

A Tale of Four Eras: The History of Titan Football

By Joe Onderko, SID*

Now entering its 110th season of competition, the Westminster Titan football program has a history and tradition unparalleled in the annals of small college football. With six national championships and over 500 victories, the “Titan Tradition” of gridiron excellence is known throughout the nation.

Westminster’s football history is unusual in another respect, in that rarely has a program been so easily divided into different eras. For Titan fans, the line of demarcation is clear: 1952, the year Dr. Harold Burry took over the reigns as head football coach at Westminster. According to former Titan defensive coordinator Darwin Huey, “From that date forward, that field and its football team have never been the same.”

Following are histories of the four major eras of Titan football:

Program Origins (1891-1951)

Westminster had long held that its first season of football was 1892. However, in research for his book on Westminster football, *Winning*, author Dr. William McTaggart made a contrary discovery. According to a 1911 edition of the *Holcad*, Westminster’s student newspaper, “Football was first taken up as a college sport in the fall of 1891. Mr. M.D. McNab of Chicago entered school that year and had some knowledge of the game. A team was organized and the first game was played with Geneva ... The score was 42-0 in favor of Geneva ... Those who saw the game

decided that football was the “most stupidest” game ever seen.”

Over the next 60 years, little of what took place on the field would change that first opinion of the sport on campus. During that span, at least 23 different head coaches led Westminster to an overall mark of 172-244-44, an average of less than three wins per season. There were several positive seasons of note: a 9-2 mark under Coach Lang in 1905, with Westminster outscoring its opponents 309-32; a 21-6-1 mark under Coach McMahon from 1906-08; and an 11-4-1 mark under Coach Tinkham from 1913-14. From that point on, however, Westminster would manage just four winning season records over the next 36 years.

The early days did provide some famous names leading the Blue & White. Coaching Westminster from 1915-16 and in the 1918 and 1921 seasons was DeOrmand “Tuss” McLaughry. Despite posting just a 7-17-2 coaching mark in those four seasons, McLaughry went on to a stellar coaching career at Amherst, Brown and Dartmouth and later became an influential member of the American Football Coaches Association (AFCA). Beginning in 1964 through today, the AFCA annually presents the Tuss McLaughry Award to members for the highest service to others. Future Titan basketball mentors John Lawther and Grover Washabaugh also saw time as head football coaches at Westminster during this era. After six decades of futility, in 1952 a new head coach appeared that would change the face of Titan football forever.

The Burry Era (1952-71)

According to Huey, in an article written following Harold Burry's death in 1992, "The Titan Tradition dates its berth from a hot August day in 1952 when Harold E. Burry first ran onto the field as head coach of the football Titans. In the 100+ years of Titan football, there has been no more important day." Dr. Harold Burry, a New Castle native and 1935 Westminster graduate, would go on to lead Titan football to previously unthinkable heights. From 1952-71, Burry compiled a head coaching record of 127-31-5 (.794).

Coach Burry never knew a losing season in football in his 20 years at Westminster, while his Titan gridders posted six undefeated seasons. His teams posted 8-0 regular season records in 1953, 1956, 1964, 1970 and 1971 and a 6-0-1 mark in 1955. The 1970 record, when Westminster captured the inaugural NAIA Division II National Championship, was 10-0 overall, including two playoff wins. His 1971 record, where the Titans finished as national runner-up in NAIA Division II, was 8-1-1.

His teams were both offensive- and defensive-minded. The Titans scored 3,613 points in 163 games under Burry, an average of over 22 points per game, while allowing just 1,591 points in that time (9.76 ppg allowed).

Burry's top offensive team came in 1956, as the Titans outscored their opponents 344-51 en route to an unbeaten record. His top defensive teams were in 1953 and 1954, each allowing just 33 points in an entire season.

Twice Burry led the Titans to 24-game unbeaten streaks. The first occurred from 1954-57 (23-0-1), followed by another from 1969-71 (23-0-1). Burry's

teams also never lost a homecoming game and lost only 14 times on "Titan Turf" at Memorial Field in 20 years. Westminster's reputation as a defensive giant was growing, as the Titans posted 41 shutouts in Burry's tenure.

Westminster captured Tri-State Football Championships in 1955 and '56. In an 11-year span as a member of the West Penn Conference (1958-68), the Titans won or shared eight conference titles, including their first six years as a league member from 1958-63.

At the conclusion of his stellar career, Burry was recognized as one of the finest coaches in the land. In 1967, he was voted Small College Football Coach of the Year by the Football Writers of America (FWA), and was also selected to the NAIA Hall of Fame. In 1996, he would be further honored when he was one of just four coaches elected to the inaugural divisional (non-NCAA Division I) class of the College Football Hall of Fame. Burry was also honored by Westminster that same year, as the entire football stadium complex was renamed "Harold Burry Stadium."

Burry retired as head football coach following the 1971 season, remaining as athletic director at Westminster. Replacing him on the sidelines was the Titan offensive line coach, a former Westminster offensive lineman whose pugnacious style would serve him well as he carved his own distinct niche of success into Titan football history.

The Fusco Era (1972-90)

Few men could have matched the record of excellence of Burry. Fewer still could have taken that legacy and

improved upon it. Over the next 19 years, Dr. Joseph B. Fusco did just that.

Fusco led the Titans to a 154-34-3 (.814) record from 1972-90, leading the Titans to four more NAIA Division II National Championships in 1976, '77, '88 and '89. When he stepped down following the 1990 season, his career winning percentage was the second highest among all active NAIA football coaches with over 10 years of experience.

A 1960 Westminster alum, Fusco began his coaching career at nearby Wilmington and Grove City high schools before joining Burry's staff as offensive line coach in 1968. After serving as an assistant over the next four years, helping the Titans to the '70 national crown, he began a head coaching career that included nine NAIA national playoff appearances and 15 NAIA Division II Top 20 finishes. However, it was the national championship years that left Fusco an undeniable legacy of success. Fusco led Westminster to a 21-1 record while capturing the 1976 and 1977 NAIA Division II national titles. His 1977 team finished 11-0 (Fusco's first undefeated team) and also won the Lambert Bowl trophy as the top small college team in the Eastern United States. Fusco again led Westminster to back-to-back titles in 1988 (14-0) and 1989 (13-0), compiling a 27-game winning streak that, at the time, was the longest win streak of any college team in the nation at any level.

The 1988 championship is the most vivid in the memories of Titan fans. Nobody who was at Memorial Field that cold, snowy December day will forget Joe Micchia's 33-yard scoring strike to Dave Foley on 4th-and-10

with just seconds to play, breaking a 14-14 tie and giving the Titans a 21-14 championship win. Westminster made it back to the NAIA title game for an unprecedented third consecutive time in 1990, only to fall to Peru State in the championship in Fusco's final game as Titan head coach.

Like Burry, Fusco was showered with awards throughout his career. He was named 1988 NAIA National Coach of the Year, while earning NAIA District/Area Coach of the Year honors on seven occasions. In 1994, Fusco joined Burry in the NAIA Hall of Fame. He joined Burry in the College Football Hall of Fame Class of 2001.

Following his coaching retirement, the coaching position was passed on like a treasured heirloom to the next Titan mentor, who continued to improve and strengthen the Titan Tradition throughout the decade of the 1990s.

The Nicholson Era (1991-1999)

There is one coach in the history of Titan football who was a member of the coaching staff on all six of Westminster's national championship teams. Gene Nicholson, who recently retired from football coaching after over 30 years on the Titan football staff, is the one person who can make that claim.

After beginning his coaching career at Wilmington High School, the 1964 Slippery Rock graduate joined Burry's staff as defensive coordinator in 1969. In that position over the next 22 years, serving both Burry and Fusco, Nicholson helped to mold one of the premier defensive units in the country. He coached 23 All-Americans from 1969-90, including 16 First Team selections, as Westminster defenses gave up an average of only 10.6 points,

94.6 rushing yards and 132.9 passing yards per game. In 1990, the Titan defense cracked the national Top 10 in all four national defensive categories for the first time in school history.

Nicholson then replaced Fusco as head coach in 1991. The tradition of excellence at Westminster continued during his eight-year span leading the program.

In 1992, Nicholson led the program to its 11th undefeated regular season in school history. After reaching the NAIA title game in 1993, Westminster capped its 100th season with a 12-2 record and an NAIA-record sixth national title in 1994. The 1994 title gave the Titans national crowns in each of the past three decades. Nicholson is believed to have coached in more national championship games (nine) than any coach at any level in college football history.

For his efforts, the 1994 inductee into the Towering Titan Hall of Fame was selected as 1994 NAIA/Rawlings Division II National Coach of the Year, while earning the same honor from

American Football Quarterly. He was also selected as Coach of the Year in the Tri-State area by the Tri-State Football Officials Association.

The NCAA Division III Era (2000-???)

The Titan football program began its fifth era in 2000, as the College entered the Presidents' Athletic Conference (PAC) under the direction of new head coach Jerry Schmitt. The College took the next step in 2002, the program's first as a full member of NCAA Division III (thus eligible for conference titles and national playoffs).

If the lessons for the future can be learned in the past, as many historians say, the next era will continue the tradition of excellence, both on the gridiron and in the classroom that has been the hallmark of the Westminster Titan football program.

**Used by permission of current Westminster SID Justin Zackal; Joe is now Executive Director of the President's Athletic Conference.*