

TIGER FLASHBACK

GREENVILLE

1985

Sporting a 12-0 record, the Commerce Tigers and hundreds of their fans followed their Black and Gold heroes through the Georgia rain to the mid-state community of Greenville. It was a horribly rainy night although unusually warm.

The Tigers not only faced a formidable Patriot football team under the guidance of Coach Dwight Hochstetler, but also field conditions that can be classified as nothing short of miserable. The field having what might be described as poor drainage with many low places being on the gridiron was covered with water, mud and worms. Yes, worms! For instance, tackle Mark Hancock had an eight-incher crawl up his arm while in his offensive stance.

The first question for Commerce in this game was how would the Tigers respond to these game conditions that they had not played in during their career. The answer was that this team on defense played like gangbusters against the top-rated team in the state polls holding all-star halfback Sandy Strozier to only 51 yards in eleven carries from his offensive running back position.

While on offense the black and gold gladiators of Tigertown didn't commit a single turnover nor did they have an offensive ball-handling miscue of any kind during this virtual down pour of rains from the heavens. This faultless effort of taking care of the football was a facet that was utterly amazing considering the conditions.

To begin the fierce battle the Tigers kicked off, and the Tiger defense stuffed the Patriot's first three plays which netted only five yards to the Greenville 26. Whereupon, the initial punt of the game was partially blocked by a 10 man Tiger rush for a net of only two yards giving Commerce excellent field position at the enemy 28.

Of the ten total possessions for the Tigers during the game, Commerce began six in Greenville territory and had an average field position of starting at the Patriot 48, while Greenville averaged starting at their own 26 and never began a drive in Tiger territory.

Ray Lamb's legion started its first of five scoring drives, covering the 28 yards in six plays with junior halfback Pat Wood driving over left tackle from the three at 6:29 of the initial period. On the conversion attempt, the wet ball was bobbled by holder Rod Rucker and Pat Wood kicked the ball into the middle of the offensive line and the score remained at (6-0) in the first stanza.

Following the Tiger kickoff into the end zone by halfback Terry Hancock, Greenville marched to pay dirt in five snaps. The most unusual play in the march was the TD run

of 63 yards by halfback Albert Parks.

The play began with the Patriot backfield quite obviously being in motion to the attention of everyone but the referee. With the Tiger defense relaxing because of this fact, Parks then exploded over right tackle and slogged his way down the field for the score at 3:46.

Quarterback Kevin Matthews converted the two-point conversion pass to Strozier giving the Patriots an 8-6 lead and putting the Tigers on the short end of the scoreboard for the first time all year.

The second question now was did this team have the character to come back from this adversity? Again, the answer was "yes" as two possessions later Patriot signal-caller Matthews lost the first of five Greenville miscues giving the Tigers possession at the host team's 41.

In game conditions such as these, usually the team with the fewest turnovers will more likely than not win the contest. Commerce, as poor as field conditions were on this night, did not drop the ball on a single play from scrimmage, and as those who saw the field will attest, this was an absolute miracle.

From the 41 the Tiger offense responded and drove the distance in five snaps. The key play being a successful third down conversion pass for a TD of 21 yards from Scott Nunn to Pat Wood who slogged his way into the end zone with 8:58 left in the half. Rucker's two point conversion run was stopped leaving the Tigers with a very precarious (12-8) lead.

Later with Greenville forced into a punting situation at its own 25 because of the swarming Tiger defense, the Patriot center snapped the ball over the head of the punter who scooped up the errant pigskin in the end zone and passed it to the tight end for a three yard gain to the 28 but short of the first down.

Commerce then drove to the Greenville five where for the first time in 28 opportunities they failed on fourth down to score from inside the opponents' 10 yard line, and the score stood at (12-8) as the halftime horn sounded.

Greenville took the second-half kickoff and drove 63 yards to the go ahead TD with the aid of a roughing the punter penalty at the Commerce 47. Halfback Bobby Bussey eventually plunged two yards over right tackle to give the Patriots the lead at 6:14. The PAT was unsuccessful but Greenville now had a (14-12) advantage.

At this point it was gut check time for the Tigers, but the cream rose to the top once more, as Coach Lamb's troops took the kickoff and drove to the Commerce 46. Halfback Terry Hancock burst 54 yards up the middle on a trap play and splattered through the quagmire to pay dirt only to have the effort called back because of a holding penalty.

On second down at the Tiger 36, quarterback Scott Nunn ran the option to perfection, as

he read the defense and left the ball in the hands of fullback Jimbo Hall who bolted 17 yards and then again for seven more to collect a much needed first down.

Three plays later Rucker plunged in from the three yard line for the first of four Tiger scores in the final stanza with 10:59 left on the game clock. Hall's two point conversion run gave the 'Cats a (20-14) lead that they were to never relinquish.

From this point Commerce scored three more times in a span of 4:07, all as a result of Patriot turnovers.

The Tiger kickoff team charged down the field and hammered the Greenville kickoff man who coughed up the wet pigskin at his 38. Shortly thereafter, HB Rod Rucker exploded for 34 yards to the one, and then plunged over right tackle behind the blocking of Chas Hardy, Mark Hancock and Scott Martin for the fourth Tiger tally. The missed PAT left the Tigers with a lead of (26-14) at the 9:42 mark of the final period.

On the first play following the kickoff, a Greenville running back fumbled after a short gain with Commerce gaining possession with good field position at the Patriot 41.

A 16-yard run by Hancock, with a 15 yard piling-on penalty tacked on, put the ball on the Greenville ten. A few snaps later Rucker, plunged over from the two with 7:30 left in the game. Rucker also added the two point conversion to give the Tigers a (34-14) lead, and the muddy slugfest had turned into a rout for the Black and Gold.

On the first play following the kickoff, cornerback Tracy Beasley intercepted his ninth aerial of the year and scampered 35 yards down the left sideline in front of the Patriot faithful for a score, as he stepped just inside the pylon for the fourth Tiger TD of the period.

The Commerce lead had now skyrocketed to (40-14) victory after the unsuccessful PAT attempt, and the game ended a short time thereafter. The Tiger motorcade then relentlessly rolled northward and victorious back to the little "city on the tracks".

Chas Hardy and Chip McClure led the awesome Tiger defense with 11 tackles each, while Rucker collected 95 yards on the ground giving him 1288 at this point on the season.

The Tigers of 1985 won twelve games in a row, before losing the next week in a very, very, very frigid and icy cold North Georgia Championship game to Palmetto just south of Atlanta. However, the Tigers during the season defeated eleven other opponents in consecutive weeks including Hart Co., Madison Co., Jefferson, Rabun Co., Oconee Co., Towns Co., Dawson Co., North Hall, Union Co., Banks Co. and Athens Academy.

Other members of the (12-1-0) 1985 Tiger squad were: Derrick Davis, Kevin McCook, Jeff Legg, Donnie Gholston, Keith Hall, Ricky Arwood, Chris Shirley, Todd Gunter, Todd Austin, Ken Canup, Shane Brown, George Mathis, Pat Tarpkins, Shane Crumley, Barry Brooks, Rick Massey, James Wood, and Dwane Mitchell.

Cheerleaders for the 1985 squad were: Kristy Smith, Lynn Lamb, Jennifer Pittman, Lisa

Vitug, Trudy McEver, Kim Wright, Kim Seabolt and Tiger-Melody Wilbanks.

July 1997, Jeff Prickett