Looking Back at the Ohio Football Championships - No. 2

A centennial moment - **Polls**

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The wire services – Associated Press (AP), United Press International (UPI), International News Service (INS) – began doing a weekly poll of college football's top teams in 1936. The idea of doing this with the state teams, in our case Ohio, finally took hold in 1947. No longer would a school be able to simply "declare" itself state champion, or challenge any other school to play them to decide the issue. Now, a poll of sportswriters and broadcasters from around the state would decide the issue based on their expertise. Although this would eliminate a lot of exciting late season match-ups, it did add some much needed organization and stability to the state championship process.

The International News Service put out its state football poll for only a few years, before merging with United Press International. However, it was mainly the Associated Press whose poll determined the state champ, while the United Press International also put out a state football poll from 1953 until about 1971.

Whether or not this was the best way to determine the state champion can be endlessly debated, but it was the system in use from 1947 thru 1971. In part because of some of the flaws that were seen in this system (for example, teams locked into league schedules or playing all of their games against local opposition, etc., often felt that they were "penalized" in the poll for not playing a more varied schedule), is why we now have the playoffs for determining the state football champions.

Since the team from Cleveland's Central High School was named the first state champion back in 1895, every team recognized as the state football champion had come from a city in the northern half of the state. From 1934 to 1946 the titleholders were centered even closer to the state's "north coast," coming as they did from either Stark or Cuyahoga County. Little would change in this regard during the first 20 years of the "poll era." In fact, during those years the teams from Stark County would have a virtual lock on the state championship, much to the dismay of some who thought otherwise (and thus adding more fuel to the growing playoff fire).

When the final rankings came out that first poll season of 1947, the Magics of Barberton High School were sitting at #1 – the only time that the Magics would win a state football championship. Following in order from 2-10 that year were Elyria High School (ranked #1 in the INS poll), Canton McKinley, Cathedral Latin, Columbus West, Hamilton Public, Warren Harding, Salem High School, Upper Sandusky and Toledo Libbey.

In 1948 Chuck Mather took over as the head football coach at Massillon Washington. Mather was not Paul Brown coaching under another name, but you probably would have had a hard time convincing the Tigers' opponents that Mr. Brown was no longer in Massillon. Coach Mather got off to a faster start than even the great coach Brown had enjoyed. With a record of 9-1-0, the Tigers were named state champions in Mather's first season of 1948, after having been out of the top spot for the five previous years. Their lone loss had been a 14-7 defeat at the hands of #7 Alliance.

The Tigers would go on to reign as Ohio's top schoolboy football team for the next six seasons, five of them under the direction of Chuck Mather, the only coach in state history to lead a team for at least six seasons and win a state title each time.

In 1949 the Tigers again finished 9-1-0, but that lone defeat was not enough to cost them their top billing in the AP poll. That loss, a 16-12 decision, came at the hands of Mansfield Senior High School, which had been voted #1 in the INS poll, but only came in second in the AP balloting. In 1950 the Tigers took no chances, and no prisoners, as they posted a perfect 10-0-0 season to win a third consecutive state title, as well as being named the national champions. In 1951 Massillon slipped to 9-1-0, this time a 19-13 loss to Warren Harding costing them a perfect season. Nonetheless, the Tigers were again ranked #1 in the AP poll to claim a fourth consecutive state championship. Warren Harding finished seventh.

The 1952 and 1953 seasons probably rank right up there with 1935 and 1936 in Massillon football history. Two consecutive perfect 10-0-0 seasons, two consecutive state championships (ranked #1 by both AP and UPI), and two more national titles.

The Tigers cruised through most of the 1952 campaign, but in week #5 they again came up against the Alliance Aviators, this time led by their great quarterback, Len Dawson. Even though Dawson sat out practice all week with a sore left shoulder, come game day he gave the Tigers almost more than they could handle. However, it would be a couple of second half kickoff returns for touchdowns that would save the Tigers this day. Massillon led 14-7 at the half and was on the receiving end of the second half kickoff. The Tigers' John Francisco took the ball four yards deep in his own end zone and returned it all the way for a 104-yard score and a 21-7 Massillon lead. Len Dawson brought the Aviators right back to make it 21-14, but on the ensuing kickoff Lee Nussbaum returned the ball 77-yards for another Massillon TD. Len Dawson would add a third touchdown for Alliance on a short run, but that would end the scoring, leaving Massillon with a heart pounding 27-21 victory.

The 1953 season would see the Tigers even more dominating. While the offense averaged 40 points per game, the defense only allowed one team to score more than seven points, with the team's lowest margin of victory being 21 points. Chuck Mather's team rolled to its 17th state title and seventh national championship.

Tom Harp replaced Chuck Mather in 1954, Mather going on to the college ranks as the head coach at Kansas University. Harp's Tigers stumbled in week three, suffering a 19-7 set back at the hands of the Alliance Aviators. However, they rebounded to win their last seven games and gain a seventh consecutive poll championship, finishing first in both the AP and UPI polls. The "Tiger Tamers" from Alliance finished second.

In 1955 and 1956 the Massillon Tigers would relinquish their top spot in the polls to Stark County neighbor and archrival Canton McKinley. Under the direction of coach Wade Watts, the Bulldogs were unstoppable both seasons as they outscored the opposition by an average score of 44-5. In 1955, the Bulldogs' 13-7 victory over Massillon in a driving snowstorm cost the Tigers a state title as they finished second in the polls to McKinley. In 1956, McKinley scored 490 points and no one was exempt from their scoring onslaught, which they proved by drubbing Massillon 34 to 7 in the season finale.

In 1957 the state championship momentarily left Stark County when Cleveland's Benedictine High School won its first state title as coach Augie Bossu's Bengals dominated both polls.

From 1958 to 1964 the championship hardware spent most of its time back in Stark County, but those teams were beginning to loose their tight fisted grasp on the state title. Alliance finished atop the AP poll in '58, but shared state honors with UPI winner Marion Harding. In '59 and '60 Massillon Washington took first place in both polls, but in 1961 Niles McKinley gained the top spot in the UPI poll, while Massillon again grabbed top honors in the AP poll. In 1962 a powerful Toledo Central Catholic squad took top honors in both polls, while Niles McKinley did likewise in '63, with Massillon back on top in '64.

In 1965 two big changes occurred with the polls. The first was the dividing of the schools into two classes, AA and A, based on enrollment. For the first time, the smaller schools around the state, put into Class A, would now get the recognition due them that the bigger schools, Class AA, had been pretty much keeping to themselves.

The second change was that the center of Ohio high school football, at least as far as the "big school" Class AA was concerned, began a gradual, but prolonged, shift to the south.

For the moment, however, in 1965 it was still "business as usual" in Class AA as Massillon Washington gained the top ranking.

In Class A in 1965 it was time for some real celebrating by some of the state's smaller schools, as teams that had never before even dreamed of making the top ten, much less being named "State Champion," finally had a well earned day in the sun. The honor of being named the first Class A State Champion went to Dover St. Joseph High School, while the following schools rounded out that first Class A top ten: Marion Catholic, Millersport High School, Hartville Lake, Hanoverton United, Johnstown-Monroe, Fairport Harbor, Lancaster Fenwick, Frankfort Adena and Portsmouth Notre Dame.

Over the next four seasons many of the same teams that had made the first Class A top ten would repeat. While no school repeated as Class A champion during those years (Marion Harding, 1966; Portsmouth Notre Dame, 1967; Newark Catholic, 1968, Norwalk St. Paul, 1969), this repetition of top ten entries only further fueled the call for some kind of a state football playoff system.

Getting back to Class AA, the Stark County hold on the poll championship came to a decisive halt in 1966 when Columbus Bishop Watterson High School finished first in both the AP and UPI polls. The Columbus area then seized the poll championship by the throat with the arrival of those great teams from Upper Arlington High School to close out the decade.

The Golden Bears of 1967-1970 are some of the greatest teams in Ohio high school football history. In 1967-68-69 the Golden Bears put up identical 10-0-0 seasons, finishing first in both polls all three seasons. In 1970 the Bears again had a perfect season, 10-0-0, but failed to convince the media experts voting in the polls that they were still the state's best big school football team. The nod that year went to another 10-0-0 team, the Massillon Tigers, with Upper Arlington finishing what had to be a very disappointing second. Disappointing not because of how they played, but because they were still undefeated – yet dropped a place in the polls. The Golden Bears finally lost a game in early 1971, but not before extending their phenomenal win streak to 42 in a row.

That 1970 season saw yet another change to the polls when the schools were further divided into three classes – AAA (big schools), AA (mid-size schools), A (smallest schools). This further breakdown of the classifications made it possible for more schools to participate in the glories of high school football by making the polls even more relative to schools and their size. The Class AA poll champion for 1970 was New Lexington High School, and the Class A title holder was Portsmouth Notre Dame.

The 1971 season would be the last in which the state football champions were determined by the polls. The polls would remain and are still with us, but with the coming of the OHSAA sanctioned playoffs, that format would now be used to determine the official state football champions. The final poll state champions were: Class AAA – Warren Harding, Class AA – Steubenville Catholic Central, Class A – Marion Pleasant.