



## Geneva's winning big again

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How does a coach endure losing 31 of 36 games during his first four years as head coach of a football program and eventually run off a string of conference championships and state playoff appearances?

"Geneva had something very big when I first came here that money can't buy - and that was tradition," said Rob Wicinski, who'll be entering his 10th season as head coach of the Vikings this fall. "I remember hearing Lloyd Carr, when he took over as coach at Michigan, tell a group of people that the first thing he would ask for to start a program was tradition.

"Even though Geneva was struggling at the time (the late 1990s), I knew it had a solid tradition."

Longtime Geneva football fans know that the foundation of that tradition was established 40 years ago when Jerry Auchstetter coached the Vikings to undefeated seasons in the days before the state playoff format, and took Geneva to its only appearance in a state final game in 1975.

Auchstetter, who returns to the sidelines this year as an assistant on Wicinski's staff, was the head coach for 20 seasons in Geneva. He was in charge from 1967 to 1985, and returned to finish the 1992 season for an injured Larry Davis, and finished his career the following year. His return this year comes after being away from the coaching game for 15 years.

In total, Auchstetter compiled a 152-43-1 record, went 23-0-1 over three pre-playoff seasons, won nine conference titles, made five playoff appearances and earned induction into the IHSA and Geneva halls of fame.

"The tradition was because of Auchstetter and Larry Davis and many others," said Wicinski, who came to Geneva in 1997 and was an assistant for head coach Mike Ellberg for two seasons before taking over as head coach.

"I knew Geneva had been losing for a while when I came, but I knew the tradition was there, so I started talking to anyone in the community I could who knew about this tradition, and I talked to Jerry Auchstetter a lot," Wicinski recalls.

### Bringing back confidence

Auchstetter remembers the key piece of advice he offered Wicinski when he was preparing to take the helm as head coach.

"The program had just faded, and it was hard to put your finger on it as to why," Auchstetter said. "But it almost seemed like the kids stopped believing that they could win, and it's really hard to get kids to get out there and believe.

"I told Rob that he had to get the players to believe they could win," Auchstetter said. "He conquered it, and now the program is very respectable again."

After that rough start in his first four seasons, Wicinski saw his program start to come together during the

2003 season when his team lost a four-overtime thriller 20-17 to Batavia on the final weekend of the season, finishing with a 5-4 record and barely missing the playoffs.

"In addition to tradition, the other key ingredient is lifting weights and working hard in the offseason," Wicinski said. "That 5-4 team was one of the first to really take that to heart, and that was the first group that was with the weight program as eighth-graders and through high school."

### Road to recovery

Since that emotional setback in 2003, Wicinski's Geneva teams have rattled off four straight conference championships and playoff appearances, including two trips to state semifinal contests and one quarterfinal game.

"It's not that the other teams and other guys I had were not committed before the 2003 season," Wicinski said. "It was just that we didn't have them long enough to really build into the program."

Wicinski will always have a fondness for his early teams that stuck with the sport despite going through losing seasons.

"Those earlier teams fought through more adversity than many of the other teams," he said.

Great success produces big games and with that can come great thrills and great disappointment at the same time. Wicinski's recent teams have experienced the part of the tradition of being oh-so-close to reaching the top of the state-title mountain.

If any Geneva coach knows that feeling, it would be Auchstetter, who played football at Mendota High School and Western Illinois University. His college roommate was Joe Marini, himself a successful head coach at LaSalle-Peru, where he lost three state title games to Joliet Catholic in the 1970s.

Auchstetter's Vikings went undefeated from 1968 through 1970.

"Those were all great teams, and if there were state playoffs at that time, who knows, we may have won some state championships," Auchstetter said.

### Some tough luck

According to IHSA records, Auchstetter never had a losing record in his 20 seasons until his final year at 4-5 in 1993, meaning the majority of his teams would have made the playoffs every season under the current format in which most 5-4 teams get in.

But the playoffs were not an easy road in the infancy of the state tournament, with only conference champs getting most of the bids. Geneva had an 8-1 record in 1974, losing its playoff bid after falling 12-7 to eventual state champion and Little Seven rival West Chicago. Then, in 1980, Geneva was the only team to beat eventual state champion Morris, but had its playoff plans derailed on the last weekend by Plainfield. Even though Geneva was tied with Morris and Plainfield atop the conference at 6-1, the tiebreaker points system kept the Vikings out.

The most glorious season came in 1975 when Geneva marched all the way to the Class 3A state title game in Champaign against Metamora. But it was a sad ending when an ice storm turned the field into a hockey rink, eliminating Geneva's advantage of speed and making it a perfect stage for Metamora's power ground game in a 25-7 loss.

Auchstetter points to the 1985 season as one of the most exciting, yet disappointing, as he was coaching his son Steve in his senior year.

"We went undefeated that season and got to the semifinals against a tough Lisle team, but the weather got

terrible and it rained - and our team was built on quickness and speed," Auchstetter said. "The weather just took that away, and we lost to a tough team."

Auchstetter said he never really had tremendous players who were destined for standout careers in the Division I college ranks, but he had a few who could play Division II or III.

"I had some pretty big names, but not many," Auchstetter said. "I just had a lot of good high school football players and I had a great staff of Jerry Vitton, John Barton, Charles Bell, Jim Burger and others."

Auchstetter had his football team primed with one of the toughest schedules in the state when boys' soccer became an IHSA sport in the early 1980s.

"I wasn't against soccer, because I would never be against a sport that kids enjoyed, but I was concerned that we had this tough football schedule and we were a small school of only 750 students," Auchstetter said. "So if we took on boys soccer, we would be the smallest school in Illinois at that time to offer both sports. I just felt we shouldn't do it until we were over 1,000 kids."

As soccer grew in popularity, and Geneva fielded some excellent teams, Auchstetter refused to say it was hurting the football program.

"Really, I don't think that it had a big effect on the football program faltering all those years."

But falter it did, though not immediately after Auchstetter's first retirement in 1985.

Those lean times

After a tough 4-5 season under new coach Don Sebestyen in 1986, Larry Davis took over and helped Geneva reach the Class 3A semifinals in 1988 before succumbing to health issues early in the 1992 season and sparking Auchstetter's return for an eventual run to the Class 4A second round. In total, Davis coached five seasons and compiled a 20-31 record.

The program went into its toughest decade when Auchstetter left again after the 1993 season. With coaches Mark Gould, who eventually went on to coach at St. Charles after just one season, and Ellberg working to carry on the tradition, Geneva faltered to a 7-38 mark over five seasons.

Wicinski joined the staff in 1997, coming with 12 years of coaching experience - two years as an assistant in Ottawa, and 10 years at Niles North, with six of those as head coach. He took over as Geneva's head coach two years later and began a rebuilding process that has endured its share of pain and joy.

Having experienced great success as a linebacker at Northern Illinois, where his team played in the 1983 California Bowl, Wicinski knew his chance for future success would hinge on whom he put in place on his staff.

"I remember I was in the hallway at school, looking at some old equipment, and thinking I just had nothing going yet, and a fellow from the community, Mark Pheanis, just walked up and said he wanted to help," Wicinski recalls. "I said 'sure' and Mark has been a great help ever since."

Wicinski relies heavily on assistant coaches Mike Fields, Mark Fagot, Frank Martin and now Auchstetter.

A new football season brings with it a new beginning and unlimited promise and hope.

For Geneva, it now means that its lofty perch atop the Western Sun Conference will be challenged by many capable foes and especially from neighboring rival and perennial title contender Batavia.

"You never know what happens on a Friday night under the lights," Wicinski said of his team, which went 11-1 last season and fell to East St. Louis in the Class 7A quarterfinals. "But we have a lot of our defense coming back and some pretty solid options on offense, and I think we should be OK."