

At Woodland Hills, tradition hasn't had time to graduate

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If you think about the average accomplishments in the first 22 years of a human life span, you'll experience taking your first steps, up to four graduations (pre-school, middle school, high school, college), gain the right to vote, and legally become an adult.

But from a football program's first 22 years of life, the accomplishments aren't at all similar and must be measured from a different sort of perspective. Some football teams that have been around for many, many years languish in mediocrity or worse. Others maybe have a dominant season here or there, but never consistently string it together.

What does this have to do with Woodland Hills? The high school, a jointure between three different high schools – Braddock, Turtle Creek and Swissvale – formed in 1987, just 22 years ago, and in its brief history has been one of the more consistent “AAAA” programs in the WPIAL.

Each of those three schools that merged to form Woodland Hills had some unique history or tradition pertaining to football. Braddock once owned the state record for most consecutive games won, with 55, during the middle-to-late 1950s under head coach Chuck Klausung, a WPIAL legend. The Tigers won five straight WPIAL championships, and also tied in the 1954 “A” title game, 7-7, against Midland.

Turtle Creek produced a pretty famous running back named Leon Hart. Hart, who graduated from Turtle Creek in 1945, went on to win the Heisman Trophy at Notre Dame. And Swissvale, well, they made it to their only WPIAL championship game in 1985, losing in the “AA” finals to Riverside (Ellwood City), 21-15.

Between the three schools combined, they owned a WPIAL playoff record of 7-3-1. That stat is deceiving because, before the 1970 season, most WPIAL playoff tournaments were a single championship game. Sometimes, teams were declared champions by a point system without even playing a title game.

In its 22-year history, Woodland Hills has made 20 appearances in the WPIAL playoffs, posting a 30-16 (.652) record in WPIAL playoff games. Woodland Hills has sent six players to the NFL, most notably Jason Taylor and Steve Breaston, and that number could soon be on the increase in the next couple of NFL Drafts.

The Wolverines have won four WPIAL “AAAA” championships, its first in 1996, and the remaining titles in 1999, 2001, and 2002, respectively. Since the WPIAL formed the “AAAA” classification in 1980, only Mt. Lebanon, Upper St. Clair have won more championships, with five each.

Those statistics are quite remarkable, and while they are impressive, they pale in comparison to the sheer numbers that coach George Novak, a winner of more than 220 games in his career, encountered when he began at Woodland Hills.

“Football-wise, we had 270 boys sign up for the team the first year (90 per high school),” Novak said. “By the time we worked through the summer and did our conditioning, 167 boys showed up for the first practice. We ended the season with 159 players and dressed upwards of 110 for each game.”

To differentiate between the classes, seniors, juniors, and sophomores each wore different colored practice jerseys. One class wore white, one black, and one blue.

“We two-platoonned by class,” Novak said.

But don’t think for a minute that the surging numbers stopped with just the football team. It carried over into other extra-curricular activities.

“We had 90 cheerleaders,” Novak recalled. “They lined up from one end zone to the other. And our band was over 300 members.”

In its first season playing football, Woodland Hills won the conference championship and its first WPIAL playoff game, a 33-7 shellacking of Upper St. Clair. Novak said that helped unite the school as one. And the Wolverines’ 1996 WPIAL football championship was the first WPIAL title of any kind at the school.

Woodland Hills has had other notable highlights, including a four-year run from 1999-’02 that ended with an overall record of 52-4 (.928). Woodland Hills set a school record for wins in 2001 (14) and finished as a PIAA “AAAA” runner-up twice in that span, three times in its overall history.

Perhaps most impressively, the turquoise and black have an incredible home-field advantage at Turtle Creek Stadium, nicknamed “The Wolvarena.” Woodland Hills owns an 82-22 (.788) record at the stadium, posting a 40-2 (.952) stretch from 1993-2001.