

# TIGER FLASHBACK

## CALHOUN

### 1995

Having driven up I-75 to the fair city of Calhoun in the northwest corner of the state, the Tigers prepared to take on the swarming Yellow Jackets on a clear and cold evening the day after Thanksgiving when everyone was still full to the brim with turkey.

This fact may have affected the fans, however it didn't affect the Commerce Tiger football team. The vaunted Tiger offensive machine got off to an early lead of 14-0, later fell behind by a 21-14 score, but they rebounded with a flurry and defeated the hated bugs (28-21) in an offensive show that kept most fans on both sides on their feet for most of the evening.

Each team amassed over 300 yards total offense, but it was the Tiger defense in key situations that helped preserve the Tiger win in the first ever encounter with Calhoun.

A huge Tiger contingent roared its approval, as linebacker Jody Rogers fielded the Calhoun kickoff at the Tiger 16, bounced outside to the right and bolted down the Tiger sideline before being brought down after a 71-yard return to the Yellow Jacket 13. This was Rogers' first kickoff return of the season and gave the Steve Savage offensive show great field position.

On fourth and three, the Yellow Jackets were penalized five yards to the three for off sides giving Commerce a first down. The Tigers scored two plays later, as halfback Steven David on the option pitch from QB Kevin Poe galloped in around left end and scored standing.

Brandon Bruce boomed the PAT through the uprights giving Commerce an early (7-0) lead with only 2:51 having elapsed in the first period.

The Calhoun offense then barreled back down the field behind the running of fullback Nathan Pasley and had fourth and one at the Tiger one. However, the Tiger defensive front wall stuffed QB Hunt Hammond's sneak attempt and the Tigers had successfully dodged the first Calhoun bullet. The Tiger defensive front was led by Josh Spear, Brandon Bruce, Jody Rogers, Michael Fitzpatrick, Tony Allen, Casey Westbrooks, Craig Ellis, Stevie Cotrell and Matt Stephenson.

Following a Tiger punt from the nine, Calhoun's Pasley fumbled on the first snap

thereafter on an option pitch attempt and Commerce reclaimed the loose pigskin at the Tiger 37.

Two plays later, Poe on the triple option kept the ball around right end, cut back across midfield and left Yellow Jackets in his dust as he scampered into the end zone untouched for the Tigers' second tally as the horn sounded to end the quarter.

Bruce again successfully added the PAT to up the Tiger advantage to (14-0).

Calhoun then mounted its first scoring drive of the evening, as they marched methodically and all on the ground on a 13-play, 68-yard drive culminated by Hammond's 1-yard sneak into the end zone. The PAT kick was good and the Tiger lead had been cut to (14-7) with 5:26 left in the half.

Later, an interception by Tiger defensive back Scott Sanders and one by Calhoun defender Anthony Shropshire ended attempts for further scores by both teams before the half, as the score remained (14-7) in favor of the Tigers.

Commerce at this point had 143 total yards to 142 for Calhoun. But there were many more fireworks to come in the second half for both teams.

The Calhoun team returned from their halftime powwow and scored on its first two possessions of the second half. The first came following the kickoff as they went 71 yards in five plays behind the running of Pasley and Chris Watters. The big play in the drive was a 44-yard burst up the middle of the Tiger defense by Pasley to the Commerce three. He then scored on the next play from three yards out. The PAT was again successful, and the score was knotted at (14-14) with 9:46 to play in the third period.

With the Tiger defense reeling from the Calhoun offensive onslaught, the Commerce offense with its only turnover of the night heaped more coals on the Calhoun fire when David fumbled the option pitch from Poe and the Yellow Jackets recovered at their 47.

Calhoun then took the lead on this possession, as their offensive line opened gaping holes in the Tiger defense in a scoring drive that took eleven plays to go the 53 yard distance to pay dirt. QB Hammond culminated the drive by scoring on an option keeper around left end from 1-yard out at the 4:08 mark of the third stanza. Patrick Savage's third successful PAT kick gave the Yellow Jackets the lead for the first time at (21-14).

A lesser team than the Tigers would have folded their tents at this juncture of the game having squandered a 14 point lead, but the Commerce cream rose to the top in this contest as the Savage Tigers came roaring back to snatch victory away from mouths of defeat.

After the kickoff was returned by Rogers to the Commerce 39, the Tigers mounted a 5-play, 61-yard drive to again knot the score at 21. On second and seven at the Calhoun

47, Poe smoothly ran the triple option to the left and at the last moment pitched to HB David who skirted left end, dodged a tackler, cut back to his right and sped down the middle of the field to glory land. Tiger fans were ecstatic as Bruce boomed another PAT to tie the game at (21-21).

After the kickoff, the Tiger defense bowed their back and the Yellow Jackets went three plays and out forcing Andy Spencer to punt dead at the Tiger 29.

Enter the OFFENSE once more. This time Poe masterfully directed his team 71 yards in six plays for the winning tally. Big plays in the drive were a 16-yard scamper by David and a 12-yard option keeper around left end by Poe down to the Yellow Jacket 26.

On second and seven, Poe kept on the option play again around left end and scored standing from 23 yards out. Bruce tacked on his fourth PAT of the night, and Coach Savage's forces had snatched away the lead at (28-21) from host Calhoun.

Calhoun, the formidable foe that they were, came doggedly back down the field and into Tiger territory with a first down at the Commerce 24. The Tiger defense then made four great defensive plays in a row.

Linebacker Tony Allen made a big hit on Hammond for a two yard loss, and Waters was stopped for a two yard gain. With four minutes to go, Calhoun still had third and ten for another first down.

Hammond then bobbled the snap for a five yard loss, as the Tigers pounced on the reeling quarterback. The Yellow Jackets now faced a fourth and fifteen situation.

Timeout was called by the Jackets. What play would they run? Hammond fadded to pass, and the Tigers blitzed forcing Hammond to retreat whereupon he was sacked for a six yard loss by a swarm of Tigers led by Brandon Bruce, Joe Anderson and Casey Westbrook.

The Tiger defense had risen to the occasion again. With offense and defense performing in clutch situations, Tiger fans had witnessed one of the great games in Tiger football history. Jubilation filled the Tiger side of the field with 3:52 remaining in the game.

Poe and Company then pounded out two first downs to run out the clock and give Commerce its second playoff victory in 1995, as they defeated the Calhoun Yellow Jackets (28-21).

Commerce gathered 323 total yards all on the ground, and Calhoun collected 311 all but 24 on the ground. With both teams collectively gathering 634 yards, it was indeed a get-your-moneys-worth track meet to witness.

The Tigers fell to Manchester the following week in the third round of the playoffs but had a fine season finishing with a (10-3-0) record.

Commerce also defeated Madison County, Oconee County, Oglethorpe County, Rabun County, Monticello, Athens Academy, Social Circle, Union County and Jefferson in the first ever playoff game between the two teams, while losing only to Buford and Jefferson in the final regular season game.

Others on the 1995 Tiger squad were: Russ Gregg, Chad Wheeler, Terrell Beasley, Will Massey, Mickey Pittman, Josh Billew, Josh Kesler, Greg Sorrow, Chad Eubanks, Matthew Moulton, Josh Smith, Matt Perry, Tommy Morgan, Chad Ashley, Brad Freeman, J. P. Barone, Jake Epps, Dustin Allen, Terry Brown, Brent Nichols, Reggie Collins, Jason Lord, Craig Mathis and Nick Ladd.

Partially compiled from *THE COMMERCE NEWS* reports

July 2007, Jeff Prickett