



## WEEK SIX RECAP



### Furious Second-Half Rally Shows Why Da' Boys are the Toast of Panther Nation

It's almost as though the Panthers went into halftime saying, "We've got them right where we want 'em."

In point of fact, that's not the message Head Coach Matt Cook conveyed to the team at the half, nor is it the precise tone he used to deliver it. We'll leave it to future historians and to player and coach memoirs to learn precisely what he said and how he said it. For now, suffice to say that whatever he said, it needs to be bottled and administered intravenously prior to the start of all games.

It was a tale of two ballgames, representing both the worst and best of times. The first half, in large measure, was on both sides of the ball a series of well-executed plays punctuated by lapses of judgment or execution. While the Panthers were more than competitive on their well-executed plays, the Haltom High School Buffalos pounced on the mistakes and went into the locker room at the half with a comfortable and seemingly insurmountable 39-14 lead.

With the Panthers as with the economy, every indicator pointed to doom, a blowout, an embarrassing defeat, a dagger in the heart. Perhaps, some of little faith no doubt fretted, the Abilene game the week before represented the true coming out of the Panthers, a return to form and a harbinger of what Panther Nation can expect for eons.

And, perhaps, that's what it could have been. After all, we saw this movie repeatedly in 2006 and know the plot by heart. The team comes out, plays with heart, suffers some reversals, gets beaten down mentally and physically and limps to the finish line a mere shell of itself. No Disney moments, no feel-good endings, just a lot of pain and suffering and bitter-bile disappointment for more hard work than we can possibly imagine.

What we saw instead, however, was a reprise of How the Grinch Stole Christmas. You know the scene, the turning point, when the Grinch suddenly understands the true meaning of Christmas and is set upon making things right, when calamity strikes and all his plunder is in danger of annihilation. But his heart grows to three times its original size, he develops enormous strength, saves the heavily freighted sleigh and is able to redistribute the gifts and decorations he'd stolen.

In the end, the Panthers weren't able to "save" the Haltom game. But their hearts grew three sizes Friday night. The cardiac Panthers fought hard to the last play, showing no surrender, no quit. They played with pride, with character, with abandon, with distinction.

You can even say they played with fire, the double entendre in this case working on both levels. They came out with raw emotion, played with determination and came within an old man's ear hair of grasping the silver ring.

It's generally considered unsporting, when a man is at the bottom of an abyss, to ask a lot of questions about how he came to be there. The first course of business is to get the man to safety. But in the fullness of time, we'll ask a lot of questions and perhaps heave the man in jail for criminal trespass. No need in this case, but the fact of the matter is that the Panthers found themselves looking upward at halftime in large part because of their own mistakes. They played with fire, as it were, and got burned. Perhaps it was a missed assignment here, a misalignment there, a case of futterfingers or temporary loss of nerve. Maybe it was inexperience or a bad read. Such is football. Such is life.

But when it comes to ferocious comebacks, full Monty displays of heart, drive and desire, you can ask for nothing better than what the Panthers delivered in the second half. Sure, we wish the outcome had been different. We wish the Panthers had time for just one more possession. Some will forever wish that one of the officials hadn't developed an apparent dislike for the Panthers, yet another in a lengthening list of referees who have interjected themselves into a contest at a critical juncture and to the Panthers' disadvantage. As one veteran fan put it, "Referees ought not cheat."

But dadgummit! Was there anyplace better to be than in the visitors' stands at the Birdville Fine Arts Athletic Complex during the second half Friday night? It's as if the Panthers stood up on their hind legs, and like the fictional Howard Beale, shouted, "We're mad as hell, and we're not going to take this anymore!" Forget Disney. This was SportsCenter stuff.

Haltom scored on its opening drive in methodical fashion. The defense showed a variety of different looks, sometimes to great success, as when safeties blitzed and helped throw the Buffs for a loss. On other plays, though, Haltom found some seams and marched down the field. The defense was successful, however, in killing the two-point conversion try.

Paschal looked to answer, but its drive stalled after a holding call and the team was forced to punt. Matthew Blum ripped a beauty that Paschal downed on the one. Unfortunately, five plays later Haltom went deep and scored on a touchdown pass. Yet again, however, the defense stuffed the two-point try.

The Panthers were determined to answer. Arron Stafford returned the Haltom kick to the Paschal 46-yard-line, and the offense went into overdrive. QB Brian Gallagher, gamely playing on a bad hip, found WR Travoy McCarver, who made a circus catch for a first down at the Haltom 40. Facing fourth and five from the Haltom 35, RB Emmanuel Smith ran for a first down to the Haltom 22. Two plays later, RB Angel Arguetta was stopped for no gain, but he was horse collared and Paschal was awarded a first down at the Haltom 11. Then, facing fourth and four, Smith rumbled into the end zone for a Paschal TD. K Chris King added the PAT to cut the deficit to 12-7.

Haltom then struck quickly and often, picking up four unanswered scores in a nightmare sequence that included a special teams' breakdown on a punt that gave Haltom the ball on the Paschal 5.

The Panthers showed no quit, however. Gallagher went to WR Sasha Lovett on successive passes for a first down, mixed it up with a five-yard pass to McCarver, then found Lovett again for a Paschal touchdown with 40 seconds remaining in the half. King added the PAT, and the teams went into halftime with Haltom holding a 39-14 lead.

Paschal received to begin the second half, and began a promising drive. However, the forward momentum disappeared after a false start, and the Panthers were forced to punt. However, the defense stood tall and forced a punt of its own. Taking over on the Paschal 35, Gallagher found McCarver for a touchdown at 7:33 of the third quarter. King's extra point try was true, and Paschal now trailed just 39-21.

The defense stood tall yet again on Haltom's next series, stuffing a fourth and 11 try to give the Panthers the ball on their own 27.

Lamentably, the Panthers were unable to generate any traction in this series, and were forced to punt. That's when disaster struck. Haltom blocked the punt attempt and waltzed into the end zone, an eerie foreshadowing of the Dallas Cowboys' fate on Sunday.

If ever a team faced a gut check moment, the Paschal Panthers did now. The team could throw up its hands, resign itself to fate and cave in, or it could fight and claw and scratch its way into contention. The Panthers chose to fight.

Marching up the field on a deft mix of pass and run plays, Paschal found paydirt on a Smith run with 57 seconds left in the third quarter. King added the PAT to cut the score to 46-28.

Then began a series of calls that were certainly controversial in Panther Nation. An apparently successful onside kick attempt was nullified on what most regarded as a phantom offsides call. Haltom ultimately took over on its own 48, but the defense again was rock solid, forcing a punt after DL Joel Taft chased the Haltom QB out-of-bounds on a third and 10 play.

Paschal marched down the field in a drive highlighted in part by a nifty play in which Gallagher handed off to Smith, who ran right then threw back to Gallagher. Smith ultimately scored, King kicked the point after and Paschal cut the lead to 46-34.

The defense again played masterfully, Blum dropped the Buffs for a loss, and DB Kirby Campbell broke up a pass play on what many partisans believed should have been an offensive interference call. Though the defense forced a punt, however, the offense was unable to score on its next drive. The defense would have to come up big again for Paschal to have any hope. It did.

On a second and 11 play, the defense smothered the ball carrier and worked on the ball. That's when LB Luis Garcia swooped in, stripped it and ran to the Paschal 41. Needing a quick strike with just 1:28 remaining, Gallagher hit Smith for the touchdown. King added the extra point, and the score suddenly stood at Haltom 46, Paschal 41.

Unfortunately, the clock became Haltom's 12th man, and the Panthers were unable to get another bite at the apple.

But consider this: It would have been easy to give in to apparent momentum, to mentally check out, to begin thinking wistfully of the season's first two games, to mail it in the rest of the way and catalog a litany of "what if's" and "if only's," which have become kind of a koan of the last three games. That's what many fans were doing, Lord knows. Not the Panthers. The Panthers played with hearts afire, with a spirit we simply haven't seen before. Sure, the team's first two victories were come-from-behind affairs. That having been said, it's one thing to come back when down by less than a touchdown, even if you only have a few seconds left, and quite another to come back from a 25-point halftime deficit. This is heart taken to a new level. This is evidence of hearts increased in size. You could even say it's a far, far better thing than they've ever done before, and it certainly is a sign of much better days to come.

We can talk all day about whether Paschal should have fallen behind to Haltom in the first place. We can talk about the fickle finger of fate, the fickle flags of officials, the joys and agonies of young men in the heat of competition. We can lament that if we could but take away just one of the special teams' breakdowns, Paschal wins. But the talk and the fretting won't change a thing and now the team must carry forward with the spirit it showed in its furious comeback attempt. The Panthers have just three regular season games remaining. Played with the heart and determination on display Friday night, the Panthers can win those three games.

The team's next opponent is clearly no patsy. The Richland High Rebels come into the 7:30 p.m. Friday contest at Farrington Field with a perfect 6-0, 2-0 record. Led by highly hyped QB Tyler Cotton, the Rebels have proven to be an offensive juggernaut. Unclear, however, is whether Richland has yet faced a team with such a large collective heart.

Reporter News, "We outclassed them a little bit, I think." We can quibble and debate what, precisely, Warren means by class – certainly a curious locution under the circumstances. One thing we can say for sure, however, is that the Eagles woke a sleeping giant. It may have taken a half of the next game for the Panthers to shake the cobwebs, but there's no denying the size of the fight in these young men, the size of their hearts. In another context, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. once said he dreamed of the day when people were judged by the content of their character. That day is long overdue. So too is the day when the Panthers enjoy the respect they so richly deserve, when the Panthers are celebrated for the kind of heart-filled character they showed against Haltom. We owe them nothing less.



### JV Panthers Fight Gamely to the Finish but Fall Just Short Against Buffalos

Week 6 of the Panther football season had our JV boys playing in the friendly confines of Bill Allen field against the Haltom Buffaloes. Haltom opened the game with a scoring drive to take an early 6-0 lead, and after a couple of possessions by each team the Panther defense got its first take-away of the game with a fumble recovery by LB Edgar Martinez.

The Panthers answered the score with RB Daniel Jackson with a touchdown pass and QB Marshall Norment hitting WR Tyler Anderson with a 30 yard pass. RB Connor Pitts finished off the drive with a touchdown. After the extra point by K Chris Smith, the Panthers had a 7-6 lead.

Haltom fired right back with another TD and a 12-7 lead after failing to convert the 2 point try. On the ensuing kickoff, Haltom attempted an onside kick, but with one of the smartest plays this year, DB Alex Hansen snatched the ball away from a group of Haltom defenders and outran them all to the end zone to give the Panthers a 13-12 lead.

Haltom refused to back down and scored two more times before the half, taking a 28-13 lead into the third quarter.

The Panthers opened the second half of the game with RB Daniel Jackson continuing his hard running and scoring a touchdown to make the game a one touchdown affair at 28-20.

The Panther defenders then stepped up their pressure, holding Haltom to a "three and out" series and then making fumble recoveries on the next two series by LB Miguel Ruiz and LB Morgan Hix.

The Panthers, taking advantage of the good field position, then drove down to the Haltom 5 yard line before Norment hit TE Jonathon Weiss with a touchdown pass, bringing the Panthers within 2 points of the Buffaloes. The Panthers' defense continued to dominate the field, but the clock was once again a demon the team could not exorcise and the game ended with the Buffaloes winning by 2 points.

The JV Panthers next take the field against the Richland Rebels at 7 p.m. Thursday at a location to be announced.

*Special thanks to Winky Hix for his game day reporting on JV action.*

### Freshmen White Rolls to Victory over Haltom Buffalos

The freshmen white team rolled to a 20-6 victory Thursday on the strength of yeoman work by QB Joe Buitron.

Buitron rushed for touchdowns of two and 12 yards and connected with WR Repairer Etuk on an 18-yard touchdown pass. The defense also played inspired football, forcing three turnovers.

The freshmen purple team did not fare quite as well in its contest Thursday, despite a number of strong individual performances. Daniel Reiling, for example, made six tackles, while Matt Young rolled up 75 yards of total offense.

The freshmen white team (2-3, 2-1) next squares off against the Richland Rebels at 5 p.m. Thursday at Paschal High's Bill Allen Field. The purple squad (3-4, 0-3) takes on the Rebels at 7 p.m. Thursday, also at Bill Allen Field.