

High School Football Playoffs Began With Special Olympic Bowl

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By Jim Riggs, Post-Journal

Editor's Note: The state football playoffs continued this week with the regional round. But for too many years, high school football ended with the final regular-season game until a step toward playoffs began in 1977 and 1978. This column was originally published on Oct. 29, 1999.

The Section VI football playoffs began Friday for the 21st time. We take it for granted now, but the Section VI Football Federation didn't have any postseason play until 1979. However, it was the idea of some Chautauqua County coaches in 1977 to have a postseason game that helped get the playoffs started that we now take for granted.

On Nov. 12, 1977, at Southwestern's Lawson Field, Division 8 champion Maple Grove defeated Division 9 champion Panama, 27-0 in the first-ever Special Olympic Bowl. On Nov. 11, 1978, the second Special Olympics Bowl was held at Lawson Field and Division 8 champion Cassadaga Valley edged Division 9 champ Forestville, 16-13.

In 1979, the Section VI playoffs were held at Rich Stadium for the first time involving the champions from Divisions 1 through 9 plus a Division 1 wild card, so the Special Olympics Bowl was never held again. However, its tradition still lives with the current Class D Bowl for the Class D teams who did not qualify for the Section VI Playoffs.

One of the founders of the Special Olympics Bowl was Jack Keeney, who was the Division 9 chairman in 1977 and he also coached Panama in the final edition of the game.

And getting it off the ground helped a postseason for Western New York High School football get started.

"They were the precursors for a lot of things," Keeney said about the only two Special Olympic Bowls. "It was the precursor for the federation to get involved in postseason play and it was kind of a precursor for the D Bowl as well."

And like the original college bowl games, the Special Olympics Bowl was simply a reward for a couple of championship teams.

"We didn't call it a championship because the league play determined championships," Keeney said. "We called it the Special Olympics Bowl and we excluded the word championship from it. We've done the same thing in the Class D Bowl. It's not a championship game, it's a D Bowl game."

It also gave a Division 8 and a Division 9 football team another game.

"It seemed ludicrous to end the season after eight football games," Keeney said.

Larger schools, such as Jamestown, might have played a ninth game with a team from outside of Western New York, such as Bradford, Pennsylvania, or Binghamton, but finding opponents for the smaller schools was more difficult.

Also, postseason play all the way to state finals had recently been adopted for high school basketball.

That had already happened for other high school sports, but not for football.

"I think once they started regional and state basketball, those of us in football were saying, 'We're the only ones left out,'" Keeney recalled. "I don't think our initial attempt was to create a state championship. We were one of two states in the union that didn't have a state championship (for football), but rather to have some way of having championship teams play at the end of the season as well as to offer a venue for some revenue for a needy organization. I think it was twofold."

So plans were worked out for the Division 8 and 9 champions to play on the first Saturday after the regular season. Southwestern graciously donated its field and the Special Olympics was chosen as the organization to receive proceeds from ticket sales.

On a snowy Nov. 11, 1977, Maple Grove and Panama met in the first Special Olympics Bowl and the first-known postseason high school football game in Western New York matching division champions. The first half was played in a snowstorm, but things were clear for the final two quarters.

The weather didn't stop Maple Grove, which rolled to a 17-0 win, to finish with an 8-1 record - all eight wins were shutouts. Leighton Swanson led the Red Dragons with 125 yards rushing and a touchdown and Dave Boughton caught touchdown passes and kicked three extra points.

With the loss, Panama finished at 5-3-1.

The game was videotaped by BOCES and shown on the local cable station the following week.

The second Special Olympics Bowl in 1978 was closer with Cassadaga Valley coming away with a 16-13 win over Forestville on a warm, sunny day matching teams that finished the regular season with 6-3 records. The Cougars led 9-0 at halftime, but Forestville, quarterbacked by Bob North, stormed back in the third quarter to take a 13-9 lead.

In the fourth quarter, Jeff Hover caught a 37-yard touchdown pass from Bob Meder and Cassadaga Valley came away with a 16-13 victory.

The Special Olympics Bowl had again been a success on the field and also raised \$500 for the Special Olympics. It was also noticed by other Section VI divisions who wanted to get into the act.

"I think they saw that postseason play was possible and from there some of our meetings went to 'What can we (other divisions) do?'" Keeney said.

However, the Section VI Football Federation had also taken notice and began working on a playoff system that began with one round of games at Rich Stadium after the 1979 regular season. It was eventually expanded to two rounds in Section VI, then to regionals and finally to state championships that began in 1993.

We take that for granted now, but we can thank the Special Olympics Bowl for getting the ball rolling in Section VI back in the 1970s.

"It's improper to say the Special Olympics Bowl created the federation championships, but I think it had an influence on it," Keeney said.

And a lot of coaches, players and fans are glad it did.