

That championship season

Written by Mark Dukes
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They came together in the fall of 1972 with the same expectations they had in previous years, mainly to be in position to win the Mississippi Valley Conference football championship.

What followed in the next 11 games not only was somewhat surprising for the Cedar Rapids Jefferson football team, but a story for the ages.

The Iowa High School Athletic Association initiated the state playoff system in the fall of '72, but at that time only four teams in each class qualified. Jefferson had won two mythical (polls) state titles previously in 1964 and '65 and was in the midst of a 21-year run of winning records.

"We thought it was just going to be another good team," then-assistant coach Bob Ask said. "We were used to good, winning J-Hawks teams. We realized we had a good group coming back from a 7-2 team in 1971 but nothing like the horses of the 1960s.

"So, no, there was no special anticipation on the coaches' part."

Jefferson won the 1972 Class 4A state championship with a 6-0 victory over West Des Moines Dowling at Kinnick Stadium in Iowa City, one of six shutouts for the J-Hawks in an unbeaten 11-0 campaign. They were the first playoff state football champion in Metro and Class 4A history.

The beginnings

As Ask said, there was no reason to believe the coaches had anything special in the fall of 1972, even though the J-Hawks were 7-2 the season prior. The '72 seniors were not very successful as freshmen, combining for a 5-16 record at their junior high schools (Roosevelt 3-4, Wilson 2-5, Taft 0-7).

Ask was the J-Hawk varsity offensive line coach at the time and was, and is, a historian for Jefferson. He wrote "High On The Hill," a history of the school in 1984, and has a scrapbook bar-none of the championship season.

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“I don’t believe we coaches even knew who came from Wilson, Roosevelt or Taft,” Ask said. “The assimilation went smoothly. It was such an honor to play Jefferson football, who cared where one’s teammates came from.”

Wilson Junior High was a major contributor at the time. Its players grew up on the southwest side, part of blue collar families whose parents worked at such places as Wilson & Company, Iowa Manufacturing and Cherry Burrell.

“Players from Wilson filled 10 starting positions on that team,” said Tom Polehna, starting linebacker and placekicker in 1972. “There were five on defense, five on offense. Most of the guys lived within a one mile or less radius of each other.”

So they got together 40 falls ago with goals no higher than competing for the conference championship, at that time a given for Jefferson football.

The '72 season

Jefferson had a veteran coaching staff in 1972, led by head coach Jack Fisk. He had had the unenviable task of following Ted Lawrence, who had led the J-Hawks to mythical state titles in 1964 and '65 and five top-four finishes in the polls. Fisk, taking over in 1966, followed Lawrence with consecutive years of 8-0-1, 8-1, 7-2, 9-1, 6-2-1 and 7-2.

His loyal and long-time assistants were Ask, Vern Bredeson and Ron Schirm. Fisk was the offensive coordinator. Bredeson was offensive and defensive backfield coach and the man in the press box on game days. Schirm handled the defensive line, Ask the offensive line.

Jefferson opened the 1972 season at preseason No. 4-ranked Davenport West at Brady Street Stadium. Thad Miller scored two touchdowns in a 20-0 Jefferson victory.

The J-Hawks improved to 4-0 with wins over Dubuque Hempstead, Clinton and Bettendorf. At Bettendorf, defensive lineman Scott Smith intercepted a pass and went 89 yards for a

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touchdown. Smith later played briefly at Iowa State.

Perhaps the turning point in the season was a 37-7 victory over Cedar Rapids Washington before 8,000 people at Kingston Stadium. Running back Jim Dulin rushed for 204 yards. Jefferson defenders stymied the Warriors, allowing them only 7 yards rushing and 99 yards passing.

Polehna kicked a then-school and stadium record 42-yard field goal. "I never thought we'd be called out for a field goal," he said. "Everything came together and the ball took off. I didn't know I had set the records."

"In retrospect, if there was a so-called turning point in '72, or a time we felt we were pretty good, it was that game," Ask said.

After disposing of defending MVC champion Dubuque Senior, Jefferson shut out quarterback Greg Cilek and Iowa City High at Kingston, 28-0. Cilek attempted 40 passes but the Little Hawks could not find the end zone.

Former Iowa great Jerry Hilgenberg told then-Gazette sports editor Gus Schrader, "This may be the best team Jefferson has ever had. And they've had some terrific ones through the years. This club seems so sound and well balanced in every department.

"They don't have a lot of individual stars but they all play great football."

By Week 9, Jefferson was the solid No. 1-ranked team and faced a regular-season finale at Muscatine. The J-Hawks staved off a spirited Muscatine effort, 14-7.

Dulin, the J-Hawks' leading rusher, was injured on the opening kickoff. But the play of defensive ends Pat Casey and Dale Blaha was particularly noteworthy. Incredibly, Casey recovered four Muscatine fumbles.

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The Jefferson defense clearly was incredible. It allowed only 36 points in nine regular season games.

What's more, it didn't allow another point in the playoffs.

The championship run

Jefferson walloped Cedar Falls, 27-0, in the state semifinals in the first playoff game played at Kingston Stadium. Cedar Falls, then of the old Big Eight Conference, was coached by Pat Mitchell, still the Tigers' coach.

That landed Jefferson in the 4A state championship game against vaunted West Des Moines Dowling, which had won 58 of its past 59 games. Its coach, Jim Williams, later would go on to be an assistant at Iowa State and head coach at Simpson College.

The championship game originally was scheduled at Drake Stadium in Des Moines, but was moved to the artificial turf of Kinnick Stadium due to an early week blizzard.

"It was an unreal feeling being there," Casey said. "Being able to play in Kinnick Stadium, we were all pretty anxious. We weren't supposed to get past Cedar Falls but, in the end, we got to move on."

Ask, who always delivered the pre-game prayer in the Jefferson locker room, said the J-Hawks felt good about themselves but knew what they were up against.

"Frankly, I think we were a bit awed," Ask said. "We knew (Dowling's) record. We were almost just glad to be there. I think we were confident but the expectations were slim."

Ask described the game plan as "vanilla," as the J-Hawks were expecting a defensive struggle.

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The J-Hawks were most concerned about Dowling's renowned running game.

It was a defensive struggle to be sure. Jefferson accumulated just 153 total yards, Dowling 151. The two teams were 3-of-18 passing.

Ugly, yes. But someone had to win.

In the first quarter of the championship game, speedy junior Steve Jones jarred the ball loose from a Dowling punt returner and senior Howard Johnson recovered the ball at the Maroon 5-yard line. Three plays later, Dulin crashed into the end zone from the 2-yard line for the first TD in big-school playoff history.

From there, the remarkable Jefferson defense took over. It turned away repeated Dowling efforts. The Maroon main threat was late in the first half, reaching Jefferson's 5-yard line before being turned away on downs.

Jefferson's most sustained offensive drive was its last, running out the clock before Dowling could get the ball back. The J-Hawks ate up nearly six minutes of clock, moving from their 7-yard line to Dowling's 34.

Said Fisk afterward: "This is definitely the best defensive team I've had in nine years at Jefferson. They're all hard-nosed kids who have worked hard.

"Our two inside linemen, Neal Johnson and Larry Harkness, did a great job and so did Pat Casey. He was playing defensive end on the short side of the field and they were running on his side, away from our strength, most of the day."

The aftermath

The 58 members of the 1972 Jefferson state championship team now are spread out across the country, from Florida to California. They have entered various forms of business and raised

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families.

Ask and Bredeson are the only varsity coaches surviving. Five members of the team are deceased, including three starting defensive backs.

Even 40 years later, if you're a westsider of advanced age, the march to the '72 state championship still is a discussion point.

The team produced two high school All-America players in lineman Scott Smith and linebacker Howard Johnson, and eight all-Valley players. But it wasn't a team flush with major-college players.

Rather, it was a collection of players who had not enjoyed much success in their junior high school football careers but grew and matured into something pretty special.

How special? 11-0 and state champions.

The 1972 Jefferson team will be honored at halftime Friday of the J-Hawks' game against Dubuque Senior at Kingston Stadium. A reception will follow at Fieldhouse Southwest.