

'It's almost our time'

Fitchburg eager to end LHS' Thanksgiving dominance

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FITCHBURG -- The Fitchburg High football team has been beat on long enough in the annual Thanksgiving Day rivalry game against archrival Leominster.

The Red Raiders know they have lost eight straight times on Thanksgiving to Leominster and haven't won on Turkey Day since 2008 -- a 20-17 overtime win.

The 2017 Red Raiders are motivated to end the Blue Devils' dominance in this series.

They know now is the time to prove they can win in the 136th overall meeting between the two programs and the 111th on Thanksgiving Day.

"The excitement level is off the charts because we have had a good record this year," said Fitchburg senior star tailback Sal Figueroa. "We've worked really hard all season, and my team is excited and we're going to ball out this year and show Leominster that we're not losers anymore and they are going to have a game.

"We have to prove to Leominster that Fitchburg is going to be on top sooner or later. It's almost our time."

Leominster leads the all-time series, 66-59-10.

"I'm excited for our kids because it's about the kids," Fitchburg coach Tom DiGeronimo said. "It's their day, it's their time. Hopefully we put them in a position to succeed and be successful in the game. It's all about them. I'm happy that we've had some success. They are excited to go out and play in this game."

The Red Raiders have certainly found new success. It's been quite a turnaround, as Fitchburg went 1-10 last season -- including a 49-12 loss to Leominster -- to 5-5 this year, narrowly missing the playoffs this fall.

"I think they've grown quit a bit," DiGeronimo said. "As a team, they've cut down on a lot of mistakes that we were making early on. They've hung in ballgames and didn't get down. We didn't play well against Wachusett, but they bounced back the next week against a good Algonquin team that can score points. To be able to do that, it tells a lot about their character and how far they've come.

"They are starting to come together."

Energy and passion were injected into this program. It helps when defensive coordinator Charlie Raff is as excitable as they come in this business, and the players responded from the get-go.

"We want our kids to feed off of us," DiGeronimo said. "We're excitable. We practice with excitement. Our goal is that they would feed off our energy and eventually take it on themselves, which they have. We've been down in games and they've fought back, so that says a lot about our kids and their mentality and their attitude about playing football this year.

A new identity was quickly formed, as DiGeronimo went back to the old I-formation offense, predicated on playing tough, physical, smash-mouth football.

"I've think we've played physical all year with the exception of maybe two games," DiGeronimo said. "For whatever reason, I don't know. But that's how we practice and that's how we teach them. We've been able to let them loose and be themselves."

The focal point of the FHS offense is senior stud tailback Sal Figueroa, who has rushed for 1,652 yards and 17 touchdowns. His rushing statistics rank second in Central Mass. In Fitchburg's last game -- a 47-26 win over Algonquin -- Figueroa had an absolute monster performance with 338 yards rushing and seven touchdowns.

"Sal has had a great year," DiGeronimo said. "I'm very proud of Sal. He played three games last year and came back this year. He's done everything we've asked. But it's our offensive line, it's the fullback. When our fullback plays well, I think it enhances what Sal does. We have to block for him."

Fitchburg's rough-and-tough line consists of Kyle Koutonen, Jaymal Sanchez, Dan Dudek, Adam Ramos, Tyree Preston and tight end J.C. Rosario. Damien Nadal is the hard-working fullback.

When Fitchburg elects to pass, Andrew Brooks (1,081 yards passing, 4 TDs) can drop back and fire darts down the field. His favorite weapon is the ultra-athletic Devin Deleon, who has caught 43 passes for 691 yards and one touchdown. He ranks fourth in Central Mass. in receiving. Ozzy Guy is a small but ultra-quick receiver who has 398 yards receiving and one score.

"Our passing game, when we do it right it's pretty good," DiGeronimo said. "I think Drew has made a lot of strides. He's made some great throws and he's getting better."

The Red Raiders know they will have to throw the ball to loosen up Leominster's defense, which may stack the line of scrimmage in hopes of stopping Figueroa.

"We'll throw the football," DiGeronimo said. "You have to go with what the hot hand is. Our pass game is like a run sometimes. If we have to throw it, we'll throw it."

Don't expect Fitchburg to change its identity in the final game of the season. That won't happen, says the FHS coach.

"Our game plan is to do what we've done all year," DiGeronimo said. "When you get into this game and start changing things, to me it throws a red flag up to the kids. We're not to change what we do. Hopefully we do it well and have success against a very good football team."

Fitchburg's defense is physical in the trenches with Alexis Rivera, Ron Fernandez and Elijah Allen leading the charge. The Red Raiders also have tremendous playmakers and athleticism in the secondary with Isaiah Perez, Antonio Ware, Trey Winters and Mike Nowd.

"I think when you start having success, you start believing in what you're doing," DiGeronimo said.

The Red Raiders are sitting at 5-5, so a win on Thanksgiving to get over .500 would be a major accomplishment for a team that now has the taste of success.

"It would mean a lot," Figueroa said. "For us to come out here and win on Thanksgiving, it would be an unbelievable feeling that we would could bring our program back."

Figueroa said he's very confident in Fitchburg's program.

"We trust the process," he said. "If we do the little things and play hard, we can come out with the 'W.'"

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