

McKeesport's offense is a high-flying act

**By JOSHUA FUNK
For PA Football News**

When you think of an option-oriented team, you think of grinding, punishing, physical, low-scoring teams that follow former Michigan State head coach Duffy Daugherty's philosophy about the forward pass. Conventional thinking would not lead you to believe that an option-oriented team would light up scoreboards week after week after week.

Remember, however, there are always exceptions to the rule. And Western Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic League (WPIAL) representative McKeesport Area is one such exception.

Actually, there are quite a few exceptions around the Keystone State. There are teams that have had pretty prolific offenses that have lit up the scoreboards that run elements or variations of the option system, but McKeesport stands apart as one of the few teams that run a *true* flexbone offense.

To the naked eye, the option looks so easy to stop. And the philosophy, as explained by longtime Tigers' head coach George Smith, is easy to understand. But boy, oh boy, is it ever tough to defense.

The flexbone, Smith explained, is a running-oriented system reliant on three athletes – the quarterback and the fullback on offense, and an unblocked player on defense. The quarterback can hand the ball off to the fullback if the unblocked defender doesn't pick him up.

Or, if the defender picks up the fullback, the quarterback can keep the ball himself or pitch it to a trailing wingback.

"The way we figured it out was...if Air Force and Navy can run it...without great talent and beat Pitt and beat Division-1 programs, if you just add speed, you'll win," Smith said. "That's the way Oklahoma was (under Barry Switzer). We can hit some big plays because we're pretty fast."

The option system was introduced to McKeesport in 1991. Smith, who is 11 wins shy of 200 for his career, had been coaching with the school since 1982. So what happened in that near-decade-long span of time?

"Here's what happened," Smith said. "In 1982, I became the head coach at McKeesport. I ran every offense there was. I had learned a little bit about the option from being a graduate assistant under Lou Holtz (who ran the split-back Veer), so I ran the split-back my first few years. But it's not the same."

Smith had a friend from the town of Emporium, located in the mountains of north central Pennsylvania in Cameron County. That friend, Jamie Eckels, was the head football coach at Cameron County High School, and he ate, slept, and drank the triple-option.

“He’s like the guru of teaching quarterbacks how to run the triple-option,” Smith said. “He came down to McKeesport in 1991...and we’ve never lost with it since. We’ve only had one losing season.”

That lone losing season was 1991 – the very first year that the system was installed. The Tigers just capped their 18th straight non-losing season in 2008, finishing 9-3 overall.

If that sounds impressive, consider some of these facts and stats. They’re bound to make your jaw drop.

- McKeesport has made 11 straight trips to the WPIAL “AAAA” playoffs, 13 total, since 1993. The Tigers’ playoff record in the WPIAL in those 13 playoff appearances is 21-11, with two WPIAL titles and one runner-up.
- McKeesport had four different starting quarterbacks in four consecutive years, beginning in 2005 with Dan Kopolovich. Kamryn Keys ran the show in 2006, JJ Eckels started in 2007, and Ty-meer Brown handled the controls last season. In those four seasons, McKeesport’s shortest came in 2006 with a loss in the “AAAA” quarterfinals to Pittsburgh Central Catholic, 24-13.
- The Tigers have posted a 49-13 overall record since the start of the 2004 season, a winning percentage of .790.
- The 2005 McKeesport Tigers set a WPIAL “AAAA” playoff record for points scored in a single game, 60, in their opening round against Shaler Area. The previous record had been set over two decades prior, in 1982, by North Allegheny, which hung 59 points on Hempfield in a shutout. The WPIAL began “AAAA” playoffs in 1980.
- Sticking with 2005, that edition of the Tigers scored 626 points en route to the school’s second PIAA championship – that scoring output ranks #3 in WPIAL history behind only the 2007 editions of Serra Catholic (702) and Jeannette (860). McKeesport’s ’05 point total ranks 16th in state history.
- In addition to 2005, McKeesport’s offense has scored more than 450 points in 2004 (451, which is believed to be a tie for 66th in WPIAL history) and 2008 (458, which is believed to be 63rd in WPIAL history).
- From 2004 to present, McKeesport has outscored its opposition 2,236 to 871. When you do the long division in your head, it works out to a 36-14 average score. In that span, McKeesport’s offense has scored 40+ points in a game 29 times. Option offenses aren’t supposed to be *that* proficient...are they?

Perhaps one of the most impressive statistics came from last year's McKeesport team. When George Smith told the story, even he couldn't believe it.

In a game last season against a down-on-its-luck Connellsville Area team, the Tigers ran off 48 points, did not attempt a pass, and its shortest run was a 38-yard gain. The next week, Smith got a call from a national high school football records keeper.

"He said we were 8th in the nation's history for scoring points in a single quarter," Smith said. "And if we hadn't missed an extra point, we would have been 5th all time."

That all happened in the *first* quarter. McKeesport wound up winning the game 67-7.

Perhaps stadiums that host McKeesport should make note of these figures and help stimulate the economy with the purchase of light bulbs.

If the Tigers' '09 attack is anything like previous years, their offense could be very fun to watch.