

Coach Tom Harp

1954 - 1955 – Won 17, Lost 2, Tied 1 Years State Champion - 1954

In another time, Tom Harp would be the Bill Johnson, the Jim Dooley and the Phil Bengston of football coaches. He was a decade ahead of those who had to replace legends in multi-championship settings. However, unlike Bill Johnson, who replaced the retired Paul Brown with the Cincinnati Bengals, Jim Dooley who followed George Halas with the Chicago Bears, and Phil Bengston who took over for Vince Lombardi in Green Bay, Harp maintained the gridiron excellence at WHS.



Harp was the second youngest head coach to take over the Tiger program when he was appointed to the post at age 26 in 1954. What did he inherit? Try these facts and figures on for the size of legendary status:

- Six consecutive Associated Press State Championships
- Two straight National Championships
- A 23 game undefeated streak
- A 57-3 record compiled by his predecessor, Chuck Mather

Tom Harp - Massillon Record

Year	Won	Lost	Tied	Points		Ranking
				Mass.	Opp.	
1954	9	1	0	295	66	1st State - AP
1955	8	1	1	262	99	2nd State - AP
Total	17	2	1	557	165	

Winning Percentage
89.5%

Mather's incredible success was due, in part, to his creative use of a coming trend in the preparation of games in the late 1940s and early 1950s – films. He was a pioneer in breaking down the strengths and weaknesses of the Tigers and their opponents, and he helped put Belle and Howell in the motion picture business.

Massillon sought a coach with this ability and dedication to preparation when Mather moved to become head coach at the University of Kansas in 1954. Mather saw firsthand the potential of Harp, who twice led Carrollton High School varsity teams to victories over the Tiger's sophomore teams.

Harp brought just three years of head coaching experience to Massillon, but he was tutored by the best and his time was right. He played for Sid Gillman at Miami University, then after serving two years in the Navy, continued his playing career as a fullback under Ed Sherman at Muskingum College.

More than 100 coaches applied for the Massillon job, but Harp impressed the selection committee with his intention of carrying on with two staples of the Mather Era: the T-formation with the balanced line and the intricate use of films in game preparation.

The 1954 Tiger squad lost six players who earned All-Ohio honors the previous season. Still, running back Homer Floyd and offensive tackle Bob Williams were back to lead the offense, and defensive back Andy Staveroff, who intercepted a school record 8 passes, and a future Ohio State All-American and Cleveland Browns linebacker – Jim Houston – were there to anchor a defense.

The Tigers extended their winning streak to 25 with easy wins over Struthers (68-0) and Canton Lincoln (47-0). The honeymoon, however, was over in the third game when the Tigers lost to Alliance 19-7. Massillon's string of state and national championships was in serious jeopardy of being stopped. Perhaps of more importance was the distinction that Massillon could be defeated.

It was at this moment that Harp's leadership and impeccable preparation helped regroup the Tigers. They breezed through the next five opponents, then were tested by Akron Garfield, 21-13, before facing a Canton McKinley team (that had just beaten Alliance 26-6) at Tiger Stadium.

In this season finale, which would determine Massillon's fate for a seventh straight state championship, it was Floyd who put on a performance for the ages. Running behind a line anchored by second team All-Ohio Bob Williams, Floyd dodged the Pups all afternoon as he ran for 263 yards in leading the Tigers to a 26-6 win.

A 9-1 season was capped by AP's selection of Massillon as Ohio State Champion for an unprecedented seventh straight year.

Harp led the Tigers to an 8-1-1 record in 1955. His ingenuity and 17-2-1 record was recognized by the immortal Earl Blake who hired him as offensive coordinator at the U.S. Military Academy.

Army...Colonel Blake...Top Harp. Yes, Tom Harp upheld the championship flavor of the Massillon Tigers, than continued his coaching career as Assistant at Army and later as head coach at Cornell, Duke and Indiana State University.

Harp had task of following legend Tiger coach picked up where Mather left off by winning state crown

By Joe Shaheen
Independent Sports Writer
(1989 article)

In 1954, the search was on for someone to take over the reigns of the Massillon Tigers from the legendary Chuck Mather. The decision was made to hire 26-year-old coaching prodigy from Carrollton High School.

Top Harp, the second-youngest head coach in the school's history, would have a tough act to follow.

Mather had compiled a 57-3 record, six consecutive state championships and three national titles in six years.

But Harp maintained the unparalleled tradition of gridiron excellence at Washington High School by leading the Tigers to a state championship in 1954 and the runner-up position in 1955.

Two bad center snaps from punt formation in a near blizzard at Fawcett Stadium in '55 cost Harp a second consecutive victory over Canton McKinley and back to back state championships.

The Tigers finished the season 9-1 in 1954 and went 8-1-1 in 1955.

Today Tom Harp is beginning a new era in his career as Director of Sports Marketing and Promotion at the Naval Academy, where he served as an assistant football coach in 1972.

In between, life's road has included coaching stints at West Point (assistant coach for five years), Cornell University (head coach for five years), and Indiana State (head coach for five years).

Harp has also dabbled in radio and television, insurance sales and the restaurant business.

"I spent seven years in the restaurant business, then we sold out a few years ago and I went back to Indiana State as the Director of Sports Marketing," Harp said in a telephone interview from his office at the Navy Academy.

Harp had just moved into a house he built near a lake outside of Terre Haute when Jack Lingle, a former assistant coach, called last May with an interesting proposition.

Lingle, now the Athletic Director at the Naval Academy, offered his former boss a job. Harp accepted and once again it is house hunting time for the Harp family.

Harp's 1954 state champion Tigers boasted All-Ohio selections Homer Floyd at halfback and Bob Williams at offensive tackle.

He remembers that season, especially the devastating 19-7 loss at Alliance which snapped a 25-game Tiger winning streak that spanned parts of four seasons.

“In our first game I was told we were 53-point favorites over Struthers.” Harp said. “Well, I told my staff I’ve never had a team score more than 50 points and then we go out and beat them 68-0.

“You always remember that first game and thank goodness Ducky Schroeder and Elwood Kammer were still around from Coach Mather’s staff. They kept me set

The Harp-coached 1955 Tigers had a pretty fair pair of defensive ends, former Cleveland Browns star Jim Houston and Dave Canary, who has gained a measure of success and fame on stage, screen and television.

Both players attained collegiate All-America status. Houston at Ohio State and Canary at the University of Cincinnati.

Harp says the highlight of his two-year stint in Tigertown was the 1954 win over Canton McKinley.

“They were No. 1 in the state at the time and we beat them pretty good (26-6) at Massillon.

“The next year’s game was on television in a snow storm and the only time they got past midfield was on those two bad snaps. They never threatened the whole game.”

Harp is quick to point out the success of his tenure at Massillon was due in part to the great program established by Mather.

“I remember someone asked me how I was going to improve it (Mather’s program). I figure if someone said you’re going to be in a horserace, I’d rather get on a horse that has been winning, and whip him a little, than get on a horse that was losing.”

With the possible exceptions of the major college rivalries like Army-Navy, Ohio State-Michigan, Alabama-Auburn, Harp says there is nothing that compares to the excitement of a Friday night high school football game.

“In all my years of coaching, I don’t know if I was ever as excited as I was in the week of preparation for the Massillon-McKinley game. Nothing compares, in my experience.”

Harp still is awed by the competition and the quality of the coaches of the 1950’s era of Ohio high school football. He singles out Alliance Aviators’ boss Mel Knowlton for being ahead of his time in perfecting the nuances of the passing game.

“I can’t even blame our (1954) loss on Lenny Dawson, because he’d left Alliance by then. But Knowlton was just a great, great coach.”

While Harp has been back to Massillon several times for visits and alumni gatherings, he hasn’t seen a high school game here since leaving after the 1955 season.

He represents a important page in Washington High gridiron history and Tiger football is still very much a part of Harp's memories nearly 35 years later.