

TIGER MASTER

Three wins away from 300, Jim Roth reflects on his career

By Joshua Funk

For PA Football News

Believe it or not, there was once a period of time when winning a single football game was a big deal at Southern Columbia High School.

Yes, that's right. The Class "A" powerhouse that gets mentioned year-in and year-out as a potential state championship contender used to have trouble winning football games. In fact, the school nearly dropped football all together.

When Jim Roth came to Southern as an assistant coach in 1980, the Tigers were mired in a 17-game losing streak. It didn't end that season – Southern lost every game, and the losing streak extended to 27 games.

But then, in 1981, Southern Columbia snapped the streak. And to celebrate, they shut down the school and gave everybody a day off.

“We actually had a day off of school for winning *a* football game,” Roth chuckled, as if, nearly three decades later, he still couldn't believe it, either.

Southern steadily improved – from 4-5-1 in 1981, 9-3 in 1982, 12-1 in 1983. Then, Roth took over as head coach, and the rest, as they say, is history.

In his first six years, Roth went 57-17-1. Five of those seasons saw Southern win 10 games or more.

The Tigers won their first District 4 championship in 1991, and lost to Schuylkill Haven in the Eastern Final. Southern again reached the Eastern Final in 1992, falling to eventual PIAA champion Scotland School, 22-8.

“Once we started getting to the state playoffs, the bar was raised to the expectation that you win a state championship,” Roth explained. “In 1993, we felt that we had a team that was good enough to accomplish that feat, but we lost to South Williamsport to end the regular season.”

South Williamsport went on to play Duquesne for the state championship game, falling 24-21. Roth was at the game in person, and knowing how his team competed with the Mountaineers, knew that Southern could also compete with the western programs if given the chance.

Southern got its chance in 1994 at Altoona, playing WPIAL champion Western Beaver for the state title. In what would have been a mercy-rule game by today's standards, the

Tigers walloped the Golden Beavers, 49-6, the widest margin of victory in the Class "A" title game to date. But winning the school's first state title wasn't all that euphoric.

"It was very satisfying, but especially right after the game, it was more of a relief (that we won)," Roth said. "The expectation was so high that we had kids that just sat on the turf in Altoona and cried. I remember that very vividly. It was such a build-up that it was more of a relief than excitement."

Southern then went on a stretch of six PIAA runner-up finishes in a seven year period. The first two losses came to Farrell, and in between three losses to Rochester was a 29-22 setback to South Side Beaver.

"The most devastating loss is when you lose in the finals," Roth said. "You hear people in the NFL talk about that all the time. The same is true for high school football."

The thought crossed Roth's mind whether or not he'd win a state title again.

"Oh yeah, it crosses your mind. It definitely crosses your mind," he said. "But one thing that I can say with honesty is this: the only way to take away the negative feelings of falling short would be to win a number of times to even the score. Amazingly, we were able to do that."

Southern evened the score by becoming the only school in state history to win five straight state titles, scoring no fewer than 31 points in any of the five wins, and topping 50 points twice.

To date, the East has won the last seven state title games in Class "A" by a very wide margin, 290-90, to be exact.

Roth's record, in 25 seasons, stands at 297-49-2, three wins shy of the 300 club. Roth would become the eighth member of that elite fraternity. The most recent member of the club, former Selinsgrove coach Bill Scott, retired after the 2007 season with 303 victories.

What will 300 wins mean to Roth, who has only had two teams (1986 and 2007) finish a season with fewer than 10 victories?

"It will be like any other game, it really will," Roth said. "When I think of reaching that number at my age, that's a great accomplishment, but I look at it more from a program standpoint. I probably take it for granted a little bit. Three hundred, to me, it's kind of a bump in the road, I guess.

"If there's a 400-game celebration (for 400 career victories), that might be a little more impressive."