

Golden Years on the Gridiron

By Michael Shute '93

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College football is tradition. It is pride. It is a rallying point and a gathering place where students, alumni, family and friends meet on a Saturday afternoon to holler and cheer.

For those who don't participate on the gridiron, football is about tailgating, reunions of old friends and making new ones. For those on the field, the game generates a special bond only understood by those who put it all on the scrimmage line in the name of their school.

From a start that included borrowed uniforms and no true on-campus home field, to almost annual appearances in the NCAA Division III Championship Game and Rowan's first-ever NFL draftee, football on the Glassboro campus has grown from one man's crusade to a consistent picture of excellence.

Today, Rowan boasts an enrollment of more than 3,700 men, a select few of whom are recruited by head coach K.C. Keeler and his staff. But in 1947 when David Rosen '49 spearheaded the drive to field a varsity squad, there were only 230 men at New Jersey State Teachers College at Glassboro, and 70 of them reported for the first spring practice.

Men had been scarce on the Glassboro campus prior to 1946. The school had suspended all intercollegiate athletics in 1942 upon the United States' entry into the war. But with the end of World War II, 117 veterans arrived, more than doubling the school's male population. Just prior to this, a group of Glassboro men had petitioned

the school for an immediate return to campus of men's varsity basketball and baseball. According to a chronicle of the school's history, they insisted, "The revival of men's sports would mean a noticeable advance in school spirit and will really give the girls something to cheer about."

In the spring of 1947, Rosen's tireless efforts and persuasive arguments, along with spirited support from the student body, prompted the school's president, Edgar F. Bunce, to approve varsity football for that fall. "We had a lot of momentum to get started in those years because we had a lot of veterans who had just gotten out of the service and they were anxious to get involved in football," added Rosen, a World War II veteran who went on to coach football in Vineland from 1949-1955.

That original football squad, called the Glassboro Yellow Jackets (despite the fact



The '69 squad battles for the pigskin.

Rowan Magazine

Volume 6, Number 1

Fall '00

Pages 24-28

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Coach Wackar points the way for the 1966 squad. Wackar coached several sports at Glassboro, but football was his first love. When students convinced President Robinson to reinstate football, Wackar jumped at the chance to coach the team.

that its members wore red and white uniforms borrowed from Penns Grove High School), played six games in the first season under the guidance of Coach Glen Frey, winning two and losing four. Home games were held at Glassboro High School. Just four of those games were intercollegiate contests so the school's official record was 1-3 according to the Rowan Sports Information Office. In the following three seasons under Coach Nello Dallalio, the team posted a record of 12-6-1 while playing home games on the College's baseball field. "We had great support from the student body and the faculty," said Rosen.

The 1948 Oak devoted a page to that first football team, and in its assessment of the first season, it read, "Who can tell where this beginning may end? Surely, no one can deny that Glassboro has many possibilities in football." But not even the players from that first team or the person who wrote those prophetic words could have imagined football at Rowan today.

"It's just unbelievable. You could see this program evolving over the years," said Salvatore Tronco '51, who was another original team member. "I started following the team again and watching them as they developed and then they're

on TV playing in the Division III Championship Game. It makes you real proud—proud of the school and where the football team has gone."

Almost as quickly as it began, however, the football program shut down in 1951 after four seasons primarily because of the onset of the Korean War. "It was really sad," said Bill Kushner, professor emeritus. "Some of us left and went to other schools." After playing two years in Glassboro, he was one of those who transferred but he didn't play football anymore because he felt like a traitor.

Then, 13 years after the program was discontinued, Professor Richard Wackar helped rebuild the Glassboro gridiron. A basketball coach at the time, he volunteered to head football, his first love. Student leaders presented Thomas Robinson, the college's third president, the results of a survey that said 93 percent of the student body wanted football back in the 'Boro even though it would mean a \$5 hike in student activity fees. The reappearance of the pigskin led to a four-game, JV-only schedule in 1963.

Despite early struggles, including a 19-game losing streak over the first three seasons of varsity play, Wackar led the team to six winning seasons including a 7-2-1 mark in 1972 which allowed the Profs to finish in a three-way tie for the conference championship, the first of 11 total conference titles in the school's history. In 1977, the Profs claimed an outright conference crown for the fourth straight year, a feat no team has accomplished since. But Wackar's contributions were more than just on the field. They literally had to do with creating the field.

"We only had \$5,000 to start the football program," Wackar said. "Uniforms and equipment were donated and purchased. Then we had to find a spot to build a field and put it all together under budget."

The school's playing field in Wackar's early days of coaching was where today's practices are held. He, his wife, fellow coaches, players and maintenance workers cut up sod, installed and cared for that original field, including late-night

watering trips. The area was an old farm's cleared-out asparagus patch and relatively flat, so it did the job. Today's stadium was constructed in 1969.

Wackar is still involved with the program and its alumni. His 17-season coaching tenure is the longest in school history. "Coach Wackar has done a great deal to keep up the spirit and the contact among the alumni," Rosen said.

One player during Wackar's coaching era typified the Profs program of the '70s and '80s. Dino Hall '79, small in stature but big in heart, led all Division III players in rushing as a senior with an average of 133 yards per game despite standing 5-foot-7, 165 pounds. Hall went undrafted but a fellow alum, then-Browns assistant GM Dennis Lynch '68, got Hall a tryout. Hall, the first pro player to come out of the College's program, went on to a five-year NFL career with the Cleveland Browns and also played a year with the USFL's Portland Breakers.

Other former Profs have toiled on pro practice squads over the years but the ultimate honor came in the 2000 NFL Draft when defensive tackle Tim Watson's name was called as the Seattle Seahawks' sixth-round draft pick—the 185th player selected—making him the first Rowan player to be chosen in the league's annual draft.

After Wackar's reign, Ted Kershner took over the program and the team remained competitive during his seven-

Dino Hall epitomized the heart and desire of the Profs football legacy. The halfback would play five seasons with the NFL's Cleveland Browns. As Rowan's first NFL player, Hall's name stands proudly in the Rowan Sports Hall of Fame.



season head coaching career (35 wins, 34 losses). Kershner, who eventually became the school's athletic director, had been Wackar's offensive coordinator.

Tim Hershey '84 recalled those years as winners. "Coach Kershner was a super guy—he was always willing to do what it takes, both as a coach and as a person," Hershey said. "We had a great time, and winning on the field makes the memories that much better."

With the hiring of former Philadelphia Eagles linebacker John Bunting as Glassboro State's first full-time head football coach in 1988, a new era of football success began. Finally a coach could be 100-percent devoted to developing the team, recruiting players, scouting opponents and more. The full-time effort paid off.

In Bunting's fourth season, 1991, he pushed the Profs to their first-ever appearance in the NCAA Division III Football Tournament. A year later he led Rowan to its first-ever undefeated regular season and a school-record 12 victories. The team's only loss was in the national semifinal game, Bunting's last before he left for an NFL assistant coaching job.

"Coaching at Rowan was a great experience in my life," said Bunting, who came to GSC as a defensive coach under Kershner. "What we accomplished in 1992 had to be the high point of my football career as either a player or coach, right up there with playing in the Super Bowl. I hope that before I get out of coaching, I can have something as close to the satisfaction level that I was able to get at Rowan."

David Wirth '84, offensive player of the year, academic all-American and inductee of Glassboro's Hall of Fame,



Right: The Profs have enjoyed their most successful campaigns yet under Coach K.C. Keeler, who has led the team since 1993. The former offensive coordinator holds the all-time record in wins, and drove the team to five Amos Alonzo Stagg Bowl title games. Only the Division III National Championship has eluded his team's grasp.

credits Bunting for lifting the program. "Coach Bunting is still responsible for the team's success today. He built on the camaraderie our teams had," Wirth said.

The skills Wirth gained on the field have carried over into his life. "I know the work ethic and dedication I learned from football helps me today," he said.

Joe Lopez '88 has found crossover value, too. "Football was a tremendous help for me. Playing at a Division III school, you're not on scholarship so you play for the love of the game. Football helped me develop a commitment to be successful at a personal level," he said, "and that has carried over into my professional life."

With the efforts of committed coaches and players, the squad has reached national levels. "When Bunting came in, he really built the program up nicely," Wackar said. "K.C. Keeler has taken it a step further."

Keeler's coaching era has been a scoreboard success. In his rookie coaching year of 1993, he steered Rowan to its first appearance in the Division III National Championship Game. Four more trips to the Amos Alonzo Stagg Bowl followed over the last six years.

Keeler, the offensive coordinator under John Bunting and an offensive coach during the last couple seasons of Kershner's regime, became the school's all-time leader in coaching victories in 1999 and enters the 2000 season as the winningest coach in school history (70-17-1, .801 winning percentage).

"John Bunting had a tremendous impact on my coaching career," said Keeler, who entered his eighth year in 2000. "We shared an office of about 10-feet-by-10-feet and I loved his intensity and passion."

With all that Rowan football has accomplished, it still is chasing one thing: an NCAA Division III Championship. The team has played for the title five times in the past seven seasons and judging by its consistent improvement, a Bowl win can't be far off.

At press time, football fans throughout the country found Rowan ranked twelfth in Division III. "Once this team got established as a national power, it became a dominant team, and I think it's going to stay that way," said Kershner.

It's contest, camaraderie and college life. From kickoff to last quarter, rallying for Rowan happens across campus and nationwide. A football team—whether you're on it or watching it—unites students and graduates, as one alumnus observed. "I didn't just go to school there," Lopez said. "I really bonded with the institution because of football." ■