

Looking Back at the OHSAA's Football Championships - No. 3

A centennial moment – Playoffs thru 2008

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As has been mentioned, the system of using the wire service polls to determine the state football champions was much better than what had previously existed, but the poll system also had its faults and detractors. Some schools continually garnered poll votes because they were “supposed to be good,” whether or not they actually were as strong as their record might indicate. The same could be said for a team with a winning “reputation.” Regional biases also occurred in the form of some members of the media, intentionally or not, favoring their local teams, conferences and coverage areas. On the other hand, those teams, conferences and areas without a direct representative among the media voters tended to suffer accordingly from a lack of recognition. For example, Cleveland area fans were especially sensitive to being shortchanged in this way, as no doubt were others, and the smallest schools were left out of the equation altogether, no matter how good they might have been.

This situation, then, led to the third and final phase of state football championship determination, the playoff era that began with the 1972 season. To be technically correct, the playoffs actually began in December of 1971, when the board of the OHSAA voted to establish a football playoff system to determine the state champions. Using the poll nomenclature, all high schools were divided into the three recognized classes of AAA, AA and A, based on their enrollment, with each Class subdivided into four regions. An early computerized system developed by Jack Harbin assigned point values to each school in an attempt to mathematically determine a team’s strength and that of its opponents. At the end of the regular season, the team with the highest point total in each region qualified for the playoffs. In those earliest days of the playoffs, therefore, only 12 teams from the entire state qualified for post-season play - three classes of four regions each - with only one school from each region able to qualify. This system remained unchanged from 1972-1979.

In 1980 the categories of the schools were renamed from “Class” to “Division,” and were increased in number from three to five, with Division I representing the biggest schools, down to Division V for the smallest. Each division was still broken down into four regions, but now the top two schools in each region qualified for the playoffs, for a grand total of 40 schools now eligible for the post-season. In 1985 a further expansion of eligible schools took place when it was decided that the top four schools in each region would make the playoffs, doubling the number of qualifying schools to 80. In 1994 a sixth division was created, adding 16 more schools to the state football tournament.

Finally, in 1999 the number of qualifying schools was again doubled when it was determined that the top eight teams in each region would play for a state championship, for a grand total of 192 teams.

The AP polls are still with us. In the pre-playoff days the polls provided us with what is known as the “mythical” state champion, because the title had not been decided on the field of play. With the coming of the playoffs the question as to who is the best can now be decided on the gridiron. However, it is very natural to ask just how accurate the current polls are. Are the teams ranked #1 in the polls really the best in their division? The answer to that is: only sometimes.

Of the 143 teams that have finished first in the AP polls in their respective class/division since the playoff era began in 1972, only 47, or 33%, have lived up to that lofty rating by also winning the playoff championship. In no year has every poll winner gone on to also win the playoff title, and in a few seasons none of the poll champions were able to also take home a playoff title.

The playoffs have also served to vindicate the ability of many teams. It goes without saying that many teams in Divisions III-IV-V-VI would probably have never received the credit due them had it not been for the playoffs. The same can, to a lesser degree, be said for the entire city of Cincinnati. Not one Queen City team was ever named a poll champion, in any class, in the 25 years of the poll era. In fact, no Cincinnati team had ever been named state football champion since champions were first declared back in 1895. All that, however, has changed with the coming of the playoffs. In the 34 years of the playoffs (thru 2005), Cincinnati teams have taken home a total of 19 state championship trophies.

Whether you hail from a small school or a big city school, the playoffs have certainly made it a level playing field and truly allowed the cream to rise to the top.

While every school in the state has not qualified for the football playoffs, almost all of them have. Of the 713 schools that support a football team, approximately 610 have at one time or another enjoyed the excitement of post-season play. Some have made this trip just once, and one school made the most of its singular opportunity. In 1974, the Truckers of Norwalk High School fell behind Louisville St. Thomas Aquinas 10-0 early in the second quarter of the Class AA final. The Truckers regrouped, and over the next two quarters ran off 20 unanswered points to lead 20-10 heading into the last quarter of play. St. Thomas made it a 20-17 game early in the fourth quarter, but midway through the period the Truckers' John McCarty scored on a 12-yard touchdown run. That TD sealed Norwalk's 27-17 victory, giving the Truckers a Class AA state championship in their only playoff appearance to date.

At the other end of the championship spectrum are the powerhouse, dynasty teams. These are the teams that have dominated their division, or divisions in some cases, for a number of years before finally relinquishing what looked to be a strangle hold on the championship trophy.

The first of these great playoff teams comes from one of the relatively new schools in the state. Archbishop Moeller High School opened its doors in September of 1960, and fielded its first varsity football team in 1963. From the get-go the Crusaders were winners for coach Gerry Faust, losing only 14 games in their first 10 seasons, while twice posting perfect 10-0-0 records. Moeller first qualified for the Class AAA playoffs in 1973 and 1974, but lost its first round (semi-final) game each time. It would be a completely different story over the next ten seasons.

In 1975 the Crusaders posted another 10-0-0 regular season record, but this time their success would carry over into the playoffs. In the finals against Lakewood St. Edward, the Crusaders held on for a 14-12 victory and their first state championship. In 1976 it was more of the same - another perfect regular season and a second straight Class AAA title. In 1977 coach Faust's boys successfully completed the hat trick. After posting a fifth consecutive undefeated regular season, the Crusaders dominated Toledo Central Catholic 42-14 in the Class AAA semifinals. It would not be as easy against Canton McKinley in the finals, but the Crusaders got the job done by a score of 14-2.

The Crusaders' win streak was halted at 37 in the second game of the 1978 season. That loss, to Cincinnati Princeton by a single point, 13-12, not only cost the Crusader's another perfect season, but it also kept them from making the playoffs. But in 1979 coach Faust had his team back on track as the Crusaders again went 12-0 to win another state title.

In 1980, the first expansion of the playoffs meant that a team now had to win three playoff games in order to take home the top prize. Not a problem for the Crusaders, who posted their first 13-win season and took home the Division I championship hardware with a 30-7 victory over Massillon Washington. In 1981 the Crusaders were again perfect - until the last game. This time, in a rematch of their 1977 title game encounter with Canton McKinley, it would be the

Bulldogs coming out on top, as they handed the Crusaders their first shutout since 1972, 13-0. Moeller, now playing under coach Steve Klone, bounced right back in 1982 by posting a perfect 13-0 season and winning another Division I championship. The Crusaders lost first round playoff games in both 1983 and 1984, but in 1985 they successfully regrouped to win their seventh state championship.

From 1975-1985 the Crusaders had won seven Class AAA/Division I state football titles, and had been named national champions five times. The run was now over, but the standard had been set.

While we normally identify a state power with an extended run of success like that enjoyed by Moeller in the '70s and '80s, that is not always the scenario. Take the example of Benedictine High School. A power in the Greater Cleveland area for more than a half century, the Bengals are the only team to win a playoff championship in every decade that the playoffs have been held.

Under legendary coach Augie Bossu, the Bengals first qualified for the playoffs in 1973, and promptly won the Class AA state title. It would take Benedictine seven years to return to post-season play, but then they would win back-to-back titles, in two different divisions. In 1980, the Bengals handed Hamilton Badin its first loss of the season in winning the Division III title game, 9-3. The next year, having moved up to Division II, coach Bossu's defense scored two touchdowns as the Bengals overcame Trotwood Madison's early 7-0 lead to come away with a 28-7 championship game victory.

Over the next 15 seasons Benedictine would qualify for the playoffs seven times, but the Bengals would have to wait until 1996 to win their fourth state championship, a 14-3 victory over Columbus DeSales in the Division III final.

Since '96 the Bengals have qualified for the playoffs all but three times, and have advanced to the Division III championship game three more times. In 2002 the Bengals lost to Columbus Watterson, 28-7, in the title game, but each of the next two seasons they took home the championship hardware. In 2003, not even Kenton's great quarterback Ben Mauk could keep the Bengals from a state championship, as Benedictine's defense shut down Mauk while defeating the Wildcats by a score of 12-0. The next year it would be St. Mary's Memorial losing to Benedictine in the Division III final, 27-14, as the Bengals took home their sixth state championship – the third most titles in the state.

Benedictine may not win the title every season, but there is a reason for that sign over the school entrance that reads "The Home of Champions."

Benedictine has shown that you do not have to be one of the so called "big schools" to win championships, and a school with one-third the number of boys as Benedictine in some regards may possess the most successful playoff era football team of all. Newark Catholic High School has only 111 boys and plays in Division V, but the Green Wave has practically made the playoffs their own personal second season. In the 34 years that Ohio has had the football playoffs, the Green and White has qualified for the post-season an unbelievable 28 times.

Once they are in the playoffs, Newark Catholic is not satisfied with just sticking around for the proverbial cup of coffee. The Green Wave has advanced to the championship game more times than any other school in the state, playing for Division V honors a record 12 times. Over one eight year stretch, 1980 to 1987, they advanced to the finals each season, winning five of those eight championship games, including a then record four in a row (1984-1987). The Green Wave has also won titles in 1978 and 1991, tying them with Moeller for the second most state championships at seven.

Beginning in 1985 another small school started its own fabulous run of success, across two different divisions. Playing in Division IV, the Versailles Tigers steadily advanced through the playoffs each season, finally making it to the championship game in 1988. They lost that one to Canton Central Catholic, 21-6. In 1989 the Tigers lost out in the semi-

finals; but, coach Al Hetrick's team finally struck gold in 1990 when they defeated Loudonville, 29-26, in a very exciting Division IV championship game.

The 1991 and 1992 seasons were off years for the Tigers as they failed to qualify for the playoffs, but they were hardly finished winning state championships. After losing its season opener in 1993, Versailles won out over the rest of the season to finish 13-1 and win its second state title. The following year the Tigers moved to Division V, where their win streak reached 27 in a row as they won a second straight title. In 1995 Versailles was back again in Division IV. Another 14-0 season stretched their win streak to 41 in a row, but it very nearly did not happen. In two of the three playoff games leading to the state title game the Tigers won by just a single point. In the Division IV championship game that season, the Tigers had to battle Bellaire's Big Red through two overtime periods before finally coming away with a 50-44 victory and their third consecutive football championship. In 1996 Versailles ran its win streak to 54 in a row before seeing it all come to an end with a 26-14 defeat at the hands of Marion Pleasant in the Division V title game.

Coach Al Hetrick's Tigers have qualified for the playoffs six of the last nine years. In 1998 they again took top honors in Division V, and in 2003 and 2004 they played for the title in Division IV. They lost in '04, but in 2003 the Tigers took home state championship trophy #6. Only four schools in Ohio have won as many state titles as the Versailles Tigers.

If you measure success simply by state championships, then the hands down winner in Ohio is Cleveland's St. Ignatius Wildcats. While the Wildcats have been a power in the Cleveland area since the late 1940s, and playing football for more than 90 years, they are a relative newcomer to the world of Ohio playoff football. A newcomer, yes, but hardly unsuccessful. The Wildcats did not advance to Division I post-season play until 1988, but since then they have not missed a year, playing in a state record 21 (thru 2008) consecutive playoffs.

Once St. Ignatius did make the playoffs it looked as if not only would they never leave, but that no one would ever beat them. In both 1988 and 1989 the Wildcats won all eight of their playoff games to win back-to-back Division I titles, as well as the national championship in '89. In 1990 they lost their first round playoff game, but that proved to be merely a fluke. From 1991 thru 1995 coach Chuck Kyle's Wildcats won 20 consecutive playoff games, leading to an incredible five consecutive Division I championships, perhaps the greatest playoff era accomplishment to date. In 1993 and 1995, Coach Kyle's team also added two more national championships to its trophy case.

The Wildcats' playoff win streak hit 23 in a row before they were defeated by Lima Senior High School in the 1996 championship game, 38-30. The Wildcats continued to make the playoffs each season, but did not return to the Division I finals again until 1999. Led by sophomore quarterback Nate Szep, starting his very first varsity game in the Division I championship game due to an injury to regular starter Bryan Panteck, the Wildcats defeated a tough Huber Heights Wayne team, 24-10, to earn a record eighth state championship.

In 2000, the Wildcats seemed destined to win another state title when they were upset in the regional finals by the Comets of Solon High School. In 2001 the scenario was quite different. The Wildcats completed the regular season at 6-4 and just barely qualified for the playoffs on the very last day of the season. The playoffs are often referred to as a second season, and the 2001 Wildcats took full advantage of this fact. Averaging just under 45 points per game, the Wildcats destroyed some of the state's top Division I teams along the playoff trail. In the finals St. Ignatius even manhandled Cincinnati St. Xavier, which had defeated St. Ignatius during the regular season. The Wildcats made it look easy as they defeated the Bombers in that title game by a score of 37-6 to bring home an unprecedented ninth state football championship.

From 2002 to 2007 victories were a bit hard to come by for St. Ignatius, but they continued to make the playoffs every year. In 2008, after an opening night loss to Glenville the Wildcats ran off 14 consecutive victories, culminated by a 28-20 victory over Cincinnati Elder in the Division I championship game – the Wildcats 10th state title.

The playoffs have added five weeks to the high school football season, but you will hear few, if any, complaints from those schools that have qualified for post-season play. In the big cities it is the individual school where most of the excitement takes place. However, it is a much different story for the schools in some of Ohio's smaller communities. There, when the local team makes the playoffs it is like the 4th of July and the Super Bowl all rolled into one. Everyone in town gets behind the team, and it does not matter whether the team is the first seed or the eighth, just making the playoffs is all that matters. Of course, they all hope – and expect – that their team will go all the way to a state championship; but, whether or not they bring home a state title, or bow out in the first round, for as long as their team is in the playoffs they are the local heroes and will remain so until the next season rolls around, and perhaps beyond.

