

TIGER FLASHBACK CENTRAL GWINNETT 1977

The Central Gwinnett Black Knights (5-0) on the season and looking to claim bragging rights toward the region title stormed up I-85 to Tigertown with the intent of knocking off their nemesis, the once defeated (4-1) Commerce Tigers, who were defending Region 8A champions and losers only at this point in 1977 to AAA Stephens County.

However, Coach Ray Lamb's vaunted ball-control wishbone machine clawed the Black Knights' armor to shreds, as the Tigers rolled to a big (21-7) win over the previously undefeated mounted Medieval invaders.

A punt that traveled only eight yards, a lost fumble deep in Tiger territory just before the half and an interception were three miscues that enabled the Commerce defense to give the Tigers good field position to score and stifle Central Gwinnett scoring opportunities.

The win came as the Tigers played a near-perfect ball game. They out-executed Central in every phase of the game. Early in the first period, Donald Rucker got the Tiger machine cranked up, as he returned the first CG punt 30 yards to the Central 32. Behind the grinding runs of fullback Ricky Hill, the Tigers drove all the way inside the Central three yard line before a fourth down and goal pass attempt by QB Rucker, and the only one on the night for the Commerce offense, fell incomplete in the Black Knight end zone.

Neither team could mount much offense for the remainder of the first quarter and the early part of the second stanza. Commerce's defense was outstanding and kept the normally explosive Knights bottled up on the CG end of the field. Midway through the second period, CG punter Barry Cheek shanked his fourth down kick off the side of his left foot and it traveled only eight yards before going out of bounds at the Knights' 31 yard line giving the Tigers great field position.

Like some kind of scavenger Commerce sensed the opportunity, and from here it took the hungry Tigers only eight plays to punch it in for the initial score of the evening. On first down Donald Rucker, who had moved from his normal quarterback position over to left halfback, shot 10 yards to the 22. Rucker, right halfback Dean Allen and quarterback Brad Brown ran six more plays moving the ball to the one inch line where bruising fullback Ricky Hill bulled his way into the end zone for the first Commerce

score. Lamar Hiland's kick made it (7-0) with only 2:30 left until the sound of the halftime horn.

"We try to tell our kids that we have to take advantage of mistakes," Lamb said. "We feel like we're going to play good defense and control the ball, but we aren't going to break many long ones."

Central made its best offensive drive of the night beginning with the return of the Tiger kickoff. Black Knight quarterback Dickie May returned Hiland's high booming kick 31 yards back to the CG 44. A 28-yard pass and another for eight yards to Cheek and Wall gave CG a first down on the Tiger 16.

On second down the middle of the Tiger defensive line burst through on a blitz and hit May as he was handing off to fullback Robert Wall, knocking the ball loose and the Commerce defenders swarmed all over it on their own 17 in stuffing the first enemy scoring threat of the night. From here Commerce ran out the clock to end the first half.

The third quarter began much like the first with neither team being able to put together consistent offensive drives as each team was playing tenacious defense. Midway through the third period, Central started a drive that carried them from their own seven to the Tiger 35. The two big plays in the drive were 15 yard penalties against Commerce for spearing and pass interference.

With the pass rush getting heavier on QB May the Tigers got a dividend. On second down May threw quickly in the face of heavy defensive pressure, and Commerce defensive back Donald Rucker made a fantastic move for the interception at the Tiger 30, and the staunch Tiger defense had risen again like cream in a churn to deny a second CG threat to the Commerce goal line.

On first down thereafter and the final play of the third period, Rucker broke loose on a trap play and raced 35 yards from the Commerce 30 to the Knight 35 yard line setting up the second score by the Tigers.

From the 35 the Tigers used six plays to move in for the kill and their second TD of the night. Dean Allen had the big play on the drive, as he powered his way up the middle for 12 yards to the CG two yard line. Two plays later Hill spun off of a tackle near the goal line and slivered into the end zone for his and Commerce's second TD of the evening. Hiland's kick sailed wide left but the Tiger lead had now mounted to (13-0) with 9:50 left in the contest.

The Black Knights, however, showed their explosiveness on the next series. It took these metallic warriors only four plays to put points on the board. After returning Hiland's squib kick to the Commerce 49, Knight QB Dickie May took to the air. Four plays later, May hit speedster John Henry Smith down the right sideline with a perfect 33-yard TD bomb for the Black Knights only tally of the game. Central's PAT kick cut

the Tiger lead to (13-7), and the Black Knight's hopes were rising.

Rising hope was all Central could muster though, as the Tigers quickly used eight plays and three minutes off the clock to punch in a third Commerce touchdown and the clincher for the game victory. The drive was typical of Tiger football, as the offensive line just blew the Central defense off the line of scrimmage creating huge holes for the Commerce backfield.

On the drive Rucker had five carries for 30 yards, and Hill had a crucial nine yard burst up the middle. Rucker displaying superhuman effort on a sweep around right end, scored from 14 yards out despite being hit by everyone on the Central Gwinnett team but the cheerleaders. Rucker also ran for the two-point conversion on the same play to end the scoring at (21-7) at the 5:11 mark of the final period.

After the Tiger defense stopped the ensuing last ditch effort by the Black Knights in four plays, the Tigers then methodically marched 43 yards in ball-control fashion, and when the game ended Commerce was in scoring position again at the CG six.

The game was one of the Tigers' best of the year. The Commerce defense led by Ricky Hill, Charles Whitlock, and Doug Martin allowed the visitors only 73 yards on the ground. Again and again the Tiger defenders came up with big plays to stop the usually high scoring Black Knights.

Offensively the Tigers acted just like Coach Lamb's traditional teams should - ball control behind excellent line blocking. Tackles-David Adams and Andre Rollins, guards-Doug Martin and Kenny Flint, center-Terry Elrod and ends-Whitlock and Steven Bagwell opened huge holes for the Tiger backfield.

In the 1977 campaign, the Tigers also went on to defeat White County, Madison County, North Gwinnett, Jefferson, East Hall, Oconee County, Monroe Area, Duluth, Cartersville and Turner en route to an (11-2-0) record only to lose early in the season to Stephens County and also the state North Georgia Championship game to eventual state champion East Rome (14-13) in one of the greatest games ever played at Tiger Stadium.

Others on the 1977 squad were: Richard Beasley, Kevin Burchett, Terry Canup, Kenneth Chester, Richard Dills, Gene Doss, Bret Evans, Cleve Hendrix, Chris Jones, Robin Jordan, Maurice Martin, Mike Mize, Terry Nunn, Bob Perry, Carl Pittman, Walton Smisson, Sheldon Spivey and Danny White.

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

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