

TIGER FLASHBACK

CENTRAL GWINNETT

1976

In the sixth game of the 1976 campaign, the Tigers broke an unusual string of three consecutive ties with the Central Gwinnett Black Knights that dated back to the last meeting in 1974 and the two contests between the two schools in the 1975 season.

Commerce on this night had other intentions, as the awesome wishbone machine rolled into Camelot (Lawrenceville) with intentions of putting another notch on their Region 8A gun in mind. In this jousting match, the young men of Tigertown shot their arch enemy off their horse in a (17-14) game that kept the partisans on their feet for most of the evening.

The game was dominated by the Tigers right up to the end when a fumble and a couple of controversial calls made it a close game.

The first quarter was a little shaky for the Tigers, as the armor-coated Medieval warriors drove to the Tiger 24 before the Tiger defense stiffened forcing the Gwinnett lads to give up the pigskin as a fourth down pass fell incomplete.

Commerce, behind the 45-yard explosion by halfback Donald Rucker, came flying back down the field to the CG 19 only to have a fourth down three yard run by halfback Steve Johnson fall inches shy of a first down.

Following an exchange of punts which backed the Black Knights up near their goal line at their own five, the Commerce defense squelched any attempt that Central might have had to get out of a hole when the Tigers forced a punt and took possession at midfield. Coach Ray Lamb's forces then proceeded to march to their first score in only four snaps of the pigskin.

Quarterback Mike Johnston got 12 on the option keeper followed by Rucker's dives off right tackle for gains of 8 and 29 yards to the one where fullback Ricky Hill barreled off right tackle and into the end zone for the TD at 2:14 of the second stanza. Lamar Hiland's kick was long and straight on the PAT attempt giving Commerce a (7-0) advantage.

On Hiland's ensuing kickoff, the Black Knight receivers couldn't get a handle on the rolling pigskin and a mass of Tigers pounced on it at the Central 24. The Tiger offensive line consisting of Doug Martin, Scott Hix, Barry Lord, Terry Elrod, Tommy

Lewis, and David Adams continued to work hard, as Rucker burst for eight over right tackle and Johnston kept on the option for three more and a first down at the 13.

A 15 yard penalty set the 'Cats back to the 28. However, the relentless Tigers continued their march as Rucker collected nine and seven yards on successive runs before an incomplete pass on third and 9 from the twelve set up a 29-yard field goal attempt by Hiland. The kick was true to form with only 37 seconds remaining in the half and gave the Black and Gold of Commerce a (10-0) halftime lead.

The Tigers punted shortly after receiving the second half kickoff, and Central began its initial TD drive of the game. It was one which covered 76 yards in 13 snaps and was culminated by a three yard plunge into the end zone by fullback Robert Wall. On the PAT pass attempt, the CG quarterback was sacked by defensive end Tommy Lewis as the Tigers held on to a slim (10-6) margin with 3:50 remaining in the third quarter.

Just as the momentum seemed to be swinging toward the home team, Steve Johnson took the Black Knight kickoff and ran it back 92 yards for an apparent TD only to have the officials rule that he had stepped out of bounds at the CG 37.

This did nothing to slow down the Tiger offense, as Commerce scored in seven plays the highlight of which was a 20 yard bolt through the line by Rucker to the four giving the Tigers first and goal. A two yard plunge by Hill set up QB Johnston's 2-yard option keeper around right end at the 0:37 mark of the third period. Lamar Hiland's PAT kick was again successful to boost the Tiger lead to a (17-6) advantage.

Following the kickoff, the Black Knights moved from their own 31 to the Tiger 37 where the Central Gwinnett QB fumbled with Rucker claiming possession for the Tigers at the Commerce 32.

On first down, Johnston's pitchout around left end to Rucker was a bad one with CG defensive end Kenny Broughton gathering in the bounding pigskin and the black clad defender raced 23 yards for the Black Knights second touchdown. The PAT pass by the CG quarterback was on the money, as the Medieval men of yore had now cut the Tiger lead to (17-14) with 7:36 remaining in the game.

Commerce then made a short drive to midfield before Dean Allen punted to the CG 20. The Black Knights immediately gained 24 yards on a first down pass play, but two plays later CG had two setbacks in a row.

The first was a minus eight yard sack on second down of the QB by defensive end Tommy Lewis, his second of the night. The second CG miscue was a third down pass interception by Tiger defensive back Steve Johnson who returned the error 12 yards to midfield. However, an official ruled on another controversial call that he fumbled as he stepped out of bounds with the Knights claiming possession once more at that point.

Tiger supporters and coaches were in an uproar at this official's opinion. Could the Commerce team compose themselves? Yes was the answer.

Two plays later, CG tried a trick halfback pass but this fooled no one, as Johnson redeemed himself by alertly picking off his second aerial within a minute to give Commerce possession once more at the Tiger five yard stripe.

With only seconds remaining, QB Johnston ran three plays into the line to run out the clock and preserve the (17-14) victory, as once more in traveling to Lawrenceville strange things had been witnessed by Tiger coaches and followers on the gridiron as had also been seen in previous visits to the Gwinnett county seat.

Statistically the game ended rather evenly. Commerce collected 11 first downs to 14 for the Black Knights, while the Tigers amassed 263 total yards to 235 for GC.

Commerce eventually went on to win the Region 8A title but lost to Turner County in the state championship mud game as they marched to an 11-2-1 season record.

The Tigers in 1976 also defeated White County, Madison County, North Gwinnett, Jefferson, East Hall, Oconee County, Monroe Area, Cartersville, Sylvan and Cedar Grove while tying Duluth and losing only to Stephens County and at Turner County in the muddy state Class A championship game.

Other members of the 1976 team were Kelly Minish, Danny White, Kenny Flint, Andre Rollins, Bret Evans, Mike Barrett, Cleve Hendrix, Brad Brown, Gene Doss, Richard Beasley, Sheldon Spivey, Bob Nelson, Bob Perry, Carl Pittman, David Sanders, and Charles Whitlock.

July 1989, Jeff Prickett