

Philadelphia powerhouse St. Joseph's Prep puts a stranglehold on Catholic League

**By JOSHUA FUNK
For PA Football News**

In a way, it's kind of ironic that St. Joseph's Prep head football coach Gil Brooks works as a lawyer for Wolf, Block, Schorr, and Solis-Cohen LLP, a law firm in Philadelphia, in the business litigation group. The Hawks have had a very tight grip on the Philadelphia Catholic League football landscape for just over a decade, and had what some might consider a "monopoly" in regular season play.

If the PCL was the business world, St. Joe's Prep's dominance might have violated government antitrust laws. Even though last year's 8-win season was the Hawks' lowest season win total in the last decade, the Prep is still a dominant PCL force.

It's interesting to note that, since the Philadelphia Catholic League formed in 1920, only three teams have reached double-digit league championship totals: the Prep, West Catholic, and LaSalle College. The Prep has won 15 PCL titles (14 outright, 1 shared in 1928); West Catholic has won 14 championships (all outright); LaSalle has won 10 titles, and like West Catholic, all of their titles are outright, too.

2009 marks the 89th season that St. Joe's Prep has played football. It would have been 90, but the PCL did not operate in 1929. In those 89 years, the Prep has done some pretty amazing things, becoming almost as synonymous with Philadelphia as the cheesesteak sandwich.

The Hawks have won 462 games, not including a six-year stretch from the late '50s to early '60s where it wasn't a member school of the PCL. The Prep has, to its name, 10 seasons of 10+ victories, and 21 seasons of 8 wins or more.

But, just like any other program, St. Joe's Prep had its share of downs, too. When Brooks first took over the program in 1992, the Hawks had just one 10-win season to its credit (1977), and that almost didn't happen because the head coach at the time, Gamp Pellegrini, was seeking a position at Monsignor Bonner because he wasn't certain he could win a PCL title at the Prep.

Even worse, from 1980-'91, the Prep went a dismal 41-85-1 (.325). Its best season was a six-win season under Clayton Carlin in 1989.

Brooks made some changes when he inherited the program.

"One of the things that was missing at the Prep when I first took over was the jayvee and freshman programs," he said. "We kind of turned that around and put a lot of concentration on those levels. We were literally building from the ground floor up."

Brooks got things rolling in 1997 as the Prep finished 12-2 and were crowned PCL champions.

“It was, I still think, the highest high I’ve ever had as a coach,” Brooks said of the ’97 championship.

The Catholic League had operated in a North/South format until the 1999 season, when it shifted school alignment to a system based on enrollment. The Prep was now faced with playing all the best-of-the-best that the PCL had to offer.

No matter. The Hawks went on a dominating run not before seen in those parts.

From 1999 to 2008, the Prep won 55 straight league games. That streak was snapped last season with a 31-17 loss to LaSalle.

The Prep went an impressive 68-9 from 2000-’05, winning PCL titles in four of those six years. Embedded in that 68-9 run was a string of 35 consecutive victories from 2001 through the end of 2003.

After the 2003 season, the Prep finished ranked #3 in the nation by the *USA-Today*. The 2002 team finished ranked 15th in the country and scored a school-record 499 points, believed to be the third-best single-season point total in PCL history.

In the last year of the six year period of absolute dominance, 2005, the Prep opened the season by defeating defending “AAAA” eastern champion Neshaminy and stunning the #1-ranked team in the land, Cleveland St. Ignatius, 28-14. That ’05 Ignatius team, Brooks said, had four Division-1 commitments on it entering that showdown.

In talking about when he took over at the Prep, Brooks made the comment, “My expectation was that we’d be good.”

Perhaps those expectations have been just slightly exceeded.