

To find a State Champion in football from Bridgewater – Raritan High School one must look back to 1974. That was the year when the B/R “East” High School (there were two High Schools 1966-1991) won the Central Jersey Group III State Championship.

The East “Minutemen”, as they were called, came into that season looking to avenge the past season as they had the first losing season (3-6) since the school opened in 1966. Almost all the starters in 1974 were seniors who had played together for 4 years. Thus there was a lot of unity and cohesion among the players. They had several excellent coaches. George Greiner was the “head coach”, Jim Norton was the “end coach”, Dave Adams was the “linebacker coach”, and Coach Bodino was the “defensive coordinator”.

The team was led by All-County running backs Jeff Vanderbeek and Ken Siegrist. The Minutemen’s offensive mostly ran the ball. Quarterback Dan Wilbur only passed around six times a game. But the occasional pass thrown seemed to catch their opponents off guard as their average yard per completion was high and a good percentage of the few passes they threw went for touchdowns.

The offensive line would boast two All-County players - Tackle Jeff Koch and Center Ed Sandora. The defense was very well balanced. While no defensive players made the First Team All-County, six defensive players made the Second or Third Team All-County. These were Linemen Andy Voss and Rich Mroz, Linebackers Bill Wolfe and Rich Shoolbraid, and defensive backs Mike Brophy and Steve Sacco.

The season:

Watchung - In the opener the East Minutemen showed they would be a force to be reckoned with when they trounced the previous year’s conference champion Watchung 28-8. They took the opening drive in for a score and never looked back. Ken Siegrist led the team in rushing yardage while scoring two touchdowns.

Somerville – In the second game of the season they romped over crosstown rival Somerville 40-0. In this game they scored on all kinds of plays – starting with a tackle-eligible pass to (tackle) Andy Voss. Soon after that from midfield quarterback Dan Wilbur hit Vanderbeek on a short pass and he ran the rest of the way for a 58 yard touchdown. The defense scored twice. First, Rich Shoolbraid fell on a fumble in the end zone. Then defensive back Steve Sacco ran an interception back for a touchdown.

Hunterdon Central - The third game against Hunterdon Central would see them down 6-8 at halftime. But in the second half the defense made 4 interceptions. The offense followed these turnovers up with scoring drives. Vanderbeek ran for 134 yards. W 28-8.

Franklin – This would prove to be the game of the year. Against one of the toughest teams in the conference they found themselves down 20-0 at halftime. The players today still remember the scene in the locker room. Coach Greiner was not happy. He told the guys that they simply were not playing football – and that he as coach was wasting his time. With that he walked out of the locker room leaving the team to ponder and discuss things on their own. Greiner indeed chose an effective strategy as the team came charging out in the second half scoring on their first three possessions. Vanderbeek made long touchdown runs on two of these drives. W 28-20.

South Plainfield – Here Vanderbeek had his usual outstanding day with 127 yards on 22 rushes with two touchdowns. The defense set up one score when Andy Voss blocked a punt. Then the defense scored one when Rich Shoolbraid ran back an interception for a touchdown. W 28-15

Piscataway – Everything went wrong in their one loss of the season. While Piscataway scored 5 touchdowns, they almost never drove the ball down the field. Piscataway scored one on a blocked punt, then another on a fumble return, and then they had a 95 yard pass play. Coach Greiner would say “we beat ourselves – they capitalized on the breaks.” L 14-32.

Clark – On the first play of the game Vandeerbeek scored on a 72 yard run. Ken Siegrist later added two touchdowns. It was an all-out romp, even backup quarterback Steve Scagliotta got on the board when he threw a 28 yard touchdown pass to Chris Raffo. W 34-0.

North Plainfield – The game was a scoreless tie for over three quarters. In the fourth quarter Jeff Vanderbeek caught a pass from Dan Wilbur and raced to the end zone for a 56 yard score. Wilbur later would combine runs of 32 yards and 1 yard for the other touchdown.

B/R West – The traditional Thanksgiving Day Game was a rout over B/R West – a team that did not have a win all season. W 44-0. But the thing that East was most thankful for that day was that Piscataway (who already had one loss) had tied their game and thus the East Minuteman were conference champions and could be chosen to play in the Central Jersey State Champion Game.

1974 was the first year for playoffs in New Jersey High School Football. This first year would see just one playoff game per group. The two top teams were chosen to play similar to the way the College Football BCS Championship Game was from 1999 - 2014. The New Jersey Sports Authority rankings showed B/R East and Carteret as the two top teams. They would play in the Central Jersey Championship Game at Convention Hall in Atlantic City.

There were several unique aspects to the championship game. First, the game was broadcast on local television – a big deal back in 1974. Second, it was played “inside”. Finally, Convention Hall, a multi-purpose facility, had a cement floor. So for the football game they placed several inches of sod overtop. But something was not right about the sod. It would loosen up after it was ran on. Thus to keep the field in good condition, after each play, a team of groundkeepers ran onto the field to quickly pack down any sod that had loosened up on the previous play.

The Championship Game started with the East Minutemen receiving the opening kickoff. They quickly showed their much larger opponents (Carteret averaged 230 pounds per lineman) who the better team was as they marched down the field for a touchdown. In the second quarter East linebacker Dave Schultz intercepted a pass and ran it to the eight yard line. A couple plays later Jeff Vanderbeek ran in for the score. Their final touchdown came in the fourth quarter as Wilbur’s only pass completion of the day (he threw just 3 passes) went for a touchdown to Fred Kunze. Final was 20-6.

Coach George Greiner summed up the season best by saying “We won because we had unity. Our team had unity, and our coaches had unity, and our teachers and students were all behind us.”

To see photos and articles about this team visit www.raritan-online.com.