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Geneva's only state team reflects on 2nd place

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No matter what happens Friday night at Burgess Field when the Geneva Vikings host Crystal Lake South in the Class 7A semifinal clash to determine which team goes to the state final in Champaign the following weekend, the 2008 version of Viking blue has its place in the record books.

By running the table with 12 straight wins, a high-water mark and school record in football excellence for the Western Sun Conference champions, the Vikings have also invited a lot of "what ifs" with inevitable comparisons to top teams of yesteryear.

What if this year's team could somehow go up against some of the great Geneva teams of the past? What would happen?

With the Vikings knocking on the door of a state title game for the third time in five years, longtime Geneva fans are again reminiscing about the glory of the fall of 1975 - the only time a Vikings football team reached the state final game.

Jerry Auchstetter coached an outstanding squad quarterbacked by junior Mark Schick, with 230-pound fullback Tim Sandman and quick halfback Scott "Oats" Sanders, along with a dominant defensive unit. They marched into Hancock Stadium on the campus of Illinois State on Nov. 21, 1975 with every intention of bringing home a state title. All they got was a heavy dose of horrible weather, a heavier dose of Metamora's massive fullback Larry Sommers and a disheartening 25-7 defeat.

Comparing the excellence

Auchstetter, who returned to the sidelines this fall to serve as an assistant for Geneva head coach Rob Wicinski, has the unique perspective of an up-close look at this year's record-setting team, as well as his memories of one of his finest squads in the 1970s.

"It's funny, but I've had a few of the players from way back calling and asking me how I think they would match up against this year's team," Auchstetter said. "I just tell them that this year's team is bigger, stronger and faster, but other than that, they'd match up pretty well, so I enjoy kidding with them."

All kidding aside, Auchstetter knows as well as anyone how much more intense off-season weight training and other skills and technique training is these days, compared to when the IHSA had restrictions on how often and when a coach could work with his players.

"A summer program wasn't even allowed back then," Auchstetter said. "Now, players are in weight training or other skills camps year-round."

Interviews with players from 1975 who still live in Geneva reveal some interesting comparisons, as well as recollections of playing in an ice storm for a state title.

"We were so competitive, that if you put this year's team back in our time, I think we could beat them," said a confident Sanders, the starting halfback on the 1975 team who works in the county auditor's office. "I think we had an outstanding defense and still hold the record for shutouts."

"I know that today's players are a lot bigger and they are more specialized than we were because in my day, most of us were three-sport athletes," Sanders said. "I know these kids are bigger, but we played a lot of bigger kids and we beat them."

Ed Gericke, who was a standout defensive end and tight end in 1975, has seen this year's team play several times.

"I think the similarities are that we both played very good defense and the offense was run-oriented," Gericke said. "The difference is that this year's team has Michael Ratay, and he is a very special player.

"We had a lot of good ballplayers, but we didn't have a Michael Ratay."

Gericke said he is most impressed with what he call's Ratay's YAC yards, or "yards after contact," saying he has never seen a player gain so many yards after being hit by a defender.

Kevin Bell was a strong safety in 1975 and currently is a freshmen football coach at Geneva, while also helping the defensive coaches during varsity games.

"We worked well together and nothing ever frustrated us," Bell said of the 1975 squad. "And this year's team has many of the same qualities."

Bell pointed out the difference in the size of athletes, more than 30 years after he donned the pads.

"Our biggest lineman was only 220 pounds," he said. "On this year's team, the whole line is bigger than our biggest guy.

"We had 32 guys on the team in '75, and we have 80 on the team today," Bell said. "Plus, many guys played both ways and never came off the field; now we try not to have anybody go both ways."

That tough title game

As a student at Geneva High School and then from his spot in the press box as the public address announcer, Kurt Wehrmeister has seen virtually every Geneva team in action the past 40-plus years. In 1975, he was able to get a ride from Champaign, where he was a freshman at the University of Illinois, over to Normal to watch his Vikings in the state final clash. Like everyone else in the stadium, he was disappointed to see the weather turn horrible and his team come up short.

"I watched the game from the end zone, near the band, and it was just an awful night and the sleet made the artificial turf very slippery," Wehrmeister said. "It was a night made for a big fullback and a big center, and Metamora had both, and we did not."

Auchstetter recalls wind gusts of about 50 miles an hour and a wind-chill factor near zero degrees. "It was an ice storm and no one could even hold onto the ball," he said. "There were 11 fumbles in the game, Metamora had six and we had five.

"But it was football, and you had to play it in any weather," Auchstetter said. "Of course, the next day the sun was out and it was a beautiful day."

Sanders said the oddest thing was when the team came back into the locker room after pre-game warmups, and stadium officials brought in boxes of different shoes the Vikings had to wear so as not to tear up the artificial turf.

"My shoes didn't even fit, and they were like tennis shoes, so I had no traction whatsoever," Sanders said in reliving his frustration. "It was so cold, I cut my knuckles in the first half, but they didn't even bleed when I was outside. Once I got inside, it started to bleed."

Gericke said the conditions were indeed horrible, but claims you have to give Metamora its due.

"We went down there thinking we were the best team and that we had beaten the other tops teams already and we were going to get our trophy, but no one told the Metamora kids," Gericke said. "They came out there and played hard."

Hard to accept a loss

Auchstetter said his team was so confident and so prepared to win the championship trophy that the players were stunned when it sunk in that they had lost.

"When I was getting on the bus afterward, I asked where our second-place trophy was, and the players didn't even want it," Auchstetter said. "They had left it back in the locker room under a pile of towels.

"That trophy didn't mean much to them then, but it got bigger and bigger as time went by and they could reflect on what a great accomplishment they achieved."

Bell looks back on the community support with amazement.

"On our way home, we had a police escort, sirens and lights, through Morris," Bell said. "What a thrill; when we arrived home, we had a reception waiting for us in the gym. Our fans and families were still applauding us for representing them so well."

Gericke is hoping this year's team can take the next step by winning the next two weekends, but he had words of advice and caution for the Vikings.

"You have a great team, but you don't win on rankings or newspaper articles, you have to go out and beat Crystal Lake South on the field," he said.

And then hope for better weather in Champaign in 2008.