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Vikings forever

By PAUL JOHNSON - pjohnson@kcchronicle.com

 Comments (No comments posted.)

GENEVA – For 1986 Geneva graduate Derek Swanson, it felt like Friday's reunion football games took 20 years off the calendar.

"That whole Phoenix rising from the ashes. It's a great feeling," Swanson said. "You feel like you're 220 pounds, running a 4.4 [second 40-yard dash] again. You just lay it on the line. This is where the blood, sweat and tears happened, right here. It was fun."

Swanson, who still is a Geneva resident, was one of more than 50 Geneva football graduates who got together for a series of reunion games Friday on the Vikings' practice field. He and six of his former teammates from the mid-1980s went 2-1, including a game against a group of June graduates that included Northern Illinois University-bound Shaun Ratay and Pat Schiller.

"It's nice to see all of the old guys coming back and playing," Geneva rising senior Mike Mayszak said. "I think it is important to keep the tradition going, keep it up to date. Guys get to come back and see their old teammates. I'll be here [after graduation]. It looks like fun. Some of these guys are pretty intense out there."

When Swanson graduated, the Vikings reached the state quarterfinals and were a firmly established program in Illinois.

But by the time 1998 graduate Cory Hallahan quarterbacked the Vikings, the luster of the Jerry Auchstetter era had worn off. Hallahan's last two seasons were 1-8 and 0-9, and the season following his graduation was also winless.

"We were pretty bad, to be blunt," said Hallahan, who looked like he still could lead a team down the field.

Current coach Rob Wicinski took over as varsity coach in 1999 and changed the culture in a hurry.

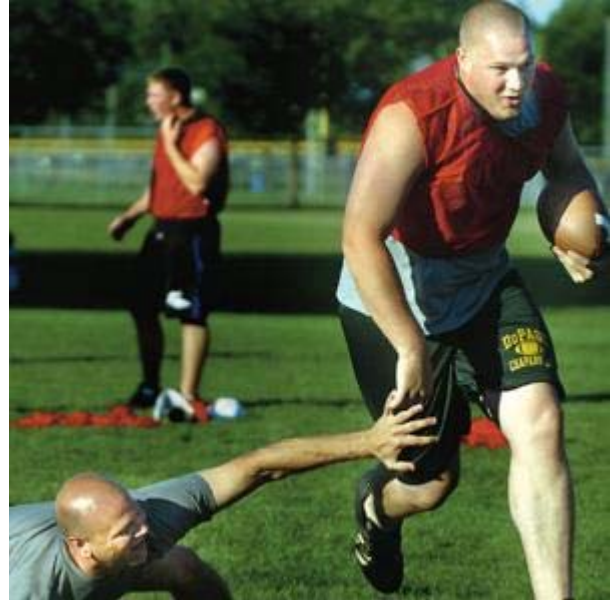
"Rob was the sophomore coach our senior year, his first year here," said Hallahan, who lives in DeKalb. "We were in two-a-days and he came over and gave us a speech that got everybody revved up and motivated. You knew right then that he was serious about his work. He didn't care that the team was 0-9."

Alumni like Swanson and Hallahan have Vikings fever again, as Geneva is in the midst of a three-year playoff streak, the longest in school history. Two of those seasons featured trips to the state semifinals, and the graduates have been following along intensely.

"It's refreshing," said Swanson, who was a volunteer assistant to Wicinski for four years. "It was a huge change for me to come from where I came from to see [the losing] happen. It was disheartening. But it was neat to be the start of something. Tradition is not something you can walk into. You have to create that. He's done that."

And Wicinski hopes to build the alumni football games into another tradition for the program. There was an alumni game the first few years Wicinski came on board, but it was not as organized as Friday's revival.

Six teams of at least seven players each, plus the majority of the current varsity team and dozens of family and friends, were on hand on a Friday night that had an appropriate, fall-like feel to it.



Brad Arnold, a 1989 Geneva High School graduate, tries to stop 2006 graduate Ryan Coffland on Friday afternoon before in the school's alumni touch football tournament. (Kendra Helmer photo)

"It's kind of a grass roots kind of a thing," Wicinski said. "I run into these guys all the time and they mentioned that they'd like to get out and play and do this kind of a thing. It's an opportunity to get our football family together. We'll build on this."

COMMENTS

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