

# TIGER FLASHBACK

## MONTICELLO

### 1990

All the (6-3) Commerce Tigers had to do to earn a spot in the Region 8-A playoffs was beat Monticello (8-1), an explosive team that had stumbled only once in 1990 as they traveled to Rose Bowl Field to play the Purple Hurricanes.

But the Tigers did indeed defeat the fifth ranked 'Canes by the margin of (36-23) on a soggy, rain-soaked field strewn with leaves and the only one I've ever seen with acorns in the end zone.

Wayland Rucker, the bullish Tiger halfback in the vaunted Tiger wishbone attack, ran the ball over, around and mainly through the Hurricane defense. Rucker and his blockers accounted for 247 of the Tigers' 295 yards. Rucker carried the ball a school record 36 times for 247 yards. He scored four touchdowns on runs of 16, 9, 22 and 31 yards.

No one knew exactly how Friday's rains would affect either team's play. The Tigers were wary of the Hurricanes' speed, and hoped a wet field would be to their advantage. Commerce had also been known to play poorly under wet conditions in the past.

However, the Commerce offensive line and backs dominated on this damp night.

The Tigers fumbled three times on their first two offensive plays, and at the Monticello five-yard line midway through the second quarter. Monticello turned the Tigers' final bobble into three points.

The Canes also had their problems with three fumbles of their own and an interception. Additionally, Monticello had a blocked punt and allowed the Tigers to recover a short kickoff.

As the game began, Commerce received the opening kickoff, but QB Jason Pittman lost the football on consecutive snaps. Monticello recovered the second bobble, but promptly lost the handle themselves and gave it right back to the Tigers.

Monticello took the early lead on a two-play, 75-yard scoring drive, as HB Terrance Davis swept around right end for 73 yards outracing the Tiger defense for the end zone. Scott Hodgin's PAT was good and the Hurricanes led early by a 7-0 score.

Tiger coaches were afraid the 'Canes might "big play" them all night. Their biggest hope of stopping them was to control the football. Rucker & Co. were effective in this area, as they maintained possession of the wet pigskin for 28 of the game's 48 minutes.

Following the Monticello score, the Tigers, behind good offensive line blocking of center-Phillip Cox, guards-Kelly Slater and Michael Brown, tackles-Chris Goodman and Andy Barnett, and ends-Chris Vickery and Eric Dorsey, scored their initial TD of the night on an 8-play, 59-yard drive. Rucker had 51 of the 57 yards and scored from 16 yards out as he burst over left tackle.

Pittman ran for the two-point conversion to give the Tigers an 8-7 lead.

Four plays into the second quarter, the Tigers' Chris Vickery intercepted a Monticello pass and returned it ten yards to the Hurricanes' 45 yard stripe. The Tigers seemed destined to score again until Pittman lost the elusive wet ball at the Monticello five.

Monticello was able to cash in on the Tiger miscue, as the home team used some ball control of their own and kept the football for some eight minutes in the second period while driving 82 yards to the Tiger 13 where, with only 28 seconds remaining in the half, Hodgkin kicked a field goal from 29 yards out to give the home-town team a (10-8) halftime lead.

On Monticello's first possession of the second half, Commerce's Michael Brown tattooed the 'Cane ball carrier Cornelius McClendon for a five yard loss on a third and two situation. Josh Massey blocked the ensuing punt attempt, and Clay Eubanks picked off the football in mid air and rambled 25 yards to score and give the Tigers their second lead of the night. Coach Steve Savage's troupes would not trail again on this wet evening.

Pittman's conversion run was again good on the quarterback option keeper and Commerce led (16-10) at the 9:33 mark.

The blocked punt was not the only break the Tigers would get on this soggy evening. Chad Crumley topped the football on the ensuing kickoff sending it bouncing slowly downfield where the Tiger's Jason West recovered at the Monticello 43.

The relentless wishbone directed by Pittman drove through the mush and ten plays later, Rucker scored his second TD. This one from nine yards out, as the Tiger lead blossomed to (22-10) with 4:29 remaining in the third stanza.

Rucker carried eight times and picked up 38 of the 43 yards in the drive.

The Tigers scored 14 points off Monticello turnovers, while the Hurricanes were able to score only three off Tiger miscues.

Monticello got untracked on its next possession with a 5-play, 65 yard drive to pull to within five points of the visiting Tigers. Hurricane quarterback Chad Fullerton hit McClendon with a 47-yard bomb down the right sideline for the score.

Hodgin's PAT was true and the Hurricanes had climbed back into the contest at (22-17).

After taking the KO at their 28, Commerce held the ball for 13 plays en route to another Rucker TD tally. Rucker carried on 9 plays of the drive and scored from 22 yards out as the blocking off the left side of the offensive wall opened a gaping hole leaving nothing but daylight.

The big play for Commerce was a fourth down and 3 at the Monticello 30 when Rucker rambled for five yards over right tackle to enable the Tigers to maintain possession of the pigskin en route to the score.

Jason West's run for the PAT was good and increased the Tiger lead to 30-17 at the 6:02 mark of the final stanza and victory seemed more a more comfortable possibility for Commerce.

But, Monticello refused to submit and responded with a quick 6-play, 59 yard scoring march. A pass from Fullerton to Hodgin of 28-yards down the right sideline to the Commerce two set up Dewayne Standifer's 2-yard scoring run as Monticello narrowed the gap to (30-23) at the 4:03 mark.

Monticello then attempted the anticipated onside kick, but the ball bounded out of bounds one yard short of midfield where the 'Cats took over.

Behind the blocking of HB West and FB Lamar Bowles along with the aforementioned offensive linemen, Rucker & Co. were not satisfied and were in gear again.

The massive back scored his fourth TD of the evening six-plays later when he burst up the middle of the Monticello defense on a trap play and rambled, as if shot from a cannon, 31 yards untouched into the acorn-strewn end zone with only 1:23 left in the contest and giving the Tigers an insurmountable lead at (36-23).

Total offense for the game had Commerce with 295 and Monticello with 339. On this night it was a game of Ball Control vs. the Big Play with the Ball Control offense of the Tigers coming out victorious.

Commerce and Monticello again played the next week in the first round of the state playoffs this time in Tigertown. Again the Tigers were victorious, as the Commerce 'Cats shut out the 'Canes by the score of 16-0. The Tigers ended the season with a 10-4 record.

En route to a (10-4-0) season record in 1990, Commerce also defeated Madison County, Dawson County, Jefferson, Dacula, Social Circle, Athens Academy, Decatur and East

Rome while losing four contests to Oconee County, Madison County, Banks County and Lincoln County in the semi-final playoff game.

July 1991, Jeff Prickett