Looking Back at the Ohio Football Championships - No. 4

A centennial moment - National Champions thru 2008

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It seems that every Fall the debate resumes: which state has the best high school football? Many claim that honor belongs to the Lone Star State of Texas, while California, Pennsylvania, and Florida also have their solid backers. However, the numbers tell it all, and when you look at the numbers there can only be one answer: OHIO.

National champions in high school football have been named since 1897. At first this was not a yearly thing, but since 1910 only the war years of 1917, 1944 and 1945 have passed without a national high school football champion being named. These champions have come from 23 different states. Of the 128 schools (thru 2008) that have been named, or shared, the title of national champion, 27, or a whopping 21%, have come from the Buckeye State. To illustrate how dominating a figure that is, the state with the next most champions is California with 16, while Texas has 15 and only two other states can claim as many as ten national champions.

Ohio's national champions have not been limited to any certain period of time. The first titleholder, Fostoria High School, won its title back in 1912, while Ohio's most recent national champion, Canton McKinley's Bulldogs, grabbed top honors in 1997. In every decade between those two years, a total of eight Ohio high schools have been good enough to place national championship hardware in their trophy cases. Leading the way with a national record of nine titles is Massillon Washington High School, followed by Cincinnati Moeller (5), Toledo Scott (4), Cleveland St. Ignatius (3), Toledo Waite (2), Canton McKinley (2), East Cleveland Shaw (1) and Fostoria (1).

While each of these schools has had its own era of national prominence, the fact that an Ohio school is always somewhere near the top of the national charts is the most telling evidence for the outstanding quality and consistency of the high school football played in the state. Furthermore, it is not just the so-called big schools that have garnered this national acclaim. Several of the teams from Ohio's smaller school divisions have been good enough to occasionally land on the national charts as well, demonstrating that football excellence in the state is not limited to just a few, or to just one division.

Today we have what are called the "mythical" national champions in high school football because the winners are taken from the various nationwide polls, rather than winning their title on the field of play. However, believe it or not, in the earliest days of high school football the national championships were actually decided on the gridiron, and Ohio schools were in the thick of it. From 1897-1927 a total of 16 games were played that are today recognized as having been for the national championship. Ohio schools were very involved in these games, having played in ten of them. Our record was a good one, too, as Ohio high schools posted five victories and one tie, while losing just four times.

The first national championship game took place in 1897, when the team from Madison (Wisc.) High School defeated North Tonawanda (N.Y.) High School by a score of 14-0 to claim that first national championship. It would not be for another seven years before another national champion was named, and this, too, would be as the result of a championship game. That game, played in Saturday, November 5, 1904, would pit a couple of "neighbors" against each other, Toledo Central High School against Detroit Central High School. In this late afternoon game the Toledoans scored

a first quarter touchdown, but missed the "goal kick" to leave the score at 5-0 (touchdowns were only worth five points back then). Later in the first half the Detroiters recovered a Toledo fumble and returned the ball 55 yards for the game tying TD. The Detroiters made their goal kick to take a 6-5 lead. That was how the game would end, one in which the final ten minutes were "played in almost total darkness," there being no lights for the gridiron in '05. (The first night game to be played under the lights in Ohio would not come until October of 1929 in Cleveland, when St. Ignatius defeated Holy Name by a score of 24 to 7.)

In 1912, the Redmen of Fostoria High School under the direction of their great coach Lawrence C. Boles, were on their way to a third consecutive state championship, and scoring points almost faster than the guy running the scoreboard could post them. In their eight games they would amass 596 points, for an unbelievable average of 74½ points per game, while yielding zero. Twice they scored more than 100 points, defeating Crestline High School, 131-0, and Prairie Depot by 103-0. When a game was arranged with Buffalo (N.Y.) Central High School, one of the better teams in the east, to decide the national championship, it was hoped that the Redmen would finally face some stiff competition.

New team, same score. It was not even close as the Redmen's vaunted passing attack destroyed the New Yorkers by the team's weekly average, 74-0. How good was this Fostoria team that ran up one of the greatest point differentials in national high school football history? George Little, then the head football coach at the University of Cincinnati and who had officiated at several Fostoria games during the season, said that Fostoria had the best passing attack of any team he had ever seen (only six years after the forward pass had been legalized) and that the Redmen could defeat the majority of the college teams in Ohio.

Fostoria shared the national title that season with the team from Oak Park (Ill.) High School, which defeated the team from Everett, Mass., 32-14, in another national championship game.

From 1916-1923, Toledo's Scott High School possessed quite possibly the most dominant high school football team in the nation, during an era that saw the emergence of several great high school teams around the country. Scott also has the distinction of having never lost a national championship football game – and they played in four of them, more than any other school in the country

In 1916, Coach Tom Merrell's team put its 9-0-0 record (which already included victories over teams from Michigan, Pennsylvania and Illinois) on the line when it traveled to Massachusetts via rail. There they would take on Haverhill High School of the Boston area on Saturday, December 9, before some 7,000 mostly local fans – although a contingent of Scott loyalists had also taken the train to Massachusetts for the game. The weather was perfect for football, even if the warmer temperatures of the early afternoon thawed an early season frost, making the field just a bit slippery. Scott took a 7-0 lead in the first quarter, then added another six-pointer in the final frame to post its sixth shutout of the season, 13-0, to claim its first national championship.

In 1919 Scott High again really earned its national championship. After playing, and defeating, a slate of seven teams from around Ohio and Michigan, the Bulldogs again traveled to Massachusetts, where it defeated the team from Somerville High School, 13-0, for the right to travel to the other side of the country to play for the national championship. The Toledoans were supposed to play the California champions from Long Beach, but that game fell through at the last minute. Instead, they journeyed up the coast to Everett, Washington, for a game with that city's team, one of the best contingents on the west coast, if not the whole country. The contest was a bitter struggle that ended in a 7-7 deadlock. Both teams shared the national title that year, along with the team from Harrisburg, Pa. (12-0, outscoring the opposition 701-0).

The following year Everett (Wash.) High School again played a team from Ohio for the national title, Cleveland's East Tech High School. Unfortunately for the Scarabs, it was a long trip that ended in a 16-7 defeat.

In 1923, Scott High School played host to the team from Washington High School of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in another game billed as being for the national championship. Played before some 20,000 spectators at Toledo's new stadium, the locals were stunned as Cedar Rapids' Elmer Marek scored 21 points within a 10 minute span of the third period to tie the game at 21-all. But with just 36 seconds to play, Scotts' captain, Eddie Evans, booted the field goal that gave Scott High School a 24-21 victory.

The season was apparently now over for Scott, until the challenge came from undefeated Columbia Prep of Corvallis, Oregon, which also wanted to play Scott to decide the national title. That game, played on January 1, 1924, was a bit anti-climatic when compared to the game against Washington High. After a slow start, in which Scott led 6-0 at the half, the Ohioans poured it on in the second session to come away with a 32-0 victory.

And this time there were no more challengers, the national championship was theirs - almost. That same year, Shaw High School of East Cleveland hosted the team from Salem (Mass.) High School, the only undefeated team in the Bay State. Before some 12,000 fans at Shaw Stadium, the East Clevelanders handily swept aside their visitors by a score of 26-0. Toledo Scott and Shaw are recognized as co-national (and Ohio) champions for 1923.

In 1924 there was no recognized game for the national championship, but if ever a team had earned that title it was the team from Scott High School's archrival from across town, Waite High School. You will probably never find a more truly national schedule than that of the 1924 Waite football team. Off their ten games, only three were played in Ohio, the rest being composed of teams from Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Tennessee, Louisiana and Massachusetts. Waite no doubt clinched the national title when they defeated two-time defending champion Scott, 13-6, in their next to last game. They then added an exclamation point to the season by thrashing one-time national power, Everett (Mass.) High School, in their season finale, 46-0. (Yes, strange as it may seem, two high schools with the name "Everett," one from Washington and the other from Massachusetts, were national powers at roughly the same time.)

After owning the national championship for three years, 1922-1924, Ohio fell out of the picture until 1927. That year, undefeated state champion Cleveland Cathedral Latin was challenged by the team from Waco (Tex.) High School to play in Texas for the national championship. The game was played on December 26. The Latins, not having had their uniforms on for almost three weeks, and not having practiced outdoors for that same period due to the weather in Cleveland, held their own early in the game. But eventually Waco's superior size and conditioning, and the sweltering 80+ degrees in Waco's Cow Palace Arena, finally got to the Clevelanders as they lost the game, 44-12. In this, the last game recognized as a national high school championship game, Cathedral Latin became the only private school to play for national honors.

The 1930s were anything but depressing for Ohio high school football fans, as Ohio teams dominated the national polls throughout the decade. In 1932, Toledo Waite (12-0) won its second national championship, sharing the title with the team from New Rochelle, N.Y. In 1934 Canton McKinley went 11-0 to win its first national championship. The next two years the Bulldogs' archrivals, Massillon Washington, dominated the national scene as Paul Brown's Tigers posted back-to-back undefeated seasons to capture consecutive national titles. The Tigers came back to again post back-to-back national championship seasons under Coach Brown in 1939 and 1940.

That championship posted by the Tigers in 1940 would prove to be Ohio's only national title that decade, but in the early '50s the Tigers, now playing under head coach Chuck Mather, were once again back at it. From 1948 thru 1953, Mather's Tigers won 57 of 60 games, adding national championships in 1950, 1952 and 1953. Later in the decade, under the guidance of Coach Leo Strang, the Tigers took home a national championship in 1959, and again in 1961.

From 1962 to 1975 Ohio would experience its longest period, 14 seasons, without a national champion, but all of that would come to a screeching halt in 1976 with the emergence of the Cincinnati Moeller Crusaders under the leadership of head coach Gerry Faust. Moeller won national championships in 1976, 1977, 1979, 1980 and 1982, becoming only the second parochial school to do so.

In 1989, Cleveland's St. Ignatius Wildcats became only the third parochial school to grab national honors, and coach Chuck Kyle's Wildcats repeated as national champions in 1993 and 1995. For their efforts and outstanding success the Wildcats were named the national "Team of the Decade" for the 1990s by Student Sports magazine.

Ohio's most recent national championship is owned by the Bulldogs of Canton McKinley, Coach Thom McDaniels' team taking the nation's top spot in 1997.

With the outstanding caliber of high school football that is yearly demonstrated throughout the Buckeye State, it is only a matter of time before another Ohio high school rests atop the national charts.