

## **The Forgotten Dynasty of Bridgewater – Raritan High School Football**

It has been a well kept secret over the decades, but surprisingly there was once a High School Football powerhouse in Bridgewater. The football team from 1968-1971 amassed a 34 game unbeaten streak. However, there are no trophies for them displayed in the trophy cases at the High School, and on the Internet, there is barely a mention about this team (until now). They are the “Forgotten Dynasty” of Bridgewater – Raritan High School Football.

The streak began back in 1968 – that’s when Lyndon Johnson occupied the White House, the Beatles were still together, and Man had yet to land on the moon. They were from Bridgewater – Raritan High School “East” – located off Foothill Road – the team name was the Minutemen. At the time they were the “new” High School as the school had just opened in 1966. The Minutemen of East were natural rivals with the other older Bridgewater High School on Garretson Road which was then known as “West” (West had opened in the late 1950s.) East was led by an inspirational coach George Greiner. He had first been an assistant football coach at West. When Coach Greiner decided to transfer to East when it opened to be the head coach he recalled others warning him that it would be a mistake to change schools. The good football was already at “West”. A new program would be a difficult undertaking – and besides East did not even have their own stadium. They would play their home games at Basilone Stadium which was West’s stadium. But he took on the challenge. To get started, Coach Greiner even had to recruited players at the school to play on the team. He appealed to their sense of school pride and was then able to get them to play on the football team.

In 1966, their first season, the new school only had 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders, so the football team just played a J.V. schedule. In 1967, their second year, while they played a varsity schedule, they were at a big disadvantage as there was no senior class enrolled at the school. The team did manage to hold their own that year - landing a 4-4 record. However, this was in a conference for smaller schools such as Middlesex and Manville. In 1968, East finally had a full enrollment of all grades 9-12, thus they were put into the tougher division that had the larger schools. This included local rivals Somerville, Immaculata, and Bridgewater “West” . Not many thought the football program at East would do well in their first season in the competitive division.

### **1968 The Streak Begins**

After losing the second game of the season 19-6 to Somerville which was the top team that year, they would play next against North Plainfield. Their opponent had an impressive record the season before. East was not favored to win. In fact, no Bridgewater football team had beaten North Plainfield in 8 years. In this game North Plainfield scored first on a 10 yard pass. But the extra point was partially blocked by East and the ball went wide of the upright. This would prove decisive. Later in the game East scored a touchdown that was set up when quarterback Charles Santora completed a 26 yard pass to Gary Debes to put East on the four-yard-line. A couple plays later running back Steve Haretel ran in for the touchdown. An extra point by kicker Jeff Fielder gave them the lead 7-6. The game would end by that score. The players on East would not know it then, but every player would never lose another High School Football Game. The team that year would go on to win their next five games before a

showdown with their rival Bridgewater – Raritan “West”. On Thanksgiving Day, 1968, Bridgewater East and Bridgewater West would play football against each other for the first time. It was a major local event with 6500 spectators attending to see if this East team was really as good as its record. West was 6-2 going into the game and thought East had been playing over their heads. A hard fought game ended in a 14-14 tie. (There were ties in those days.) So the battle to see who had the best football team in Bridgewater would remain unsettled for another year. East’s impressive 7-1-1 record in its first season with a senior class led one local sportswriter to correctly say that this new team will be heard from for years to come.

### **1969 First Undefeated Season**

In 1969 Bridgewater East with new quarterback Steve Havran along with running back Bruce Hennemuth led the team to an undefeated season, 9-0. (There were no playoffs in high school football in the early seventies.) This season East defeated West in the Thanksgiving Day game 20-14. The last touchdown by East (which proved to be the margin of victory) was a testament to their coaching staff as they scored on a fake punt from mid field. Punter Bob Latorra threw a perfectly executed screen pass that Bruce Hennemuth ran in for a touchdown. Fourty two years later Bruce Hennemuth still recalls that play *“ We practiced the fake punt for days - Greiner was always thinking about surprises. Bob Latorra threw a good pass and it was pretty much clear sailing with all the downfield blocks.”*

That game was the first win over West and it capped off a perfect season. It was one of the highlights of East Quarterback Steve Havran’s career. Today when Steve was asked about the one game that stands out from the rest, he replied *“The 1969 East-West game stands out for a lot of reasons. Mainly though, it was the last game to complete a perfect season. I remember specifically our second offensive play. We were basically a ball control running team. Coach Greiner really surprised me when he called for a play action pass on that second play. As it turns out Gary Debes had beat his man and we scored a touchdown. The team and crowd went crazy. At the end, it seemed like the clock stood still, as our defense had to make a big stand, and they did hold, saving the perfect season. It was an unbelievable feeling.”*

### **1970**

The next season, 1970, the team again proved dominate over their competitors. Only one game was within a touchdown – a 14-12 victory over South Plainfield. They would shutout their opponents in the last three games of the season. That included a 16-0 victory against a hard hitting Bridgewater West team on Thanksgiving Day.

Five players from East that year made 1<sup>st</sup> team “All County “. From the offense it was Quarterback - Steve Havran, Running Back - Bruce Hennemuth, and Center - Rob Apgar. (Hennemuth was also named to the All-State team.) The defense had linesman Paul Grimes and Jim Barry.

## 1971

This year proved to be a challenge as the stars from past years had now graduated. But the coaching staff never graduated and they created more disciplined motivated players. This year saw quarterback Dan LaMountain along with offensive scorers Dave Wessel and Tim Dostal lead the team to another 9-0 season. Again, only one game was within a touchdown. It was a 16-14 win against South Plainfield. Just three times all season did their opponents score more than 6 points. Five East players were named to the "All County" team. On offense, it was running back Tim Dostal and lineman Jeff Miller. On defense, it was lineman Don Jenkins, linebacker Don MacQueen, and defensive back Dave Wessel. At the end of the season, the unbeaten streak was at 34 games. (33 wins and a tie)

In the midst of these undefeated seasons it was noticed that, with the exception of the Thanksgiving Day game, that the stands were not packed with fans. This was a different era - the younger generation had other things on their mind. An unwanted war with an unwanted draft. One student from the class summed up the situation "You could easily get a thousand people to attend a protest against the Vietnam War, but it was not so easy to get that many to attend a football game. "

## 1972

The opening game of the 1972 season was against Watchung. The unbeaten streak stood at 34 games. A high spirited Watchung team came out fired up hoping to end that streak and jumped out to a 10-0 lead at halftime. Quarterback Dan LaMountain, who led the team to an undefeated season the year before, was determined to keep the streak alive. The running game, the usual bread and butter of Bridgewater East, was being stopped so he took to the air. He managed to move the team downfield, but a couple of interceptions, one in the end zone, ended potential scoring drives. LaMountain in the second half broke free for an 83 yard touchdown run pulling Bridgewater East within reach of winning. Late in the game, trailing 10-8, East drove in close, but another interception in the end zone with 2:30 appeared to ice the game for Watchung. But maybe not, the defense held, and using their timeouts they managed to get the ball back with a minute left. Perhaps they could pull off another victory. However, an interception at mid field with just seconds left made it real. East's undefeated streak had finally ended.

It was 34 games undefeated over 4 seasons. The team had helped define the new school. Their coach George Greiner won critical acclaim from his players.

Steve Havran, quarterback 1969-70, said about Coach Greiner – "Coach Greiner was not only a great Coach, he was a great man and teacher. I'll never forget the basics that hard work pays off, as well as other life lessons Coach taught us."

Bruce Hennemuth, running back 1968-70, on Coach Greiner, "Coach Greiner was very influential in my life. He assembled a remarkable staff that were all on the same page. Hard work and discipline were strongly "encouraged"! We had a few games that might have gone the other way if it wasn't for Coach's emotion and motivational skills. Coach was always approachable and had a great sense of humor - he loved to joke around and poke fun at everyone. He could laugh at himself as well. I would

say that he is one of the most balanced people I have met, mixing a strong work ethic with a desire to win while enjoying life and family.”

What was the key to the success and the duration of the dynasty?

Dan LaMountain, Quarterback 1971-72, vividly remembers:

It was several things. It was about a new high school with motivated administrators, teachers, and staff. It was about a young and enthusiastic coaching staff. It was about the student body, the band, the cheerleaders, and the parents. It was about the teams and athletes we competed against. It was about one of the best Thanksgiving Day rivalries. It was about everyone coming together and sharing the experience.

Today Coach George Greiner is retired and lives in Georgia. He fondly remembers his coaching days at Bridgewater – Raritan High School East. He said “My overall experience at Bridgewater East was one of great gratitude. We had a great Superintendent in Dr. Harmon Wade, principal Dr. Stanley Godleski, and Athletic Director, Joe Porcaro who was the very best. The coaching staff were extremely loyal and dedicated to our football program. They included Vince Bodino, Bill Apsley, Jim Norton, Joe Panzarella, Ed Ginty, Dennis Gates, Dave Adam, John Gara and Bob Powell. Our athletes were extremely dedicated and disciplined to compete with their very best effort at all times. God has truly blessed me to be a part of such a great experience in my life.”

As for High School East, it was converted to the middle school in 1995 when all the high school students were moved to the expanded high school on Garretson Road.

For more details, and to see over 100 photos about the “previously” Forgotten Dynasty of Bridgewater-Raritan High School Football visit [www.raritan-online.com/forgotten-dynasty.htm](http://www.raritan-online.com/forgotten-dynasty.htm).