

BIG THINGS COME IN SMALL PACKAGES

2008 Communications Tech Phoenix gave Public League football a little recognition

By Joshua Funk
For PA Football News

If the Philadelphia Public League had gained a reputation in any particular sport since it became affiliated with the PIAA, it came from basketball.

Prep Charter won back-to-back “AA” state titles in basketball over perennial WPIAL powers Beaver Falls and Aliquippa. Two other Public League schools, Communications Tech and Strawberry Mansion, finished as PIAA runners-up in 2006 and 2008, respectively.

When it came to football, however, the Public League didn’t receive as much respect.

In fact, it would be safe to say that the respect level was near, if not, zero.

Which Public League teams come to mind when you think of Public League football? Two schools that immediately come to mind are Frankford and George Washington, two “AAAA” schools that have had strings of dominance in the city and seasons that reach double-digits in victories.

Frankford had a pair of dominant runs that each lasted over a decade. The first run, from 1969-’84, saw Frankford notch a record of 152-22-2 (.863) and win nine Public League titles. During the second run, which lasted from 1991-’03, Frankford won 124 of its 147 games played and added four more Public League titles.

Washington boasts a 200-game winner in head coach Ron Cohen, and represented District 12 in the last two “AAAA” state football tournaments, falling to Parkland, 44-12, in 2007 and to Bethlehem Liberty, 30-13, this past season. The 2004 edition of Washington finished 12-1 and scored 452 points.

But winning playoff games against out-of-district opponents isn’t common. In 2007, Bok Vo-Tech, then “AAA,” opted to play in the Public League final instead of the “AAA” state playoffs. That left Benjamin Franklin to face District 1 rep Pottsgrove, a game in which the Electrons lost, 42-12.

So, of all the previous Public League schools listed, which one brought the first PIAA state football playoff victory? The answer: Comm. Tech.

The Phoenix, competing in Class “A,” the state’s smallest classification for football, only fielded a team with 24 boys. The school didn’t have a weight room, relying instead on a couple of gigantic tires to take the place of lifting weights.

2008 marked only the third year the Phoenix were members of the Public League and PIAA. And you wouldn't necessarily think of Tech as a football power: in the school's first two years in the PL, the Phoenix won just eight games.

The best of those two seasons, 2007, saw Tech finish 6-4. Despite the fact that Tech finished over a .500 winning percentage, it allowed more points (150) than it scored (94). The team's leading rusher, Stacey Hill, ran for 736 yards and scored three touchdowns in 2007.

The Phoenix' 2008 season began innocently with a narrow 14-12 victory over West Philadelphia. What followed that two-point victory were six consecutive victories by double-digit margins. Comm. Tech's average margin of victory in those six wins was 30.5 points.

During that run, Stacey Hill set a school record for rushing yardage in a single game – 272 yards on just 16 carries in a 34-14 drubbing of Penn Charter. In that game, the Phoenix ran for an impressive 479 yards.

The 7-0 record earned the Phoenix a spot in the District 1/12 Class "A" sub-regional playoffs. Included in this bracket were Jenkintown and Bristol, winners of a combined five District 1 Class "A" titles.

It was at this juncture that Tech's magical season was predicted to end. But Comm. Tech didn't listen to the predictions. The Phoenix defeated Bristol 18-14 to earn the Public League's first-ever inter-district football playoff victory.

Jenkintown was next. The Drakes brought with them a 1,000-yard rusher and passer. Comm. Tech shut the Drakes down, 22-10, to do something even more improbable: advance out of the District 1/12 sub-regional to the PIAA playoffs in the quarterfinal round. The Phoenix' next opponent: District 11 champion and offensive juggernaut Schuylkill Haven.

Comm. Tech was eliminated by the Hurricanes, 43-0. But the accolades didn't stop there. Stacey Hill was recognized as an Associated Press 2nd-team specialist. He finished the season with 1,322 total yards of offense and 17 total touchdowns (15 rushing).

Comm. Tech was also listed among the honorable mentions in EasternPAFootball.com's final statewide rankings.

It turned out that, instead of Washington or Frankford or Franklin or Bok, it was the little guy, Comm. Tech, that took the city of Philadelphia and Public League football on a run never seen before.

It only serves to validate the theory that "big things do indeed come in small packages."

Information for this story came from www.tedsilary.com & the Pennsylvania Football News' Resource Guide.