

TIGER FLASHBACK

CARTERSVILLE

1976

Sporting a record of (8-1-1), the Commerce Tigers traveled west to Cartersville to do battle with their region rivals the Hurricanes on a clear and mild night just made for football. The Tigers went into the half down 14-3. But came out and played like gangbusters in the second half to scratch and claw a win away from the would-be storm by a (24-17) score.

"All I told them at halftime was that they were playing flat. It had been three weeks since we had played a game. I told them we needed to come out with more enthusiasm," stated Lamb. Indeed they did as they outscored Cartersville in the second half 21-3 and out-gained the Hurricanes in total offense 214 yards to 100. 171 of those second half yards for Commerce came in the final stanza.

On the second play of the game, Tiger halfback Donald Rucker fumbled giving Cartersville excellent field position at the Tiger 19. Cartersville then marched for the first tally of the game with brothers Hal and Harvey Hatfield doing the rushing honors.

Four plays following the Tiger fumbles, Hal scored the touchdown on a 6-yard run with 9:30 to go in the first period. Harvey Hatfield toed the PAT for a (7-0) Cartersville lead.

Following the kickoff, Commerce began an 11-play, 64-yard march for their first score of the contest. With the drive stalling at the Hurricane 12, and Lamar Hiland entered and booted a 29-yard field goal to cut the Cartersville lead to (7-3) with 4:18 left in the first period.

With neither team able to make a sustained march for the next eleven minutes, Cartersville's Wayne Silvers, with five minutes to go in the half, caught a Dean Allen punt at the Hurricane 42 from where the purple clad opponents made a relentless ball control march, all on the ground, in 11 plays to the Tiger 12.

The drive was capped by a 12-yard TD pass from Silvers to tight end Ricky Williams with only thirteen seconds remaining in the half. The PAT kick was again good by Harvey Hatfield and the Hurricanes had a favorable halftime lead of (14-3).

After Cartersville received the second half kickoff, the Tigers threw up a tenacious defense that immediately denied the Hurricanes a first down. Linebacker David Sanders blocked Hal Hatfield's punt which was recovered by Bob Nelson at the host teams' 26 yard line.

On fourth and six at the 23, quarterback Mike Johnston fired a strike to halfback Steve Johnson for a first down at the 'Canes four yard stripe. Three plays later halfback Donald Rucker bucked over from the one. Lamar Hiland's successful PAT at 7:59 of the third quarter cut the Cartersville lead to a (14-10) score.

The defenses again took charge forcing three consecutive punts with almost no yardage by either team before Steve Johnson returned a Hatfield punt 30 yards to the 'Canes 30 yard line with 1:29 left in the third period.

Ray Lamb's troops then marched the 30 yards in six plays culminated by a beautiful option pitch from Mike Johnston to Steve Johnson who skirted left end to glory land untouched for the go ahead TD from 19 yards out. Hiland's boot for the PAT was again true and the black and gold clad 'Cats now smelled victory after going ahead (17-14) with 11:13 to go in the fourth period.

In the second half, the offensive line of ends-Bob Nelson and Doug Martin, tackles-David Adams and Scott Hix, guards-Tommy Lewis and Barry Lord and center-Terry Elrod began to make the wishbone click as well as defensively closing the offensive door to the 'Canes. It was truly a master at work.

Cartersville took the ensuing kickoff and made its only drive of the second half. From their 16, the Hurricanes drove 73 yards all on the ground to the Commerce 6 where the stalwart Tiger defense threw up a stone wall forcing Harvey Hatfield on fourth and goal to kick a 23-yard field goal to knot the score at (17-17) with only 4:34 remaining in the game.

After Steve Johnson returned the kickoff 16 yards to the Tiger 28, Ray Lamb's men using primarily the option, forged down the field and scored in only five snaps. Two big plays set up the touchdown.

First, Steve Johnson took an option pitch around left end for 34 yards to the Hurricane 34. Two plays later Rucker scampered around right end on the option for 21 yards to the Cartersville 7. The drive was capped off on the next play when Rucker galloped in for the score from the seven at the 2:58 mark. Hiland's PAT again was successful and the Tigers had taken the lead for good with a score of (24-17).

On the first play after the kickoff, a Hurricane pass was picked off by Bob Nelson at the Tiger 15. The Tigers immediately covered 74 yards in six plays and were threatening to score again on the 'Canes 11 yard line when the horn sounded to end the game. The Tigers had snatched the Region 8A title away from the Hurricanes once more.

It was a remarkable comeback for the Tigers and one filled with character and heart, two ingredients necessary for champions.

Ricky Hill led Tiger tacklers with 17 followed by David Sanders with 11.

Donald Rucker led all Tiger rushers with 23 carries for 111 yards followed by Steve Johnson with 13 carries for 103.

Commerce later went on to post an (11-2-1) record losing in the state title game in the south Georgia mud to Turner County.

In 1976 Commerce, en route to the region title, also defeated White County, Madison County, North Gwinnett, Jefferson, Central Gwinnett, East Hall, Oconee County, Monroe Area, Sylvan and Cedar Grove. The Tigers tied Duluth (3-3) in the region championship game and lost early in the season to Class AAA Stephens County.

Others on the 1976 Tiger team were: Brad Brown, Sheldon Spivey, Carl Pittman, David Sanders, Bob Perry, Charles Whitlock, Gene Doss, Richard Beasley, Mike Barrett, Terry Canup, Andre Rollins, Kenny Flint, Cleve Hendrix, Bret Evans, Kelly Minish and Danny White.

July 1994, Jeff Prickett