

# TIGER FLASHBACK

## BUFORD

### 2000 (2)

The stadium was packed by 6:30 PM; then at 7:55 the Commerce Tigers of Coach Steve Savage rumbled down the hill in anticipation of racking up its second state football championship at the hands of the highly touted Buford Wolves who wanted revenge for an earlier final game of the regular season Region 8A title defeat by Commerce (18-14).

Electricity filled the air; both sets of stands were full of fans showing their exhilaration for their favorite sons, whether it was black and gold Tigers or green and gold Wolves. The hill was full, the fence was full and the stands were packed. There were at least 7500 spectators on hand to see the two best teams in Class A football square off for the last Class A football title game of the 20th century.

They were not to be disappointed, as offense was the name of the game in the first half. The Tigers behind Monte' Williams bolted out to a (21-0) first period lead and eventually won a thriller (27-19) in what can only be described as a classic contest before the largest crowd ever to see a football game not only in Commerce but also in Jackson County.

The thunderstorms predicted by the National Weather Service did not arrive in time to disrupt the game. But lightning in the form of Monte' Williams struck four times. "Sweet Feet" electrified a standing-room-only crowd and propelled the Commerce Tigers to victory over the arch-rival Wolves for the second time in the season and Commerce won its second state football title with the first having come back in 1981.

On the Tigers' second possession of the game, Williams stunned Buford with a 41-yard touchdown pass reception from quarterback Michael Collins for the game's first touchdown, as he literally out ran the ball and caught up to it as he stepped into the end zone just behind the Buford defender with 5:21 left in the quarter.

After two offside penalties against the Wolves, Coach Savage elected to go for the two-point conversion which was successful when big Casey Gary plunged over right guard into the end zone giving the Tigers an (8-0) advantage.

Williams later scored on runs of 88 yards, 32 yards and 56 yards. His 287 yards in 29 carries pushed him past Emmitt Smith to number four among all-time national high school rushing leaders with 8,844 yards.

"Monte' came to play tonight," said Coach Steve Savage. "He went out in style, I'll tell

you that."

After Buford had cut the Tiger lead to (21-19), the senior running back showed why he's Georgia's most prolific high school runner ever. On his final touchdown, a 56-yard jaunt, Williams cut around left end, broke three tackles, and on the last did a lurching 360 to escape.

Later on the run a few yards down field, safety P.K. Sam grabbed his facemask. Williams did another 360, spun out of Sam's grasp, side-stepped right to avoid the last Buford defender and sprinted into the end zone. It's classified by many as the best run of 2000 in Georgia high school football. Gary's missed PAT at 3:55 of the third quarter kept the Tiger's precarious lead at (27-19) and in striking distance of the Wolves.

The first quarter had belonged to Williams. Following the first touchdown by Williams, Buford punted deep into Tiger territory down to the 12. However, Williams brought the crowd to its feet again. On the next play, Williams dashed up the middle behind the blocking of Stephenson, Eason, Massey, Flint, Wilkie and Gary. After dodging a linebacker, Williams cut to his left and left the Buford defenders in his dust, as he sprinted 88 yards to glory land. The PAT kick sailed wide but the Tigers had mounted a (14-0) lead at the 2:24 mark of the initial stanza.

Buford then took the ensuing kickoff and returned it to their 22 and in two plays had advanced to the Tiger 43. In a mad scramble for a fumble, co-captain Lee Sorrow recovered the loose pigskin which had been knocked free from a Buford running back at the Commerce 36 yard line.

On three successive running plays, Williams gained 32 yards to the Wolves 32 as the quarter ended. On the first play of the second quarter, Monte' bolted over left tackle behind Gary, Wilkie and Eason and sprinted untouched into the end zone. Gary's PAT was successful and the Tigers now led (21-0) with 11:53 left in the half. The Buford faithful stood in disbelief at the fortunes that had befallen them, as the Tigers had seemingly taken complete control of the game.

However, the Wolves came to life. Five plays following the kickoff, quarterback Travis Payne hit P.K. Sams on slant pattern over the middle from his left split end position. The wide receiver then raced 52 yards untouched to pay dirt. The PAT kick failed however, but the Tiger lead had been cut to (21-6).

Two possessions later, the Tigers gave Buford their second touchdown. The option pitch from Collins to Williams was errant and free safety Isaac Brown scooped up the loose pigskin and rambled 53 yards to score. Payne's two point conversion pass was also unsuccessful, but the Tiger lead had now been cut to (21-12) as the half neared its end.

Taking the kickoff to open the second half, the Wolves ran 11 consecutive plays

primarily behind fullback Joey McDonald's bursts up the middle of the Tiger defense and Webb Aiken skirting the corners. Aiken capped the drive when he scored from four yards out with 6:46 remaining in the third quarter. The PAT was good and suddenly it was the Commerce crowd that was now standing in disbelief, as the lead was cut to a precariously slim (21-19).

As grandmother used to say, the cream always rises to the top and that is just what the Tigers offense and defense began to do. On the next Tiger drive, the gold and black scored in only five plays then gave the game to the vaunted Tiger defense.

Collins carried the ball three consecutive times following the kickoff for a first down, as the rain now had begun to fall on the football faithful. Enter Monte', who ran for five yards, then brought life back to the Tiger side of the stadium with his spectacular 56-yard twisting, turning, lurching, lunging and dodging run. And, I might add, one of the greatest ever made by a Tiger player to end the night's scoring at (27-19) following the missed conversion kick by Gary.

The game now was put into the hands of the vastly improved Tiger defense with 3:55 left in the third period.

After the kickoff, Buford was three plays and punt. Commerce eked out one first down as the quarter ended and three plays later Collins punted into the end zone.

Buford then mounted a 30-yard drive to midfield where fullback McDonald was hit hard and fumbled with Tiger linebacker Nick Cox recovering the slippery pigskin at the 50.

On fourth and one at the Buford 41, 2-back Casey Gary, behind the blocking of Twion Shealer, the offensive line and his own bullish extra effort, ran over one Wolfpack tackler for a two-yard gain and a first down at the Buford 39. Four plays later, Collins punted into the coffin corner and out of bounds at the Buford seven with 2:23 remaining in this great contest.

Enter the Tiger defense once more, as strong safety Kyle Moore stepped in front of a Payne pass in the right flat and made a great interception. He leaped into the air for the catch. Off balance, he caught the wet pigskin, lost it coming down, but caught it again with his feet as he fell to the ground at the Buford 22. It was a great individual effort by the junior defensive back.

Following the Buford touchdown drive to begin the second half, the entire Tiger defense of ends-Shealer and Gary, tackles-Scott White and Evan Crawford, linebackers-Cox and Casha Daniels, defensive backs-Collins, Moore, Wes Massey, Charlie Epps and Lee Sorrow all bowed their necks and stymied almost every offensive attempt of the heralded Buford offense.

In five plays, the Tigers ran out the clock and were on the Buford eleven when the game

ended.

During the contest, the Tigers knocked out 16 first downs to 11 by Buford; 397 yards of total offense for Commerce and 240 for Buford. Commerce only turned the ball over once on a fumble, while Buford lost two fumbles and two pass interceptions to the opportunistic Tiger defense.

For Savage, it was his first state championship title after a number of close calls, and he did his best to savor it.

"With about four minutes left, I was looking at the clock and I got to thinking it was going to be over soon. I wasn't ready for it to be over," he said.

"This team has been building for years. A lot of people can take credit for that championship tonight. I thought we were close in '95 and '94. We had our best chance in '90. They were all here tonight," state Savage. Other teams in '97, '98, and '99 also had reasonable chances you might add. All the teams that have played in the last decade were there on that December night.

"Some say it was the best senior class we've ever had. I don't know...I can't say enough about them guys," he added. Neither can the rest of us, for it was indeed a most memorable and remarkable year.

"I've got some great friendships here, and that's what I'll remember the most," said Collins after the game. "Playing for Commerce is really special. The supportive atmosphere is awesome," he added.

Indeed, what a great team effort it was. They beat Lincoln County twice; they beat Buford twice; arguably the best two teams in Class A other than the mighty Commerce Tigers. Wow! What a great year and one that will always be remembered as one of the greatest Tiger teams in Commerce's illustrious 61 years of modern football history.

The 2000 Commerce Tigers also defeated Franklin County, Morgan County, Walhalla, S.C., Athens Academy, Wesleyan, Jefferson---in which Monte' Williams broke the all time career rushing mark of Worth County's Robert Toomer. At that point Williams had accumulated 8011 career rushing yards. Warren County, Trion and Johnson County also were playoff victims of the Tigers.

In recording a (13-2-0) season record, the Tigers lost only to Forsyth Central and Washington-Wilkes which on this same evening lost to Americus in the Class AA state championship game.

Others on the 2000 STATE CHAMPION TIGER TEAM were: Jonathan Beasley, Dennis Wilder, Josh Jordan, David Evans, Adam Bagwell, Michael Sailors, Saeed Beituni, Brandon Maddox, Greg Gamble, Skyler Bolton, C.J. Ward, Dustin Martin,

Adam Cochran, Rob Brown, Josh Haynes, Lamar Daniels, Sam Cutler, Justin Howell,  
and Derrick Blalock.

Primarily compiled from *THE COMMERCE NEWS* and *THE ATHENS DAILY NEWS*  
reports

July 2001, Jeff Prickett

**Commerce vs. Buford Series Record**  
**(13-13-1)**

<u>Year</u>	<u>Commerce</u>	<u>Buford</u>
1946*	14	33
1947	0	7
1948*	6	6
1949	27	0
1950*	22	7
1951	27	7
1952*	14	0
1953	33	12
1980	14	21
1981*	6	13
1982	21	0
1982 #	14	17
1983*	15	28
1983*#	0	13
1984 #	5	20
1988*	34	14
1989	0	18
1992*	6	26
1993	6	20
1994*	17	7
1995	7	27
1996	0	41
1997*	28	13
1998	55	33
1999*	42	32
2000	18	14
2000*#	27	19
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27 games	458	448
average	16.96	16.59

\*-----Home Games

#-----Playoff Games

