

Prep School's resurrected football program is generating excitement



As teammates watch during pre-game warm-ups, St. John's Prep tackle Andrew Mullin (77) leads halfback Will Wittrock around end. The Johnnies were preparing for their football season opener Sept. 1 at Lutheran High School in Bloomington, Minn. Lutheran went on to post a 32-6 non-conference victory. The Johnnies return to action against Elmore at 4 p.m. Friday, Sept. 8, at Clemens Stadium, St. John's University, Collegeville. (SCV photo by Mike Killeen)

by Mike Killeen
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COLLEGEVILLE — Way back in the second millennium, St. John's Preparatory School didn't play football for two seasons.

We're not talking about the dusty past, when real men wore leather helmets and scoreboards were updated manually after each touchdown.

In 1995 and 1996, St. John's Prep didn't have a football team. A lack of students interested in playing caused the school to drop the program.

For some, it was almost like the kiss of death.

"I was worried because I heard that they didn't have football here," recalled Eric Ritter, now a senior at the Prep School. "So, I really didn't want to go here. I could have went to Albany, or come here, or wherever."

But in 1997, the school brought back the sport under head coach Bryan Backes.

"Just when Mr. Backes said he was going to resurrect the football team, it made me turn my head a little bit and help him out," said Ritter, the Johnnies' quarterback.

These days, he has a bit of company. The Johnnies have their largest roster — 30 players — since the program returned. They are playing six varsity games this season, their most since 1997, as an independent team (not playing in any conference).

"It used to be the kind of thing where you didn't want to admit if you were a football player here," Backes said before the season-opener Sept. 1 at Lutheran High School in Bloomington, Minn. "Now, the football players really feel

there's a certain amount of excitement, and you've got kids who want to give it a try for the first time."

Still, the foundation of the team starts with players like Ritter and Damien Dumonceaux, who both were around in the fall of 1997, when the undermanned Johnnies suffered through an 0-8 season playing in the Prairie Conference. They became an independent program the following season.

"Me and Eric, we were thrown right into the heart of the fire," said Dumonceaux, who played as a freshman and is now an offensive tackle/nose guard. "There was no question that we were going to start, because we didn't have the numbers. It was definitely a learning experience."

"Since I've been a freshman, it has been phenomenal how our team has changed," Ritter said. "Instead of going in there and saying, 'Let's just have fun and don't get hurt,' now it's getting the game plan ready and knowing that you have a good chance to win every game."

Backes said he borrows some of his approach from legendary St. John's University coach John Gagliardi. To protect his players from injury, ball carriers are not tackled to the ground during practice. Like Gagliardi, Backes seeks focus and preparation in practice. And, he lets older players like Ritter and Dumonceaux "coach" younger players.

"He (Gagliardi) used to say, 'I don't have any assistant coaches; the seniors are the assistant coaches,'" Backes said. "That's kind of the philosophy we take. The experienced guys learn the stuff, and they pass it on."

"My biggest goal for the

program is that the kids get an authentic high school (playing) experience," Backes said.

But Backes does have some elements that Gagliardi doesn't have to contend with. Each year, St. John's Prep usually has a handful of players new to the game, including foreign exchange students.

"We've had people from all different nationalities playing," Dumonceaux said. "It's fun to get to know how they view our game, American football. It's fun to work with them."

Dumonceaux, a member of St. John the Baptist Parish in Collegeville, thinks it's important to have a football team at the school.

"It kind of keeps the school united. It builds relationships with guys we normally wouldn't have," Dumonceaux said. "It's just a personal thing, but all teams are important. It's all about building relationships that will last into the future, and having a little fun doing it."

"I think it's important to the whole school, because when you have a football game, it brings the community of the school together to watch the team," said Ritter, a member of St. Joseph Parish in St. Joseph.

Backes, a member of St. Paul Parish in St. Cloud, agrees.

"I don't think football has to be a big part of our school, but because of our culture, football and the fall kind of go together," he said. "It's nice that the people around the St. John's Prep community now again feel like they have a rallying point to talk about the team."

"We won one game two straight years, and it has been like we've won the Super Bowl," he added. "The (school's) spirit is a little better."



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