

Great PA Teams
By Hal Wilson

RIDLEY TOWNSHIP 1948

The Green Raiders of Ridley have been a dominant force in District One football for more than 60 years. Scholastic football is part of the fabric of Ridley Township and the Boroughs of Ridley Park and Eddystone in Delaware County.

Ridley Township, and its successor, the merged Ridley High School, have compiled by far the highest winning percentage among all Pennsylvania high schools playing football, past or present. Ridley Township, and Ridley Park and Eddystone, were merged in 1966. Through the 2009 season, Ridley has won 611 games, lost only 156, and tied 26, for a phenomenal .784 percentage. In 2009, Ridley has won its second District One championship in three years with a gritty victory, 19-10, over heavily favored and State No. 1 North Penn, reaching the PIAA AAAA semi-finals before a loss to LaSalle of the Catholic League..

Football began at Ridley Township in 1934. Winning teams were produced immediately. The very first team was unbeaten at 7-0-1. the lone blemish a tie with Chester. A series of fine coaches built the program – including Bill Slezak and Hal Brewster. Ultimately, in 1948, the Green Raiders produced a team that was termed one of the most powerful in suburban Philadelphia history. Eleven games were won, most by convincing scores. Major powers St. James, Chester High and Lower Merion were beaten. 382 points were scored – the most ever in Delaware County. This team set the stage for the glory that has followed.

Coaching this great squad was the immortal Felix “Phil” Marion, a great motivator, who was a member of the legendary “Seven Blocks of Granite” at Fordham University in the mid 30’s. The other Fordham Ram guard was Vince Lombardi. Marion had played at Eddystone before enrolling at Fordham. He began coaching at Ridley during the 1942 season when Coach Art Raimo of Villanova fame went into the Navy. 1943 was Marion’s first full season – he coached Ridley for 30 years, passing away after the 1972 season.

Halfback Ralph Ortolano said recently that, at the 1948 pre-season camp, squad togetherness was missing. There were a few fights. These , coupled with a tough first game 12-7 win over Chester St. James, brought the team together. That factor, and the inherent talent and overall size, shaped 1948 Ridley. St. James neighbor, Chester High, was beaten, 26-6, and the Green Raiders were on their way. The principal remaining obstacle was Lower Merion, then a strong program, and Ridley prevailed 19-13. After the LM game, the Raiders really began to roll, shutting out their final five opponents. Traditional Thanksgiving Day foe Eddystone was coached by Phil Marion’s brother Dom.

Halfback Ortolano also said that , “Phil Marion was not easy to play for. He was a tough taskmaster. The practices were harder than the games.”

Ridley's stellar 1948 lineup:

E 17 Wes HUFFINES 6-0 165
T 32 Jim ROYER 6-1 225
G 22 Mike ZAYATZ 5-8 185
C 31 Robert SCHULER 6-0 220
G 27 Angelo POLITARKOS 5-7 185
T 33 Nelson SHUGART 6-0 215
E 13 Pat ROGAN 6-1 165
Q 7 John "Yommy" COSTELLO 5-6 150
H 19 Ed GERA © 5-8 165
H 5 Ralph ORTOLANO 5-7 150
F 30 Harry KURLISH 6-0 190

8 Frank SAVASTANO at 5-7 160 and 18 Eddie LOGAN, 6-0 165, were other valuable backs. Ted BECK was the kick snapper, while Schuler handled the place kicking and Captain Gera did the infrequent punting. Future coach 6 Joe MCNICHOLAS was the junior backup quarterback.

End Wes Huffines was named to the All-State first team. The Raiders placed four on the All-Delco team including Huffines, Zayatz, Costello and Kurlish. Huffines was Delco Linemen of the Year and Costello Back of the Year. Each of these players was a senior, along with Ortolano and Shugart. Although smallish in stature, Costello made a huge contribution to the squad.

Kurlish was big and fast and he and Gera did most of the rushing damage. Older brother Bill Kurlish had been a member of Penn's famous "Destiny" backfield in 1936.

A strong sense of sportsmanship marked this team and penalties were few.

Costello went on to Pennsylvania Military College (now Widener) and earned Little All-America honors. He later played semi-pro ball for Marcus Hook.

Jim Royer became a star tackle at the U.S. Naval Academy in the early 50's.

The spectacular 1948 Green Raider season record:

12 CHESTER ST. JAMES 7
26 CHESTER 6
32 MEDIA 0
33 CLIFTON HEIGHTS 13
39 COLLINGDALE 7
19 LOWER MERION 13
41 PROSPECT PARK 0
42 DARBY 0
54 GLEN-NOR 0
47 RIDLEY PARK 0
37 EDDYSTONE 0

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Ridley had had a fine perfect record team in 1937, and others in 1951 with back Wes Fitzgerald, in 1958 with QB Frank Potter and halfback Del Delozier, and in 1964 with later coach All-State QB John Waller at the controls. The unbeaten and untied 1965 club was paced by Quarterback Joe Emmi and All-State receiver Ron Withelder. 23 games in a row were won from 1963 into the 1966 season

Ridley Township joined the Suburban A League in 1952 which became Suburban One in 1956. Ridley won the championship with its 10-0 1958 team, then shifted to Suburban Two which was oriented toward the southern part of District One. In 1967, these schools, along with Lower Merion and Radnor, formed the Central League.

The Green Raiders proceeded to win the Central League crown in 1969, when the perfect season included a monumental 56-28 comeback win over the Steve Joachim – Randy Grossman Haverford Fords. Haverford led 19-7 in the first half. The Raiders overall strength then began to show and the game eventually became a rout. Tom Coombs won first team All-State honors that year at offensive guard.

After the 1972 death of Phil Marion, his long-time assistant and former player Joe McNicholas took charge. The winning continued without missing a beat. More Central League titles were won in 1973 and 1974, with the 1974 club another perfect record team. Ridley was in a deadlock for the title in 1975 and won the championship outright again in 1979.

1982, 1984, 1986, 1988 and 1990 were unbeaten, untied regular season teams – each winning the Central League crown. The 1986 squad was led by 6-7 210 pound Matt Blundin, a great football QB who was equally adept on the basketball court. He had an outstanding career at the University of Virginia and in the NFL. Bob Kuberski was a great fullback and lineman at Ridley in 1987 and 1988, the U. S. Naval Academy, and with the Green Bay Packers, starring on their 1996 Super Bowl Champions.

Through these fabulous years, a Ridley loss was a momentous event - and a considerable disaster for the entire community.

In 1990, Ridley reached the championship game of the PIAA Quad-A playoffs in Hershey, losing tragically to North Allegheny after a late fumble. Present coach Dennis Decker was the star quarterback and was named to the All-State first team, along with wide receiver Devon Preston. Receiver Jim Nicholson also received All-State recognition.

Joe McNicholas continued to direct the Green Raiders through the 1996 season. He was succeeded by assistant Ralph Batty. John Waller became head coach in 2001, retiring after a successful 2008 campaign.

Waller's 2007 Raiders won their first PIAA District One championship (District playoffs began in 1992). This fine team was led by first-team All-Staters QB Steve Egee and LB Andrew Hodges.

Former star QB Dennis Decker is now the head coach, with Ralph Batty his able top assistant. They direct the new District One champions.

In all, Ridley has won or shared 20 Central League championships.

At Ridley, the names and faces of the Green Raider gridgers and their coaches may change but the victory march goes on.



Row One: G. Plath, R. Crowley, E. Lincoln, H. Firth, W. Cole, L. Klecka, J. Kunkle, R. Redgate, W. Beebe, C. Dickerson, C. Rausch, J. Hodnett, J. Wells, L. Orner, J. Clymer (Manager).
Row Two: B. Reese (Manager), G. Thomas, F. Savastano, J. Costello, R. Ortolano, R. Nass, A. Politarkos, M. Zayatz, E. Logan,

J. Yankanich, D. Wood, J. O'Donnell, E. Gera, H. Ebsworth, M. Cerbus, C. Pedrick, J. McNicholas, Mr. Marion (Coach). *Row Three:* R. Millman, T. Beck, L. Scott, R. Butler, R. Schuler, J. Royer, N. Shugart, W. Huffines, J. Rhodes, J. Vail, G. Knerr, P. Rogan, H. Kurlish, T. Fizzano, J. Clutterbuck, R. Hahey, Mr. Wynn (Coach).