

North Attleboro turns back Attleboro in a classic

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NORTH ATTLEBORO — The 97th renewal of the Thanksgiving Day football series between Attleboro High and North Attleboro High was a classic, marking the final game to be played at Community Field.

With less than a minute remaining in the game, the Bombardiers were a yard shy of a first down at the Rocketeers' 34-yard line, and perhaps a play away from tying the MIAA Division 3 Super Bowl Big Red.

North Attleboro senior quarterback Chad Peterson engineered a 70-yard, 16-play drive that consumed 7:11 in the second half, resulting in senior Zach DeMattio, normally a linebacker who was making a cameo appearance at fullback, scoring from five yards out for the decisive points in a 14-6 victory for the Big Red.

"That was a tough game, we knew that Attleboro would be tough," North Attleboro junior running back Nick Raneri said after being named the L.G. Balfour Offensive MVP Trophy winner.

Raneri totaled 49 yards of offense and partially blocked a second quarter Attleboro punt.

After scoring on its opening series of the game, North Attleboro turned to its defense, which denied the Bombardiers the end zone on their first five offensive series, three of which ventured into Big Red territory.

"I knew Attleboro would give us a hard time, they've been practicing for two weeks for this game and we've been practicing for three days," Raneri said. "Right from the start, we grinded it out and took the intensity away from them. We couldn't let them take the momentum from us, we had to come out for the second half ready to roll."

Coming off of a victory over Duxbury on Saturday to claim the MIAA Division 3 South title, the Rocketeers made the defensive stops when they needed them most.

With a fourth down and inches scenario for the Bombardiers at the North 28-yard line on their second offensive series of the second half, Rocketeer senior captain Sam Bullock dropped a Bombardier before the chains could be extended.

With just over a minute left to play, the Bombardiers had the ball in Rocketeer territory when North Attleboro senior linebacker Adam Eberle and junior defensive tackle Ryan Clemente combined for a nine-yard sack.

"That's what it is, a true rivalry," Attleboro coach Mike Strachan said. "North Attleboro going to the Super Bowl and all, the kids know what the expectations are. I'm proud of our kids, we fought back all year, we fought through some adversity.

"Our kids worked really hard, which is a tribute to them. We're disappointed, but I'm happy with the effort. We match up really well with them (North). The kids gave everything they had."

And so it was with scant seconds left for the Bombardiers, Justin Cote took in a Cam Furtado pass and rambled 18 yards to the North 34-yard line, only to be shoved out of bounds, a step shy of gaining a first down.

"When they're healthy, they're as good as anybody," Don Johnson, the North coach said of AHS and the classic confrontations on both sides of the line for four quarters. "That was the most difficult game to prepare for, probably, in my career because we just didn't have the time (after beating Duxbury five days earlier). "We were banged up, we were emotionally spent — we really had one full day of practice on Monday."

The Rocketeers displayed enough steely resolve to emerge victorious — not succumbing after Bombardier senior linebacker, L.G. Balfour Defensive MVP award-winner James Weir picked off a pass and rambled 54 yards to the North 32-yard line and after a potential go-ahead 20-yard field goal by the Bombardiers on the final play of the first half fell short.

Four times during their 70-yard scoring march that covered the final two minutes of the third and the first five minutes of the fourth quarter, the Rocketeers converted third down situations.

Chad Peterson completed a 12-yard toss to Brendan McHugh; Peterson completing a 9-yard pass to Nolan Buckley; Raneri running for five yards to the AHS 31; and Peterson completing another toss to Buckley, after nearly being sacked, for a 10-yard gain.

The Rocketeer defense set up North's first touchdown. Jason McNeany dropped an AHS runner for a 3-yard loss before DeMattio made a QB pressure on third down and Raneri got a hand on a Bombardier punt, presenting North prime field position at the AHS 32-yard line.

Seven plays, with two rushes by McHugh for 14 yards and three rushes by Raneri for 21 yards, North was in the end zone, Peterson completing a scoring strike to Buckley in the right corner of the end zone. And the first of two Geoff Wilson conversion kicks proved to be the game-winning point.

The Bombardiers took advantage of Weir's takeaway to take the lead, Furtado finding junior running back Justin Cote (51 multi-purpose yards) alone in the right corner of the end zone for a 10-yard TD.

Furtado delivered 118 yards of offense from the Bombardiers' pocket.

"We knew their offense, we knew their defense, we knew that we could beat them," Furtado said. "We knew what plays they were running, where they were coming from. It was a battle."

Now it's on to Gillette Stadium in Foxboro for the Big Red, the winners of 11 straight games, a 5 p.m. kickoff against St. John's of Shrewsbury in pursuit of North's eighth Super Bowl championship.

"Attleboro wasn't giving us much, we looked a little tired, a little flat in the first half — again, I attribute that to the short week," Johnson said. "We didn't have a chance to recover. We never really recovered from last week's game," Johnson. "But we hung tough."