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Bearcats Show Promise in Loss to Salem Tigers

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Salem, MO - The Dexter Bearcat football team made the long travel to Salem High School Friday night as they took on the mighty Tigers. With an unexpected outcome, the youthful Bearcat squad offered a performance leaving a strong hope and optimism for the future of the program even though they fell to the Tigers by a score of 19 to 6.

"Salem was just a basic fundamental team," commented Bearcat head Coach Aaron Pixley. "They were decent physically and a solid football team. When you play a team like that you have to match up with them fundamentally and on execution to win these games."

Coach Pixley added, "I think we played hard and it showed. We need to continue to do some basic fundamental things, but this was a good step in the right direction."

At game time, the summer heat was still a hot and muggy 88 degrees. That was not a problem for the Tigers' faithful as the stadium was electric with tailgating, a parade and a fire truck pumping up the pregame festivities. The field was perfectly groomed and the the hometown fans were excited about the home opener against the Dexter Bearcats.

The Tigers won the opening coin toss deferring to the Bearcats and Dexter's Alex

Townsend sparked the opening kickoff with a 33 yard kickoff return giving the Bearcats great field position.

However, the game quickly turned to a defensive battle between both squads as neither the Bearcats nor the Tigers were able to create much offense in the entire first quarter with only total offense of 48 yards for the Bearcats and only 30 yards for the Tigers.

The Bearcats found success with Austin Guy and Mason Keena pounding through the middle of the Tigers defense gaining 3.0 and 4.0 averages respectively. Quarterback Hayden Hillis delivered two completions to Ryan Collier for 4 yards and found his tight end Parker Vanslyke for a 17-yard completion in the first series of plays. The drive momentum fell short as the 'Cats were unable to convert on a 4th down attempt.

The Bearcat defense took the field and offered a strong performance against the strong Salem Tigers offensive line with a four downs and out. Again, the speciality teams for the Bearcats continued to be a bright spot for the 'Cats in the first quarter as C. J. Greene took a punt from the Tigers' Garrett Connell and returned the ball 26 yards giving great field position again to the Bearcats.

At the end of the first quarter and a score of 0 to 0, fans on both sides of the contest had to feel that we had the makings of a great evenly matched football squads. That quickly changed in the opening minutes of the second quarter as both size within the line of scrimmage and quickness of the backfield took over for the Salem Tigers. At the 10:41 mark of the second quarter, Caden Camden quickly sprung loose around the right side of the Bearcat defense, taking the ball for a 34-yard run into the end zone. The point after conversion was good by Brandon White making the score 7-0.

But the battle continued throughout the remainder of the 2nd quarter between both teams as what seemed to be promising drives ended in missed 4th down attempts and punting situations. Toward the end of the second quarter, the passing struggles of QB Garrett Connell were replaced with spot on accuracy as Connell dropped back deep in the pocket with 3:09 remaining in the quarter and launched a beautiful pass to his go-to wide receiver Caden Camden for the Tigers second touchdown of the night. The PAT was wide right leaving the score 13 to 0.

Ryan Collier for the Bearcats received the kickoff returning it 37-yards giving the 'Cats excellent field position for what appeared to be the final drive of the half.

The offensive series for Dexter wasn't able to produce any movement and the 'Cats turned the ball over on a 4th down passing attempt to the Tigers. With over 50 seconds remaining and excellent clock management, the Tigers marched the ball down the field ending with a pass from QB Connell to Luke Campbell who ran the ball 20 yards for the final score of the first half. The 2-point conversion was unsuccessful as the Dexter defense held strong making the halftime score 19-0.

The Bearcats came out in the second half with a renewed passion for the game both moving the football and superior defensive play. The Tigers had an excellent return to around mid-field on the opening second half kickoff. With great field position, QB Garrett Connell and the Tigers pulled out the long ball pass play again, but Peyton Driskill had other things in mind. Driskill played the deep pass like an all-pro coming up with a Bearcat interception returning it 7-yards. Notable to this Driskill's INT was the hurray and pressure placed on the Tigers QB by Parker VanSlyke.

Immediately, the Bearcat offense began to pound the ground with Austin Guy and Mason Keena effectively running the ball both inside and around the end of the Tigers defense when Haden Hillis passed left to Alex Townsend for a 33 yard touchdown for the Bearcats. Point after attempt failed making the score 19 to 6 in favor of the Salem Tigers.

The remainder of the contest continued to be a defensive battle. The front four of the Bearcats defense of Matt Agey, Malichi Harp, Josiah Payne and Parker VanSlyke were a tremendous force at the line of scrimmage shutting down the middle running ability of the Tigers. That coupled with the strong play of the linebacker corp of Austin Guy and Ryder Foster filling the in the middle and Jacob Medler and Mason Keena shutting down the outside run simply allowed the rest of the game to be a draw.

Overall the Bearcats offense had positive performance. The offensive line appears to be coming together as a strong unit. Seniors Ryder Foster and Matt Agey are the Bearcats two returning linemen that bring experience and leadership. The two Juniors of Brayden Crocket and Caleb Coons with the young

sophomore Francios Haasbrock-Wirz round out the offensive line.

Coach Pixley commented "Overall a great performance by our kids. We got a glimpse of what Hayden Hillis can do when he can get loose and run. I thought our two running backs in Mason Keena and Austin Guy ran hard and did a great job for us. Overall, everyone did something good and we simply need to work on our consistency to improve the overall team performance."

Pixley added, "This group is just that inexperienced and we have to work on our fundamentals each week."

Leading tackler for the Dexter defensive unit was Austin Guy with an incredible 15 total tackles. He was followed by Jacob Medler with 5 tackles and Ryan Collier, C J Green and Ryder Foster with 4 tackles. C J Green had a fumble recovery and Peyton Driskill had one interception.

Keena had a 4.2 yard average from his running back position with 16 carries for 67 yards. Austin Guy had 14 carries for 69 yards, averaging 4.9 yards per carry and Hayden Hillis carried the ball 8 times with 21 net yards..

In the passing department, Hillis went to the air 27 times and completed 11 passes for a total of 96 total yards. His leading receivers were Ryan Collier with 5 catches for 32 yards, Peyton Driskill with 2 catches for 10 yards and Braxton Greenfield, Parker VanSlyke, Alex Townsend and Camden Riley each has one reception. Hillis had one interception on the night.

Overall team statistics against the Salem Tigers had a lot of parity as possession time 26.37 minutes for the Bearcats and 30.27 minutes for the Tigers. First downs, the Bearcats had 14 compared to the Tigers 12. Total net yards for the Bearcats were 253 with the Tigers having 274.

Next week, the Bearcats will be at home again at the newly renovated Charles Bland Stadium against the New Madrid County Eagles. The Eagles are an offensive machine outscoring the first two opponents 111 to 24 - defeating Malden in Week One (65-18) and East Prairie (46-6) in Week Two.

"Next week will be a real challenge for our kids against New Madrid." Pixley added, " They are 2-0 on the season. They are athletic, big and strong. The

Eagles running back is super fast and we will have to deal with it. We will need a good week of practice and preparation."

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