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Pride, Determination Drive JHS

Coach Huckno Has Continued Winning Tradition

“When you think you’re doing the very best you can, you’re probably not even coming close to your limit.” - Wally Huckno

To get a read on what really makes Wally Huckno tick, one might have to go back about 35 years to when he was an undergraduate at Edinboro (Pa.) State.

“I was a good student in college, very intense,” the Jamestown High football coach said. “When it came to a test, I just studied and went after that test. I always wanted to do the very best.”

So he prepared for each test as if it was a final exam – his own personal version of academic one-on-one.

“They always say you hardly ever tax your brain,” Huckno said. “People think that they are working so hard and you’re probably only doing 10 percent. So I translate that into athletics.”

David Hinson got that message loud and clear two weeks ago.

Hinson, arguably the best player in Western New York this fall, hadn’t felt well all week leading up to the Division 1 showdown at Frontier, and as the JHS running back trudged off the field at halftime, he didn’t know if he could continue.

But it didn’t take long for him to change his mind.

In fact, all it took was a chat with Huckno.

“I said, ‘David, sit down. I’ll play (P.J.) Cotter if in the championship game you want to sit.’”

Yet when the undefeated Red Raiders took the field to start the second half, Hinson was in the lineup.

“He came back in the second half and did very well,” Huckno said. “One time we called back-to-back timeouts. He said, ‘I don’t think I have much left,’ and I said, ‘David, you have more left than you think you have left.’ And he broke a touchdown run.”

The Red Raiders went on to win, 22-6, to clinch the Division 1 title.

We know as people that we never do the most we are capable of.

In 1962, Huckno, who had just graduated from Edinboro, was entertaining a job offer from St. Gregory’s School in North East, Pa.

For \$3,200 a year, he could teach English and coach the football and basketball teams.

“I considered it long and hard,” Huckno said.

He eventually decided not to take it, hoping instead he’d land a job at Corry, Pa., where he’d done his student teaching. But nothing opened up there.

Huckno was disappointed.

Then Alfred Miller, a guidance counselor at Corry and a Jamestown resident, suggested Huckno apply in New York State. He was eventually hired for an English teaching position at Lincoln Junior High School.

During Huckno’s second year there, Mike Zanghi, the football coach, asked Huckno if he’d like to be his assistant. “I said, ‘Gee, I played football in high school, but I really have no background,’” the former Union City, Pa., resident said. “I really saw myself as a basketball and baseball coach.”

But by 1965, after Zanghi departed to join Tony Nunes on the JHS varsity staff, Huckno teamed up with Pete Hofert to coach the Knights to some fine seasons before assuming the head coaching spot in 1972.

Over the next four years, Huckno – along with assistants Joe DiMaio and Tom Phillips – won three Chadakoin Valley Junior High Conference championships.

“I would have stayed there and retired without any thought,” Huckno said.

Not only was he highly successful at Lincoln – the Knights once won 25 straight games – but Huckno was also coaching with two of his closest friends, DiMaio and Phillips.

But in 1976, Joe Sanfilippo, the JHS varsity coach, asked Huckno to be an assistant, a job the latter had always craved.

That season, Sanfilippo’s second as JHS coach, the Red Raiders almost won the Division 1 title at Sweet Home.

"I remember Joe saying to me, 'I don't know how we'll do, but they don't know how to win here at Jamestown yet,'" Huckno recalled. "Sweet Home has been a winner for years and they'll have an advantage.' It was a nip-and-tuck game and we lost by a couple of points.

"I remember that quotation and the longer I've been around, I think there's some truth in that you have to learn how to win. For some teams, it's ingrained. They learn how to lose and they're always struggling to not lose a game. From thence on, our program only got better and better. I don't think we ever had a down year to speak of."

Beginning with that season, Sanfilippo's teams were tremendously successful. And after the 1982 campaign, his record as the coach of the Red & Green was 48-22-2.

The program had begun to take shape.

"We began to roll at that point and began to talk about the importance of lifting weights," Huckno said. "We began to develop a program."

Then, one January day in 1983, Huckno received some shocking news.

"I was refereeing a basketball game and got home at 11 o'clock (when the phone rang)," Huckno recalled. "It was the Buffalo paper and they wanted to know if I had a comment about Joe Sanfilippo's announcement that he was retiring."

Huckno was named Jamestown's varsity coach in April 1983.

"People think that they are working so hard and they're probably only doing 10 percent."

While the players change from year to year, one thing remains constant in the JHS program – Red Raider pride.

"That phrase got very, very strong in the 1986-87 teams," Huckno said. "With Bob Pollino and Kurt Eimiller, they lived Raider pride. Our feeling is... it's wonderful to be a Red Raider and there are certain things you have to adhere to... We tell our kids that if you're ever suspended from school, you're dropped from the squad. If you skip practice, we drop you from the squad. It sounds maybe difficult to our ninth graders, but it slowly comes into them until they begin to get so dedicated."

Drawing from his years spent with Joe Sanfilippo and Dick Noonan, who preceded Sanfilippo, Huckno has put his stamp on the program.

Now in his 12th year, he and his staff – that numbers 14 beginning at the junior high level – has guided the Red Raiders to an 85-26-1 record and seven trips to Rich Stadium for the Section 6 Football Federation playoffs.

The highlight of his tenure came last year when the Red Raiders played in the state championship game against North Rockland, a contest they ultimately lost, 24-12.

"I never felt nervous," Huckno said of that game in the Carrier Dome in Syracuse. "I was composed throughout the playoffs... I don't feel any intense pressure. I think people in Jamestown help take that pressure off. They know the effort we put in. I can't expend any more energy than I do, my coaching staff can't. We prepare the kids as well as we can."

I think our kids don't want to disappoint the coaching staff. They want to give of themselves. We do say frequently: 'On Sunday morning look in the mirror and say I did my very best.' I don't care what the score is.

The scores this season have been lopsided as Jamestown, No. 1 among large schools in Western New York and No. 2 in the state Class A poll, has outscored its opponents, 341-75. A return trip to Syracuse looms on the horizon.

Still, such lofty rankings don't prevent Huckno from doing his share of screaming and hollering from the sidelines on game day.

"I know that's true," Huckno admitted. "The kids tell me I'm the nicest guy there is until game day. Even in practice, I'm not a difficult coach.

"I know I do have a transformation at times. My wife has been on the sideline and she steers clear of all the action. I know once we start, we're there for a purpose. Our boys frequently adopt the same mental feeling that I have and the coaching staff has. I can't tell you what it is, but I know there is a transformation."

Phillips says Huckno was the same way 20 years ago as a junior high school coach. "He was demanding there, too," Phillips said. "You weren't late and you made a commitment. I don't see him having changed one iota."

It's not easy being a Red Raider football player. It's very demanding. You're driven hard by the staff. I think there's a lot of love there. I think we truly care for the kids.

The Red Raiders finished the regular season this fall with an 8-0 record and a Division 1 championship. Most observers believe they are destined for a rematch with North Rockland in the Class A title game next month in Syracuse. If that happens, Huckno said he will have enjoyed the journey to the Carrier Dome as much as the game itself.

"People said it must have been wonderful to get to Syracuse (last year). I said, 'No, as a matter of fact it was almost a little disappointing. It's like going after that big buck or that big musky. It's the challenge in the preparation as you attempt to get there. Once you get there, it truly is not as wonderful and fulfilling as you thought it would be."

"I think athletics is a very fickle game. Just when you think you have things mastered and just when you think you should be the winner, that's when you get toppled off the throne."

That happened in 1987 when the Red Raiders – unbeaten during the regular season – were upset by West Seneca East in a playoff game that was played in a sea of mud at Jefferson School.

“That team, by rights, was one of the finest teams in the state,” Huckno recalled. “in turn, Orchard Park last year was absolutely an excellent team, and probably would have given North Rockland more of a game than we did. (But) we rose up and beat them at Rich Stadium.”

“I know the best team doesn’t always win. As intense as I am, I don’t brood too very long. I always say, ‘Sunday morning I’m going to get up and go to Mass, whether we win or lose.’”

The people in Jamestown care about how the Red Raiders are going to do on Saturday. That’s a comfort. It’s all a little bit of a burden, but not too heavy, because there’s a lot of hands helping to hold that.

Huckno, 54, took over as athletic director at JHS this year after spending 32 years in the classroom as an English teacher. And although he could retire at 55, he has no intention of doing so.

“I have no plans on retiring,” he said. “I don’t feel old either. David Currie (a varsity assistant with DiMaio and Phillips) is 32 years old, but he seems like an equal. I don’t feel like stepping down right now. This job has been a nice refreshing change.”

“I’m thinking this will kind of be a second breath and I’ll do it for a while, kind of play it by ear.”

When he does finally decide to hang up his whistle, Huckno can relax, play some golf, enjoy a good book or two, or continue to officiate basketball. But don’t expect that to happen anytime soon. He’s feeling as good as he ever has, plus he’s doing what he loves with people he enjoys.

“That’s what probably keeps me in it,” Huckno said. “Tommy (Phillips), David (Currie) and Joe (DiMaio). It’s just a neat, wonderfully comforting thing. We’re already planning for next year.”