

Unmatched excellence

50 years later, Norristown High celebrates last perfect football season

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NORRISTOWN — The tone was set in a letter sent by head football coach Roy Kent that summer.

The team was coming off a 4-7 season, Kent's first at the helm, and had not had a winning campaign in three years.

Kent's letter was straightforward.

"If you're not willing to pay the price of sweat, blood, and bruises for victory think again before you show up for a suit August 16."

Eighty-two players arrived on that first day of practice.

It was 1957, and the Norristown High football team was about to embark on what would become an historic season. The Eagles went 9-0 that year, and 50

years later, are still the last undefeated football team at Norristown High.

The team held a 50th reunion Saturday evening at Chadwick's at The Club at Shannondell.

"There are some guys, different groups, that still see each other every so often," said Dave Wetzel, Class of '60, who helped with the reunion and developed a web site for the event. "There are also guys I haven't seen since."

Roger Adelman and Charles Holmes, both juniors in 1957, were the ones who spearheaded the 50-year gathering.

"We did it for two words: Leroy Kent," said Adelman, Kent having passed away in 2005 at the age of 82. "He was our coach, but he was a real inspiration to us.

"This is a chance to honor the team, and to honor Kent. He became the driving force in many of our lives."

There have been just three undefeated, untied seasons in the long history of Norristown High football, which dates back to 1892. Norristown was 11-0 in 1922 and 12-0 in 1923.

The school actually was 1-0 in that first year of 1892, went 2-0 in 1894 and 2-0 again in 1902. There was also an 8-0-1 team in 1938.

The two teams in the 20s were amazing in their dominance. The 1957 squad holds a unique distinction in the history of Norristown football.

"The year before, we had been 4-7," Adelman said of the 1956 season. "(Coach Kent) had put it in our minds that we could win and we could be the better team in the fourth quarter."

That fall, this team intended to prove their coach right.

The landmark season unfolded this way:



The 1957 Norristown High School Eagles are the last unbeaten football team in school history, going 9-0 and capturing the Suburban One League title during their landmark season. Members of the team include, front row from left, Mr. Kent, Willie Suber, Stewart Percy, Charles Holmes, Joseph Bono, Robert Eastwood, Roger Adelman, Roddy Duckworth, Michael Branca, Philip Knerr, Robert Spence and Robert Lee; second row from left, Edmund Lippy, Richard Detwiler, Gene Bishop, Robert Hopple, William Glazier, Robert Johnston, Theodore Avery, Richard Daddona, Lee Phillips, Blaine Lawson, James Shells and Mr. Zdanowicz; third row from left, Mr. Martz, William Kohler, John Brown, Frank Bishop, David Wetzal, Pau! Shellenberger, Carl Espenship, Richard Guss, Donald Ford, Richard Ford, John Pulcini, Robert Melnick and Mr. Hess; and fourth row from left, Jeffery Barrett, Elmer Romeis, John Karcher, Donald Schreck, Bruce Lindeman, James Plummer, Gary Clemens, William Brandt, Carl Daddona, Gus Morano and Jay Brunner

Norristown 18, Ridley Township 6

The schedule opened with a Sept. 20 game against Ridley Township. Bob Lee, part of the Eagles' backfield, gave the team the lead with a one-yard run.

With the score tied at 6 entering the fourth quarter, Mike Branca's hard hit caused the Ridley quarterback to

fumble the ball, which Branca scooped up and took four yards into the end zone.

Willie Suber's one-yard plunge finished the scoring and had the team at 1-0 on the young season.

Norristown 24, Phoenixville 0

The following week saw the Eagles playing their first home game at Roosevelt Field, on Sept. 27.

Norristown hosted Phoenixville, and took care of the Phantoms. The game was highlighted by a pair of long touchdown runs from Suber, who went for 66 and 79 yards on the night.

Bob Johnston and quarterback Stew Percy ran in the other two touchdowns.

Percy's biggest play of the night went for naught, however, coming when the QB faked a handoff to fullback Holmes, then took off for a 12-yard bootleg into the end zone. The play was so well executed, even the referees had been fooled, and blew an early whistle thinking Holmes had the ball. Percy would score from the one a few plays later.

An estimated crowd of 6,000 watched as the Eagles improved to 2-0, a writer covering Phoenixville suggesting in print the next day the series was so one-sided, the Phantoms should consider leaving Norristown off the schedule in the future.

Norristown 38, Pottstown 12

Week 3 meant a trip to Pottstown to face the Trojans on Oct. 4. Two different "Bobs" threw touchdown passes in the game for Norristown, Bob Johnson hitting Percy and Bob Lee finding Suber.

Suber also ran the ball for three touchdowns while Percy scored on the ground, as well.

Again this week, Percy came up with a huge play, only to see it wiped out. Percy intercepted a Pottstown pass at

the goal line, returning it all the way to the other end zone for an apparent tally, only to be called back by a Norristown penalty.

Gene Bishop successfully converted the team's first two point-after attempts in this game, but Bishop's big moment was still to come.

Norristown 7, Lower Merion 6

Norristown would host powerhouse Lower Merion in Week 4 on Friday, Oct. 11, at Roosevelt Field. The Eagles had not beaten the Ardmore Aces since 1945, and Lower Merion brought into the battle a 32-game unbeaten streak dating back to 1953.

The night would spawn stories of legend for the football program, and a poem, "Goal to Go," written by then-junior Jerry Spinelli.

In what would be a true defensive battle, the Eagles took a 7-0 lead early in the first quarter when Holmes ran in from 13 yards. Gene Bishop would be perfect on the extra-point attempt, and oh how big that boot would become by game's end.

Lower Merion pulled to within one in the third quarter on a touchdown of its own. Adelman came from his end position to get a hand on the Aces' kick

attempt to tie the score, securing Norristown's slim advantage.

But this game would come down to the Eagles defense, which was tested in the final moments of the game.

"The goal-line stand was one of the epochal moments in Norristown High sports annals," wrote legendary Times Herald sports editor Red McCarthy in the following day's edition. "Seldom will you find the likes of this one on any football level, scholastic, collegiate or professional. The determination with which it was executed was the story of a determined ball club's will to win the 'big one.'"

Lower Merion had one last chance to come from behind and extend its unbeaten streak to 33. The scoreboard clock was counting down below five minutes as the Aces collected a first down inside the Eagles' 2-yard-line.

Four times the Aces tried to push across the goal line, but on each play the Eagles stood tall. When Lower Merion's Nick Stuart was stopped on fourth down, Norristown took over on the one-foot line.

At game's end, the Norristown fans stormed the field as the Eagles were now 4-0, surviving their toughest battle.

The victory was such a big deal, the following Wednesday night, the public was invited into the auditorium at Norristown High to watch the team's film of the game.

Norristown 19, Haverford 13

Following a week in which the team's game versus Abington was canceled due to a flu outbreak, the next week the Eagles hosted Haverford at Roosevelt Field.

Suber, who had given Norristown a 7-0 lead with a 23-yard run in the first quarter, came up huge with 90 seconds to play, darting 27 yards and avoiding several tacklers to break the tie as the Eagles won.

Holmes had scored on a 1-yard play in the second quarter, which at the time gave the Eagles a 13-0 lead.

Defensively, Bob Melnick pulled down two interceptions while Adelman recovered two fumbles.

The game left the Eagles at 5-0 and in command in the Suburban One League standings.

Norristown 38, Cheltenham 7

Next week, Cheltenham came to town, and Suber showed them who was boss. The rain that fell this day had little effect on the back, who scored

four times and ran for 204 yards. He even tossed a 17-yard pass to Adelman.

Suber's touchdown runs went for 21, 30, 69 and finally 54 yards. The other two scores came on runs of one and 27 yards from Holmes.

This big day left the team at 6-0, 4-0 in Suburban One play.

Norristown 20, Upper Darby 13

Next up, on Nov. 9, Norristown headed for the road to play at Upper Darby, and was in a close one going for its seventh straight.

This one was harder than had been anticipated, the Eagles pulling out a narrow win to lock up at least a tie in the league race.

Lee put the Eagles on the board with a one-yard score in the first quarter. Leading 7-6 at halftime, the Eagles added a pair of touchdowns in the third quarter, one coming on a 70-yard scamper from Suber, the other when Percy went the final four.

The Eagles' win set up a game the next week when Norristown could clinch the Suburban One League title against Chester.

Norristown 19, Chester 13

On Saturday, Nov. 16, the Eagles hosted Chester at Roosevelt Field, that

league title in the offing. Holmes would score two rushing touchdowns in the game, Suber adding another.

The team's first score came after a 32-yard run from Suber got the Eagles in prime position to give the ball to Holmes for the final distance, the fullback beset by ankle problems much of the season.

Kicking off after the TD, Norristown recovered a Chester fumble. On the first play from scrimmage, Suber took a reverse and went 32 yards for a 13-0 lead.

Chester scored twice to tie the score at 13-13 before halftime.

In the fourth quarter, everything still in the balance, Phil Knerr recovered a Chester fumble, leaving the team 77 yards from victory. Holmes would get the call for 41 of the yards needed during the drive, including the final seven.

One last gasp of air for Chester was gone when Frank Bishop intercepted a pass, and the league championship was Norristown's.

"These kids provoke ulcers," Coach Kent was quoted as saying in the next day's Times Herald.

Norristown 33, Upper Merion 7

On Thanksgiving morning, Nov. 28, an estimated 10,000 people packed into Roosevelt Field for this local gem of a rivalry. Upper Merion High, then known as the Spartans, was looking to do what eight other teams could not. And the Eagles of 1957 wanted their place in local sports history.

Holmes scored but one touchdown that day. He was too busy doing everything else. The fullback ran the ball 23 times for some 226 yards, a 47-yard dash his longest.

Suber caught a screen pass from Percy in the second quarter, turning it into a 29-yard score. Holmes' nine-yard rush had the Eagles' lead to 13-7 at the intermission.

After halftime, Suber went 25 yards for another score. Lee kept his feet inbounds just long enough to pull in a Percy pass for another TD before Frank Bishop threw a 19-yard pass to Melnick to cap Norristown's scoring for the morning.

The 33-7 final score meant a perfect 9-0 record and a celebration for that team that has lasted these 50 years.

"We're so happy to be able to get together to celebrate this team," Adelman said. "Still, we all are sorry that Coach Kent will not be able to be there."

Almost 50 years ago, on Dec. 12, 1957, the undefeated team gathered to celebrate their success during a testimonial dinner. At the time, members of the 1922 and 1923 undefeated teams also attended to honor this group.

Many members of the 1957 Eagles have gone on to do great things, in their personal and professional lives. Five members of the team have since been entered into the Norristown High Hall of Champions: Frank Bishop, Bob Eastwood, Holmes, Knerr and Suber. Two other members of the team, and one person from the cheerleading squad, are in the school's Hall of Fame: Adelman, Tom Catanese and Nancy Tornetta Russell.

Saturday night at Chadwick's, this large group came together again in numbers matching that dinner in 1957. They shared memories, were reacquainted with those not seen in decades and talked of a special time in each one of their lives.

It was 1957, they went undefeated and it all began when Coach Roy Kent sent them a letter that summer demanding excellence.

He asked if they were willing, and the Eagles of 50 years ago showed him nine straight times just how willing they were.

GOAL TO GO

The score stood seven-six
With but five minutes left to go
The Ace attack employed all tricks
To settle down its stubborn foe.

It looked as though the game was done
When an Ace stepped wide 'round right
An Eagle stopped him on the one
And tumult filled the night.

Thirty two had come their way
And thirty-two had died
Should number thirty-three, this day
For one yard, be denied?

Roy Kent, the Eagle mentor, said,
"I've waited for this game,
And now, defense, go, stop 'em dead
And crash the Hall of Fame."

The first Ace bolted for the goal
And nothing did he see
But Branca, swearing on his soul,
"You shall not pass by me."

The next two plays convinced all
The ref would make the touchdown sign
But when the light shone on the ball
It still lay inches from the line.

Said Captain Eastwood to his gents,
"It's up to us to stop this drive."
Said Duckworth, Avery, Knerr and Spence,
"Will do, as long as we're alive."

The halfback drove with all his might
His legs were jet-propelled
But, when the dust had cleared the fight
The Eagle line had held.

- Jerry Spinelli
Class of '59