

## **A Winning Experience**

-Joel Katz

For years, Marblehead football had been looked upon as something of a joke. The blowout loss was a trademark of the MHS squad, and usually the game was not complete until the opposing team's second and third stringers took their turn at scoring a touchdown. Participants for the team were hard to come by, and even harder to come by were real players. The Marblehead community was accustomed to this losing environment, and even when some big wins came along, the few fans that existed knew it wouldn't last. In the 2007-2008 season, the high school team finished 4-7, a result which showed overall improvement but at the same time included a disappointing 1-4 conference record.

Down at Gatchells Park that year, something very different was happening. As they closed out their last practice of the year, the 8<sup>th</sup> grade Marblehead Magicians were enjoying another dominant season. Unlike the town's varsity football program, this team was no stranger to success. From 6<sup>th</sup> grade until 8<sup>th</sup> grade, this team lost a total of one game. The success of this group of boys was the product of both a talented bunch of young athletes and enthusiastic, knowledgeable coaching staff. This was a team that expected to win every time they came out onto the field, and their attitude was no different as they prepared for their final game boasting an undefeated record.

But winning isn't everything. In youth football, the emphasis of the sport is less on winning games and more on learning the values the game teaches. So in the final practice of the final season of this group's youth football career, it was only fitting that they were given the chance to learn a little from their role models. A bunch of seniors on the high school squad along with coach Chernovetz came down to say a few words to our team. It didn't matter what they had to say; every kid in the youth football was captivated by their presence that night. These were the guys that played on Friday nights, under the lights, in front of the crowd. These were the guys whose names and numbers we all knew as if they were professionals playing on TV every week.

Everyone listened intently as the seniors spoke. They reminisced about their season and their careers, giving us the clichéd "work hard," "school comes first," and "respect your teammates and coaches" messages. These values and lessons are important for kids and teenagers to learn, but a kid in shoulder pads, kneeling in sweat and mud after a practice, cannot quite grasp their true meaning. However, something one of the players said stuck with me. He talked about how when he was in youth football, the high school players came to talk to his team and it meant a lot to him. The player, after making this point, repeated it again, this time emphasizing how clearly he remembered this experience and how it felt like "just yesterday" when he was a youth football player. It almost seemed as if he had a sudden moment of realization, of just how fast football, high school, and perhaps his life, seemed to be flying by. As he and the other players wished us good luck in our upcoming final game, I couldn't get the thought out of my head that one day, I too would look back, as a high school senior, upon youth football and my childhood experiences.

Some time later, this group of kids was now a group of guys adjusting to high school life as freshmen. It was fall, and making us feel more comfortable in our new environment was the spectacular season we were putting together on the freshman football team. We capped off our season with a win against rival Swampscott, and finished with, what else, an undefeated record. Realizing that we accomplished this feat on the stage of freshman football, which is often neglected by varsity programs and left with mediocre coaching, we didn't take it to mean that we would be crushing all our opponents in years to come. Still, the success gave us a newfound confidence that we could continue our prior success and bring it to the varsity level. Achieving the same success as high school athletes that we experienced at a younger age was an exciting prospect, especially knowing that we could do it together, with that same group that we had as middle schoolers.

In 2009, the varsity team finally broke through and won the conference. For most of our class, sophomores that year, it was a season of going up against the starters at practice, playing in JV games, and watching from the sidelines on Friday nights. This is an expected fate for a sophomore football player, and it was no damper to the thrill ride of that season. Having a brand new coaching staff that year meant adjusting to a new system and new attitudes, of which between then, freshman year, and youth football, we had seen many.

Whoever the coaches were, they must have been doing something right. After a huge win on Thanksgiving, and a playoff game victory, the team was headed to the Division 3 Super Bowl at Gillette Stadium. Nobody would have believed you if you told them five years earlier that Marblehead would play in the Super Bowl in 2009. The situation was almost surreal, and even players who would be lucky to play two special teams plays were filled with nervous excitement. Marblehead lost that day, but just seeing those seniors up on the jumbotron inspired the younger players on that team, players that hoped to one day be seniors playing for a division title of their own.

Today, that group of younger players are the 21 seniors on the Marblehead football roster. This is a group that has grown together as young men, and as football players, over the last four years. Some of us have been together longer than we have known how to do long division. Some of us claim they were never taught long division. All long division aside, this group has forged a bond that can never be broken. Certainly, winning has contributed to the camaraderie of the group. But much more meaningful than the winning these guys have achieved is simply the experiences we have had together. It's why this article is called "A Winning Experience," and not "A Tradition of Winning" or "Can't Be Beaten." As much as our determined seniors want to win this year, the experience of football isn't about winning. No high school footballer plays to learn; he plays for his team and to win. But what he will end up taking away from it is much more than a series of letters in the win/loss column. It's his understanding of loyalty, of respect, of sportsmanship, and of never giving up. You'll be hard pressed to find a better way in the world for a junior-high schooler to learn the importance of teamwork than through the example of a football team. Everybody on the team needs to give his best possible effort to the benefit of the entire team.

Where else is better for a young man to learn to never give up, than for him to learn it in this fourth quarter of the last game of the season, locked in a tie game? There happened to be, four years ago, a tie game in the fourth quarter, a game that happened to be the last one these Magicians' youth football career. The 8<sup>th</sup> grade team finished undefeated that year, but their biggest win was never seen on the scoreboard. Their greatest achievement was in as a team, better yet, working together successfully as a team, something they would never forget how to do in sports and in life.

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