

TIGER FLASHBACK

NORTH SPRINGS

1978

Sporting an (11-0-1) record going into the third playoff game of the 1978 campaign, the Commerce Tigers rolled down I-85 toward the north Atlanta area to take on the North Springs Spartans. It was the country mouse paying another visit to the city mouse. But if the country mouse doesn't start behaving any better, he may not get invited back.

The Commerce Tigers, led by the 187 rushing yards of quarterback Brad Brown and the three touchdowns and 121 yards from fullback Ricky Hill, rolled to a (44-19) victory over North Springs in the quarterfinals of the state class AA football playoffs, thus eliminating a good Spartan team from further competition. The Spartans record fell to (11-2-0).

Commerce jumped out to a 17-0 first quarter lead, scoring on its first three possessions of the game.

In fact, the Tigers were on the scoreboard three plays after they took control of the ball for the first time on a Spartan punt to the Tiger 33. On the option, Brown kept around left end for 25 yards, and Hill carried for successive thrusts over guard of 22 and 20 yards on the next two plays, the final carry was good enough for a touchdown as he strolled into pay dirt standing and untouched.

Big Richard Dills' extra point was boomed through the uprights to make the score (7-0) with 8:51 remaining in the initial period.

"We wanted to take control of the game early," Coach Ray Lamb said. "That was the key to the big win. North Springs is a lot better team than they showed tonight. They have a lot of tradition and pride in their program, and we were fortunate to come up with such a big win."

Four plays after the ensuing kickoff, Spartan tailback Mike Niebanck fumbled and the Tigers recovered at the NS 20. The Spartan defense stiffened as the Tigers gained nothing in three plays.

Dills then booted a 38-yard field goal to up the Tiger lead to (10-0) at the 5:40 mark of the first stanza.

The Tiger defense, led by Hill and linebackers Terry Elrod and Charles Whitlock, forced a Spartan punt three plays later down to the Commerce 16. From here Commerce mounted its third scoring drive of the playoff encounter.

Two plays later QB Brad Brown swept left end on the option keeper and sped 77-yards to glory land. Dills' PAT was again true and the Tigers held a commanding lead of (17-0) with 3:13 left in the first period.

The Spartan coach Bob Mangan knew his team was in for a long night. "Their defense was driving our offensive line back into our backfield," he said. "The only way we had to move the ball was to rely on trick plays. After I saw they were whipping us on the line so bad, I knew we were in trouble," Coach Mangan added.

On North Springs' second play thereafter, fullback Bill Hall fumbled and Commerce recovered at the Spartan 37 with just over two minutes remaining in the period.

Commerce converted a big fourth-and-one situation at the NS 18 when Hill burst up the middle of a gaping hold in the middle of the Tiger offensive line for 13 yards to the Spartan five. On the next play Hill rumbled up the gut of the Spartan defensive wall once more for a 5-yard touchdown. Dills' PAT was again successful and Commerce led (24-0) with 10:05 remaining before intermission.

On the next Tiger possession, Brown made a bad pitch on the triple option and the Spartans recovered at the Commerce 46.

On third-and-four, Niebanck threw a halfback pass to Danny Gilbert for a 40-yard TD. The PAT kick was good and the Spartans had a least put a dent in the scoreboard to cut the Tiger lead to (24-7) with 4:59 remaining in the half. Neither team could mount another drive before the halftime horn sounded, as the Tigers took a big lead to the locker room.

Commerce took the second half kickoff and marched 72 yards in seven plays. The big play of the drive was a 42-yard scamper around left end on the option by QB Brown. The Tiger signal caller rumbled through the Spartan defense behind great blocking before being dragged down at the one-foot line. Hill then banged over from that point for the fourth Tiger TD of this chilly night in late fall.

Dills' PAT kick was unsuccessful. However, the Tiger lead had mounted to (30-7) at the 8:48 mark of the third period.

On North Springs second possession thereafter, Tiger safety man Richard Beasley snagged an aerial by QB Art Ferguson and returned it 23 yards to the NS 33, whereupon a piling on penalty against the Spartans moved the pignskin to the 18 yard stripe of the host team.

Five plays later, halfback Carl Pittman skirted left end for 7 yards and scored untouched. Dills' successful kick now gave the Tigers a (37-7) advantage with 3:42 to go in the third stanza.

On the first play of the final period, the Spartans scored on a 7-yard pass from quarterback Ferguson to halfback John Heyman. With the muffed PAT placement, the score remained at a comfortable Commerce advantage of (37-13).

Commerce bounced right back and scored on a drive of 58 yards in seven plays. Halfback Taylor Rucker did the honors this time, as he swept right end to pay dirt from 12 yards out with 8:24 left in the contest. Dills' booming PAT gave the Tigers a big lead of (44-13).

Against Tiger subs, the Spartans added another tally on a drive of 76 yards in ten plays culminated by a touchdown pass of 14 yards from Ferguson to Heyman once more. With the unsuccessful PAT pass the final score read (44-19), Commerce over North Springs.

The Tiger offense amassed 389 yards on the ground behind one of the best offensive lines that the Tigers have ever had. They were: tackles--Terry Nunn and Brett Evans, guards--Charles Whitlock and Terry Elrod, center--Terry Canup (a one time Tiger assistant coach), and tight end--Maurice Martin.

While the Tiger offense gained almost 400 yards on the ground, the tenacious and fearless Tiger defense limited the North Springs running game to only 32 yards in the first half and 120 yards for the game. All the Spartans' touchdowns came by way of the air game primarily against Tiger second teamers in the fourth period at which point the game had already been decided.

"This is the best defensive team I've ever coached," Lamb said. "They are sound and persistent. Everybody does his job and helps out others when they can." INDEED THEY WERE TENACIOUS ON DEFENSE.

Hill led the team in tackles with eleven against the Spartans, while linebackers Elrod and Whitlock added seven each.

The Tigers went on to post a (12-1-1) record defeating: Habersham Central, Hart County, Madison County, White County, East Hall, Oconee County, North Gwinnett, Duluth, Loganville, Gilmer County, Loganville and Cartersville while tying Jefferson (14-14) and losing the state semi-final game to eventual state champion East Rome in a (14-13) contest played in Commerce.

Others on the 1978 Tiger squad were: Robin Jordan, Ricky Wood, Dennis Strickland, Michael Fischer, Lamar Hiland, Bob Finch, Fred Martin, Phil Pittman, Keith Lord, Kevin Burchett, Danny Cook, Clay Hendrix, Paul Gholston, David Flint, Adam Stephenson, Chris Jones, Buddy Beauchamp, Todd Parham, Bobby Lamb, Clark Williams, Dean Allen, Dean Shirley, Paul Guest, Tracy Milford, Mike Mize, Terry Cook and Sonny Crawford.

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