

50TH ANNIVERSARY SERIES: Greencastle-Antrim plays first varsity football season in 1967

Members of the 1967 Greencastle-Antrim football team pose for a picture. G-A played its first varsity season in 1967.



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EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first of a three-part series recognizing the 50th anniversary of varsity football at Greencastle-Antrim High School.

GREENCASTLE — The beginning proved difficult. Fifty years later, Blue Devil football is a proud signature of the Greencastle-Antrim community.

Much has changed since G-A's first varsity season in 1967, when an enthusiastic group of players and coaches attempted to build a program from the ground up.

"No one knew what they were in for," said Pat Ruda, who started the '67 season as an assistant coach before being named head coach after the third game. "It was a trial by fire. None of the players had any experience and the coaches had never coached football before. We had an idea of what to do, but it was a tough road."

Greencastle did sponsor a football team in 1911, but 1967 is recognized as the program's first varsity campaign, which produced an overall record of 1-4.

A five-man coaching staff was approved by the school board, with Dr. James Kauffman named the initial head coach. Joining Ruda — who was still completing his time at Shepherd College — as assistants were Jerry Lyons, Robert Jones and Geoffrey Hicks.

Considering the unique circumstances, the PIAA granted G-A permission to practice throughout the summer to give the newcomers a head start.

"We started spring drills as early as April, I believe," Ruda said. "We were probably the most conditioned team in the state, but because we started so early, by the time the season actually started we were running out of players from injuries or leaving the team. That summer schedule was brutal, and I respect the heck out of every one of those kids that hung in there still to this day."

Looking to fill a five-game schedule, G-A found a proper opponent in East Juniata for the opener. Like Greencastle, East Juniata was also competing in its first season of varsity football. Dates with James Buchanan, York Catholic, North Hagerstown and Bermudian Springs eventually came to be, comprising the 1967 slate.

"With it being the first year, trying to get teams to play was difficult since most teams already had their schedules put together," Ruda recalled. "So we had to find teams with open dates, which happened to be teams that no one else really wanted to play because they were so good, especially Bermudian Springs. The East Juniata game went well, and then it was tough from there."

Competing on a Saturday afternoon, G-A won its first game against East Juniata before dropping the final four. Following losses to JB and York Catholic, Kauffman abruptly resigned as head coach in the middle of the season, with Ruda selected to take over at the helm for the final two games.

"I was just graduating college and was hoping to get some experience and learn the ropes under a head coach before getting my chance," Ruda said. "It didn't exactly work out that way. Doc Kauffman resigned and there I was, named head coach."

Since 1967, Ruda has remained involved with the G-A athletic department in various capacities, with the now 72-year-old still a prominent face at the high school.

Financially, fundraising was essential to starting football at G-A. Bob Johnston, who spent years as a dedicated volunteer to the program, served as a driving force behind the original Blue Devil Football Booster Club.

“Fred Kaley (the athletic director at G-A) posted that anyone interested with helping start a football program show up to a meeting,” Johnston said regarding the fall of 1966. “Seven of us showed up, which we then became known as the ‘Original 7.’ The goal was to raise \$10,000 for uniforms and all the other expenses. By the time the first game rolled around, we raised about \$4,000.”

Johnston, now 78, referenced several fundraising methods, including memberships to the booster club and raffling off an antique car given by Tom Pensinger — a member of the Original 7 — during halftime of the first game.

“The early days were trying, but they were also a lot of fun,” Johnston said.

The opening game against East Juniata proved to be the highlight of the season, as G-A beat the visitors 25-6 on Saturday, Sept. 23. Ben George recorded the Blue Devils’ first touchdown to spark a strong second quarter for the hosts. Fred Davison followed with three touchdowns before the half, lifting G-A to victory. George rushed for more than 90 yards in the win while Davison accounted for 60 yards on the ground.

Prior to kickoff, James H. Craig was made honorary captain as the only surviving member of the 1911 team still living in Greencastle.

The celebration was short-lived, however, as G-A was overwhelmed by James Buchanan in its second game, losing 53-0 on the road. An estimated crowd of 2,200 attended the contest, the largest at the time at JB. The Rockets, recognized as a football power, held the Blue Devils to just 26 yards rushing and 19 passing.

Although managing to find the end zone, the outcome was similar when G-A returned home against York Catholic, falling by a score of 42-12. The Blue Devils trailed 35-0 at halftime before a pair of late touchdowns provided somewhat of a silver lining. Tom Hendrickson put Greencastle on the board with a 37-yard scoring run prior to Chris Beaver hauling in a pass from Mike Phelps and taking it 72 yards to paydirt in the fourth quarter.

Facing the opposing school’s junior varsity squad, G-A was much more competitive against North Hagerstown despite coming up short, 19-7. Phelps connected with Tim Stoner on a 54-yard touchdown pass late in the first half to cut into the deficit by the break. A defensive struggle produced a scoreless second half.

The finale of the five-game slate was forgettable, as Bermudian Springs pounded the Blue Devils 62-0. Statistically, G-A ended with negative-27 yards rushing but did manage 89 yards through the air.