

COMEBACK OF THE YEAR

Thomas Jefferson's Baldrige picks up where he left off...2 years ago

By Joshua Funk

For PA Football News

For now, it appears there won't be any more DeCicco's once Thomas Jefferson's prized Division-1 tight end graduates in May. In truth, the DeCicco name is a big one in the Jefferson Hills region.

But Thomas Jefferson head coach Bill Cherpak might want to start checking down the ranks to see if there are any more "Baldrigees" coming through, because his senior back is something special.

Brian Baldrige is the Jaguars' feature tailback, and as a senior, is having a phenomenal year – 1,959 rushing yards and 29 touchdowns aren't anything to sneeze at – but if you knew where #20 had come from to get to this point, you'd be amazed.

Two years ago, as a sophomore, Baldrige helped Thomas Jefferson to a 34-15 demolition of Blackhawk at Heinz Field. That day, Baldrige ran for 144 yards and a touchdown, a 44-yard run in which he did a 360-spin just to keep his balance before darting the remaining 20 yards to paydirt.

After General McLane eliminated TJ 28-7 in the Western Finals two weeks later, Baldrige, a 1,400-rusher and 19-touchdown scorer, and TJ began prepping for the 2007 season.

When the lights went up against Belle Vernon in the season opener, Baldrige, on a kickoff, went down with an injury. It wasn't good – a torn left ACL and a broken left femur, an injury that can be devastating to any running back.

Out for the season, it was hard for #20 to accept.

"It took a couple of weeks (to accept), sitting there on the bench, twiddling my thumbs," Baldrige said.

"It's hard because you become removed from that whole locker room situation," TJ head coach Bill Cherpak said. "You almost become an outsider. And that's tough."

Baldrige's teammates also echoed that #20 was a little down about not being a part of TJ's second run to a PIAA football championship, where the Jags thumped District 1 champion Garnet Valley, 28-3.

Once Baldrige was able to resume football activities, Cherpak said he had an idea Baldrige could return to form.

“The way he was running when he got hurt, he was devastating,” the 149-game winner said. “It was all about taking it slow – were we rushing him back or going too fast to get him back?”

“He’s played in mostly the first half of games this year – so he’s fresh now. He’s back to near 100 percent.”

So when Thomas Jefferson strapped on their black and gold helmets against Blackhawk for this latest go-round, the 2008 WPIAL title game, Baldrige claims he didn’t think back to two years ago.

“There might have been some history there,” Baldrige said, “but it didn’t really mean that much.”

Baldrige proved 2006 didn’t mean anything as he ran for 138 yards and four touchdowns on runs of 3, 10, 2, and 3 yards. He’s run for 3,375 yards in his career, just 625 yards shy of 4,000 for his career.

Just imagine, though, how lofty Baldrige’s stats would be had he not suffered the injury last season. He could be taking serious aim at 5,000 career rushing yards right now, instead of needing to average 209 yards for three more games to hit 4,000.

It’s a scary thought indeed, because TJ has never had a 4,000-yard rusher in its storied history. But all that matters now is that #20 is back to his old form.

“It means a lot (to be in this position),” Baldrige said. “My sophomore year, it was fun being part of it.”

If he thought a western runner-up finish was exciting, just wait for the thrill of hoisting a golden football.

That could be a very real possibility for Baldrige and the Jaguars.

And it would put the bow on just one more fantastic Thomas Jefferson football career...one that, if it were played in full, could have devastated the school record books.