new brand of Tiger would play, as Commerce skinned the Lions (17-12) at Tiger Stadium on a clear and rather hot Friday night.

"You better know it was good to win," commented Savage. "We were real proud of the enthusiasm our players showed," stated the new head coach.

With many fans wearing "Savage Tigers" T-shirts, the Tigers were able to overcome a rather sluggish first half leading only 7-6 and totally shut down Franklin County in the second half on their way to the 17-12 victory in the season opener for each team.

The Lions came out roaring as they took the opening kickoff, and under the direction of

quarterback Andy Esco marched from the Lion 32 to the Tiger 35 all by way of the ground game, but a great hit by the Tiger defense forced halfback Mickey Blackwell to lose possession of the ball with Tiger defensive lineman Cedric Wood recovering at the Commerce 35.

Unable to mount any offense whatsoever, Commerce after only three offensive plays punted back to the Lions where Blackwell returned it 20 yards to the Lion 48 yard stripe. Franklin proceeded to methodically move the ball to the Tiger 18 primarily behind the running of Blackwell and Anthony Wheeler.

However, a delay of the game penalty against the Lions forced a successful 35-yard field goal by Charlie Hall on fourth-and-six giving Franklin County an early 3-0 lead with 1:12 remaining in the first stanza.

Later, the Tigers showed their grit as they responded quickly. On their next possession, the real 'Cats marched 80 yards in nine plays to take the lead early in the second period.

On a third-and-five situation from the Tiger 24 and also the first play of the second period, quarterback J. Ben Bray rifled a complete pass to split end Jason Waters for 17 yards to the Tiger 42 and the Tigers' initial first down of the game. Left halfback Wayland Rucker followed with a 23-yard sweep of right end for another first down at the Lions' 35.

Two plays later, Bray hit halfback Tyrone Rollins for 11 yards over the middle and another first down at the Lion 23. Rucker followed with a 9-yard burst over right tackle, before fullback Lamar Bowles crashed over right guard for a 14-yard touchdown run dragging tacklers into the end zone with him to score the first touchdown of the 1989 campaign and the first of many in the "Savage Era".

With 9:57 remaining in the second period, big Cedric Wood split the uprights to give the Tigers a (7-3) advantage and one they would never relinquish.

The fine offensive line consisting of Chris Goodman and Andy Barnett at the tackles, Kelly Slater and Michael Brown at the guard positions, center Tracey Brown and tight end Chris Vickery opened up large holes most of the night enabling Tiger runners to gain 184 yards rushing for the evening.

The Lions responded to the Tiger score on their next possession by driving from their 43 to the Tiger's 9-yard line before once again having the Tiger defense force them to settle for a Charlie Hall field goal. This one covered 25 yards and just barely cleared the right upright to bring the Lions to within a point of the Tigers at (7-6) with 5:20 showing on the scoreboard clock in the second period.

Neither team could muster a real scoring threat for the remainder of the half of this close contest, as the two teams went to their respective locker rooms and separated by only

one point.

The Lions had a total of 144 yards in the first half while Commerce compiled 125. The Tiger fans didn't know it then, but their northern guests would show almost no more prowess on offense, as they would gain only 28 additional yards for the remainder of the game.

On Franklin County's first possession following halftime, three successive plays were stuffed by the Tiger defense forcing a punt. Tiger defensive back Richie Backer stormed through from the outside and blocked the kick with a mass of Tiger humanity recovering all the way back at the FC 14 yard line.

Bowles rambled up the middle behind fine offensive line blocking for six yards then added another yard to the seven. Bray, faking beautifully, scampered around right end on the option keeper for a first-and-goal at the two.

Bray then kept the ball again on the same option keeper play for the second Tiger tally of the night, as he scored untouched. Wood's second successful conversion attempt upped the Tiger lead to (14-6) with 6:20 to go in the third stanza.

The Tigers received another break with only seven seconds to go in the third period when Lions' punt receiver Bob Edwards failed to handle a punt by the Tigers' Andy Barnett at the FC 35. Here ever-hustling Josh Massey, a defensive cornerback, recovered for the opportunistic Tigers.

A defensive holding penalty against the Lions moved the ball to the Franklin 24. The Tiger drive was stopped though when Bray, harassed by the Franklin County defensive rush, threw a pass that was intercepted by FC defensive back Bob Edwards who returned it five yards to the FC 10.

In the second half, FC fumbled five times, losing two with the last one coming seven plays following the interception when Tiger linebacker Kelly Slater scooped up the loose pigskin at the 21 and returned it nine yards to the FC12 before being dragged down by a Lion defender. A personal foul on the Lions during the tackle gave the Commerce lads a first down and goal to go at the Franklin County six yard line.

Three runs by Bray netted only three yards to the three yard line where Cedric Wood entered and booted a 20-yard field goal, and the Tiger lead had now mounted to what many fans thought was a comfortable (17-6) advantage.

However, Franklin County's Mickey Blackwell took the ensuing kickoff up the middle of the field, broke two tackles at midfield, and veered to his left before outracing Vernard Gillespie 94 yards to the end zone. The Lions decided to go for the two-point conversion, but quarterback Andy Esco was stuffed behind the line by Tiger defensive end Miles Grogan, as the Tigers kept their five point lead of (17-12) with 5:40 left in the

game.

Commerce's powerful wishbone running attack featuring Wayland Rucker and Cedric Wood knocked out four first downs and 51 yards in eleven plays to run out the remaining time on the clock giving Coach Steve Savage a win in his first attempt as head coach at Commerce with an exciting (17-12) victory over the Lions of Franklin County.

Rucker led all rushers in the game with 96 yards in 14 carries, while Richie Backer led the team in tackles with nine, seven of which were unassisted.

The Tigers went on to post a record of (8-4-0) in Steve Savage's first year as head Coach of the Tigers and a very successful one at that.

The Tigers in 1989 also defeated Oconee County, Jefferson, Union County, Dawson County, Banks County, Towns County and Oglethorpe County in a playoff game (24-20) in one of the most exciting games ever played at Tiger Stadium. Commerce lost four contests during the season to Madison County, Buford and to Dacula on two occasions the second game being a playoff game.

Others on the 1989 squad were: Rod Wilson, Bruce Chisholm, Adam Wilson, Michael Smith, Clay Eubanks, Lance Poole, Joe Lee Davis, Michael Blackburn, Bobby Carroll, Clay Seymour, Phillip Cox, Emory Walker, Scotty Pattman, Scott Fitzpatrick, Lance Leavens, Chad Bennett, Craig Davis, Jason Meadows, Gary Davis, Chuck Thompson, Jason Pittman, Jeff Williams, Chad Wilson, Eric Dorsey, Jason West, Chad Crumley and Craig Patrick.

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