

Lanier Christian Academy @ Pinecrest Academy

CUMMING, Ga. – The trend of high-scoring affairs between Lanier Christian Academy and Pinecrest Academy continued Friday night at Pinnacle Field.

On Sept. 23, 2022, the Pinecrest Paladins faced off against the Lanier Christian Thunder just hours after attending the funeral of beloved teacher and coach Nico Quintana – they lost 69-7. 364 days later, the Paladins posed a tougher opposition to the Thunder, but came up just short in a 34-31 Thunder victory.

“It’s hard to get up for a football game when you’re brokenhearted,” Paladins Head Coach Shawn Coury said. “A year removed, we take Coach Q’s spirit in our heart and we say, ‘You know what? Let’s go play hard for him.’”

And play hard they did. Pinecrest (1-3) jumped out to an early lead thanks to Pablo Nuez’s 25-yard field goal. The junior also nailed each of his four PAT attempts and picked up 21 receiving yards on the night. In fact, the Paladins dominated the first half on both sides of the ball.

Although junior Matthew Mitchell, in his first year playing quarterback, rushed for 14 yards and racked up 137 passing yards and a touchdown in the first half, and finished with 230 total passing yards, Pinecrest’s defense and special teams stole the show. Juniors Peter Birozes and Johnny Lynch, headlined the Paladins’ first-half clinic, shocking the Thunder with a 92-yard kickoff return for a touchdown and an 82-yard pick-6 respectively. Lynch also received Mitchell’s 19-yard touchdown pass, and Pinecrest’s Colton Riley recovered a botched Thunder punt attempt in the endzone for a touchdown.

After leading 31-21 at the half, junior Leo Groza burned the brightest for the Paladins in the second half, tallying a blocked PAT and three sacks and making seemingly every other tackle.

“Leo Groza is by far right now our leading tackler,” said Coury. “He’s a kid that you love to coach because he’s got a huge heart and plays with his whole heart.”

However, the Paladins sputtered offensively in the second half, with their first possession ending with a fumble recovered by Lanier Christian, and their other three resulting in turnovers on downs.

“It just shows you what happens when a bunch of kids make up their minds that they’re just not going to quit,” Thunder Head Coach Bruce Miller said. “Every one of our guys deserves a lot of praise.”

Miller noted his running backs in particular as being huge playmakers. Sophomore Isaiah Hreniuc ran for 71 yards and a touchdown and junior Noah Freeman accrued 94 rushing yards. Senior Shepard Acton was the most impressive, rushing for 186 yards and three touchdowns. Miller was also satisfied by sophomore Drew Kalinauskis’ ability to fill in for their injured quarterback CJ Britt, as he scrambled for 31 yards and collected 78 passing yards, including a 25-yard touchdown pass to fellow sophomore Ben Hargis.

Assistant Coach Billy Shirley was very happy with the team’s second-half adjustments, especially on special teams and Assistant Coach Joel Lulinski promised the Thunder donuts for their comeback.

“Every time our team gets a shutout, I get them donuts, but coming back from adversity today and turning the page on our team, I thought they deserved it,” Lulinski said.

As such, the Lanier Christian players will enjoy some donuts while reviewing film on Monday and preparing for their next region game against The King's Academy on Oct. 6.

Meanwhile the Paladins will look to keep giving it their all and staying competitive.

"This is what Friday nights should be," said Coury. "Battles that come right down to the end of the game."

We'll see if Thursday night high school football is just as exciting at Pinecrest's next game on Thursday, Oct. 5 at Cross Keys.