

Raiders start a new tradition (SLIDESHOW)

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FITCHBURG -- The Fitchburg High football team was sick and tired of being pushed around.

The Red Raiders needed to take a stand.

With a new coach, new system and new attitude, the Red Raiders finally stood up to the bullies at archrival Leominster High, who have owned Thanksgiving Day for the past eight years.

The biggest bully on the day was Fitchburg's Sal Figueroa. The sensational senior tailback carved up the Blue Devil defense to a tune of 324 yards and four touchdowns to fuel the Red Raiders' 34-21 triumph over Leominster in the teams' 136th overall meeting overall and their 111th on Thanksgiving.

"I feel like we restored pride back in Fitchburg," said Figueroa. "We've been losing for way too long. Everybody was doubting themselves, but after today I feel like we restored tradition back to Fitchburg and the city of Fitchburg in general."

Fitchburg's last win in this series came way back in 2008 -- a 20-17 overtime victory. Leominster still leads the all-time series, 66-60-10.

"It's amazing," Figueroa said. "It's good that everyone in Fitchburg can enjoy their turkey. Leominster has been winning for a long time, and it was time for that to end. I feel good and I feel great. I hope everybody is happy, too."

The Red Raiders finished the season over .500 at 6-5. The Blue Devils are 3-8.

"It just shows what type of kids we have, what type of community we have," Fitchburg coach Tom DiGeronimo said. "They can only put us down for so long. I'm speechless right now, but I'm proud of our kids."

Trailing 7-6 at the half, Fitchburg coughed up the second-half kickoff and the ball was recovered by Leominster's J.C. Cora at the Red Raider 23.

Leominster quarterback Pat Gallagher, who threw the ball a whopping 32 times in the game, found Connor Marchand for 15 yards down to the 8. Two plays later they hooked up again -- this time Marchand pulled in a 6-yard touchdown reception. Pablo Rodriguez's extra point was good and the Devils extended their lead to 14-6.

But Figueroa provided a much-needed spark with a strong kickoff return to the Blue Devil 42.

It only took one play for the Red Raiders to strike, as Figueroa took a toss left, followed his blockers and rumbled down the near sideline en route to a 42-yard TD jaunt.

"Sal had a great game," Leominster coach Dave Palazzi said. "He's a good runner. He had a great game. It was tough to tackle him. He got loose like I wish he wouldn't have and their offensive line played well."

Damien Saavedra booted the extra point, pulling Fitchburg within a point at 14-13.

Fitchburg's defense, led by strong play from Ron Fernandez and Alexis Rivera up front, forced a three-and-out series from Leominster and got the ball back at the FHS 20.

Fitchburg's rough-and-tough offensive line of Tyree Preston, Kyle Koutonen, Jaymal Sanchez, Adam Ramos and Dan Dudek continued to win the one-on-one battles in the trenches and the offense continued to prosper.

Damien Nadal carried twice on the drive, while underrated QB Andrew Brooks hit Devin Deleon in stride on a slant for 20 yards. Figueroa ripped off a 9-yard run, and Ozzy Guy caught a quick-hitter for 4 yards to the 37.

Then it was Figueroa time again.

The senior back took a counter play to the house, finding daylight at the second level and outracing the defense for a 37-yard score to cap off a six-play, 80-yard drive with 5:30 left in the third quarter.

"Sal's special," DiGeronimo said. "He's just a special player. Like we always say, big-time players make big-time plays in big-time games. He made a lot of them. And our O-line did a great job; everybody did."

Like all good running backs, Figueroa made sure to shower his offensive line with love and praise.

"Without them, I wouldn't be able to run the ball like that," he said. "I want to shout out to my offensive line and make sure they get credit. I want everyone to know that they are the reason why I was able to put up points like that and able to carry the ball like that."

Fitchburg went for the 2-point conversion and was successful on Brooks' keeper, giving the hosts a 21-14 advantage.

Leominster punted on its next two drives.

Fitchburg, meanwhile, made it a two-score game when Brooks rolled to the right and delivered a perfect ball to Nadal for an 8-yard touchdown. Saavedra kicked the extra point for a 28-14 edge.

"We made some adjustments at halftime, we settled our kids down and we made plays," DiGeronimo said. "Our coaches did an awesome job. This is just great for our school, for our city. I'm happy for them."

Leominster fought back on Cora's 68-yard kickoff return to the FHS 2. Leominster junior tailback Adam Couch did the honors with a 2-yard touchdown run, cutting the deficit to 28-21.

But the Blue Devils had no answer for Figueroa. Fitchburg executed a nine-play, 73-yard drive, completed by a Figueroa 10-yard touchdown run. Before the score, Brooks came up with a huge fourth-down run to keep the drive alive at Fitchburg's 37. Figueroa also broke down Leominster's defense with a 44-yard run to the 9.

Late in the fourth quarter, Gallagher drove the Blue Devils down the field with four completions -- three to Brian Rodriguez and one to Jack Young -- but he was picked off at the goal line by Fitchburg's Isaiah Perez to seal the emotional victory.

Fitchburg came out flying and forced Leominster into a three-and-out series to start the game.

Then, Fitchburg's I-formation offense went to work. And, of course, Figueroa got a steady diet of carries and chewed up 32 yards on three carries, including a nifty 21-yard jaunt along the left edge. With the ball at the Blue Devil 48, Figueroa got his number called again and got through the line of scrimmage and the showcased his cut-back ability with two knee-buckling moves on his way to a 48-yard touchdown run. The Red Raiders missed the extra point but led 6-0 with 6:52 left in the first quarter.

Leominster countered, however, on its next drive.

Couch gave Leominster great field position with a kickoff return to the Red Raider 39.

The Blue Devils went to the run with Justus Reynolds -- a 9-yard gain -- and two 4-yard gains by Couch (15 carries, 58 yards, TD).

Quarterback Pat Gallagher (16-of-32 passing, 192 yards, 2 TDs, INT) loosened up the FHS defense with a pass to Connor Marchand (5 receptions, 49 yards, TD), and two plays later rolled right and fired a pass into the hands of Mike Viola for a 9-yard touchdown. Rodriguez kicked the extra point and the Blue Devils led, 7-6, with 2:13 left in the opening quarter.

Both teams coughed up the pigskin on fumbles on their next possessions, and the defenses began to take over. Fitchburg drove to the LHS 29 thanks to a key 15-yard run by Brooks, but Leominster's defense tightened up and forced a turnover on downs. A key play on the drive with Marchand's tackle of Figueroa for a 2-yard loss.

Fitchburg's defense also stood strong after Gallagher marched the Devils down the field with a key pass to Brian Rodriguez on a screen for 19 yards. Leominster got into FHS territory, but Gallagher's keeper on fourth down came up just short as the Red Raiders took over on downs.

Late in the half, Gallagher connected with Viola for gains of 17 and 4 yards, respectively. A late hit out of bounds put the ball at the 19, but the drive stalled as FHS tackled Couch short of the first-down marker at the 10.

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Red Raiders 34

Blue Devils 21

Leominster (3-8) 7 0 7 7 -- 21

Fitchburg (6-5) 6 0 15 13 -- 34

First quarter

F -- Sal Figueroa 48 run (kick failed), 6:52

L -- Mike Viola 9 pass from Pat Gallagher (Pablo Rodriguez kick), 2:13

Third quarter

L -- Connor Marchand 6 pass from Gallagher (Rodriguez kick), 9:49

F -- Figueroa 42 run (Damien Saavedra kick), 9:26

F -- Figueroa 37 run (Andrew Brooks run), 5:30

Fourth quarter

F -- Damien Nadal 8 pass from Brooks (Saavedra kick), 5:35

L -- Adam Couch 2 run (Rodriguez kick), 5:17

F -- Figueroa 10 run (kick failed), 1:54

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