



## CHARGER FOOTBALL

*When the majority of St. Joe alumni talk about Charger football, they're essentially talking about the story of David and Goliath, in the form of a mini-series one might see on cable or through a streaming medium. The small, determined young man who knows that he has the ability to defeat the giant, a sinister foe who confronts David with a significant difference in size and with more formidable weapons. Most weeks, David returns home a defeated man but his head is held high. Each week he returns to defeat the giant, confident he will find a vulnerable spot in his opponent. And when that happens there is much rejoicing in David's house. And while David's family celebrates, they recognize that David has learned a great deal about himself. He walks with an attitude of interior strength, fortitude, compassion for the downtrodden and with a desire to demonstrate that he has what it takes to beat the odds. And, for that, he's a better man.*

### IN THE BEGINNING

On September 8, 1966, a headline in *The Herald* announced "New Sport, New Coach". A picture of Head Coach Jack Annetti surrounded by players accompanied the news that St. Joseph High School in Westchester was adding football to its athletic program. The school would begin its venture in football with sophomore and freshman teams.

A week later, on September 15, the *Suburban Life* let readers know that the sophomore team would host Holy Cross HS in its premier game while the freshman squad would host Driscoll Catholic HS.

On September 22, *Westchester News* reported that the Chargers beat Holy Cross 12 – 6 in an exciting come-from-behind win. Highlights of the game were included in the coverage by both *The Herald* and the *Suburban Life*. Noted were a key interception by Jerry Fox and a touchdown scored by Terry Drugan.

By October 29, the *Suburban Life* previewed Homecoming for the sophomore team, which had recently lost its first game of the season to Marion Catholic, 8 - 0. The sophomores rebounded and improved to 4 – 1 – 1 with a Homecoming victory over DeLaSalle, 19 -7. On December 13, the same paper informed readers that St. Joseph High School "surprised" St. Pat's, with a 13 – 6 win.

The team also received major contributions from Bill McGlooin and Dave Egan.

Meanwhile, the freshman team finished their season with a respectable 4 – 4 tally.

Before the second season, *Westchester News* announced that SJHS football had silenced its critics with its second place finish in the CPL.

The *Suburban Life*, on October 5 and 12, reported the 26 – 6 win over Providence and the 19 – 6 win over Marist as the team improved to 4 – 0. In addition to Drugan and Fox, Mike Wojtyla was noted for his

efforts in the win over Providence. That team would also finish with only 1 loss. Another highlight was a strong effort in a scrimmage game against St. George's varsity.

In 1968, St. Joes would debut a varsity squad. Its first game would be overshadowed by civil rights protests. The varsity opened the season on the road in Iowa versus Waterloo East High School which, according to the *Suburban Life* sports editor Bob Faje, was "closed down Thursday and Friday due to disturbances reported as racial incidents." One player recalls seeing the lumber yard across from the hotel on fire.

The Chargers fell 65 – 20 that Friday but as the *Des Moines Register* reported, the city's "top-ranked" team was primed for a "third straight Iowa high school football championship."

In their next contest, the varsity beat Bishop McNamara, 20 -7, with great efforts from Drugan, Dave Naborowski, and Frank Conidi.

By the end of the season, local papers reported that the Chargers were led during the season by Terry Drugan, 89 completions in 208 attempts for 1354 yards; Jerry Fox, 37 receptions for 571 yards; and Dave Naborowski, 21 receptions for 401 yards.

## **AND NOW THE REST OF THE STORY**

The Chargers went up against major competition throughout their history, especially in a tough East Suburban Catholic Conference.

The varsity looked as if it might break through in the near future with the 1972 team, which recorded a three-game winning streak.

During this time there was a realignment in the East and West Suburban Catholic Conferences.

The 1974 team's defense allowed an average of only 9 points in the first 8 games in the ESCC but the offense struggled.

In 1975, the offense fared better and achieved a 4 – 5 record. During the same season, the freshman team, under Jerry Fox, became the first undefeated team for football.

In 1976, a single cause for celebration was the 16 – 13 homecoming win over Carmel, which earned the school a day off the following Monday, courtesy of Principal Brother Alfred Marshall.

The 1977 season saw the varsity put together only two wins, but both of them were shutouts, against Luther North and Carmel.

Although the 1978 team struggled, it was the only team in the conference that season to score against ESCC champion St. Viator. A memorable game included a hard fought, high scoring and close contest against Notre Dame.

Things were promising with the 1979 team as it recorded wins over Andrew and Driscoll in its first two games under new head coach Coach Bob Chmiel. But challenges awaited the team as it began its conference schedule. Excitement did brew when the Chargers were leading state-ranked St. Viator before falling to the Lions.

The Chargers improved in 1980 by beginning the season 2 – 0 but was only able to muster one more win, its first conference victory in 3 seasons. On September 13, 1980, Pat Tanzillo made an interception at Immaculate Conception, 8 yards deep in the opponent's end zone. His 108 return for a touchdown remains an IHSA record and earned Pat an appearance on Channel 7 news.

For many years, St. Joes played their home games at Proviso West with the Panthers their opening contest. After losing to Proviso 39 – 0 in 1982, the Chargers claimed victory over them 33 – 31 in 1983. St. Joes was always up for rival Holy Cross, who they defeated 42 – 26 for a homecoming win that same year. The Chargers enjoyed witnessing an Army Golden Night parachute with the game ball onto the field at Joliet Catholic at their homecoming and then suffered their worst defeat ever, 86 – 0. When asked if the score was accurate, one Charger responded, "I lived it, have the radio tapes."

The dominance over Proviso West continued with a 26 – 12 triumph in 1985 and a 16 – 12 win in 1986.

During the 1986 season, a highlight was the first win ever that the Chargers recorded over East Suburban Catholic Conference rival Notre Dame. In that game, and as reported in a local paper, quarterback Bob Cihlar connected on a 28-yard pass to Craig Lottie on the opening drive of the game. After a Don score, a handoff to Charles Phillips resulted in a 60-yard run and another St. Joe score. A two-point conversion gave the Chargers 15 points, which was sufficient for a 15 – 12 win.

A brief resurgence of Charger football occurred in the late 80s. While the 1988 team recorded only one win, 22 – 20 over Proviso West, it suffered three one-point losses, against Montini, St. Viator and Notre Dame.

The next season saw the 1989 squad beat Montini 30 – 16, St. Viator 28 – 20, both games following an 18 – 14 win over Proviso West.

After a winless season in 1990, with the Chargers suffering some close losses, the team made a strong comeback the next two seasons.

In his first year as head coach, Jerry Fox guided the 1991 Chargers to 3 wins, including victories over conference rivals Holy Cross, 16 – 14, and St. Pat's 15 – 6.

In 1992, St. Joes was one better, finishing 4 – 5, their best finish in 17 years. The varsity recorded wins over Proviso West 37 – 6, Herscher 20 – 19 (under the lights after a long bus ride following a spaghetti dinner in the café), and Holy Cross 32 – 20. The most exciting win, however, was the last game of the season, a home game played at Proviso East, a 21 – 8 victory, spoiling Marist's post-season hopes.

The following season proved more challenging as the 1993 squad was able to secure only 1 win, a 21 – 8 victory over Holy Cross.

In 1994, Paul Swaitly became head coach but the varsity was unable to record a victory.

In 1995, a one point loss to Benet and a two point loss to Leo was the closest the Chargers would get to wins.

With the establishment of the Chicago Catholic Metropolitan Conference, the Chargers picked up 3 wins in 1996, beating Crane, 28 – 8, Weber, 21 – 20, and St. Frances DeSales, 32 – 26.

The Chargers recorded the same number of wins in 1997 and over the same opponents, Crane 24 – 16, Weber, 21 – 6, and St. Frances DeSales, 31 – 17.

History repeated itself in 1998, with victories over Crane, 33 – 14, Weber 35 – 6, and St. Frances DeSales, 26 – 14.

In 1999, the Chargers climbed back to their best 4 – 5 record with wins over Weber (forfeit), Hales Franciscan, 28 – 22, and St. Frances DeSales, 28 – 20. The highlight of the season, however, was one of the best games in Charger history, a 50 – 48 homecoming win over St. Viator. Six records were broken that day as Ryan Keag threw for 345 yards.

In 2000, new head coach Rob Wagner led his team to a 4 – 5 record, as the Chargers beat Hales Franciscan, 33 – 22, Leo, 30 – 18, St. Frances DeSales, 46 – 12, and Lincoln Park 42 – 12.

The 2001 Chargers could only claim one win, a 39 – 0 triumph over Juarez.

In 2002, head coach Bob DeCarlo provided different experiences for his teams with trips to Wisconsin and Springfield. The Chargers won their only game on the last day of the season, a 35 – 21 victory over Ursuline.

The next several seasons saw the Chargers struggle against overpowering competition. Nick Goshe was named head coach in 2006 and worked hard to make St. Joseph HS competitive.

It wasn't until the 2008 Chargers ended a 45 game losing streak by beating Ridgewood 42 – 13 and then Argo 44 – 23. St. Joes also gave stiff competition to Marian Catholic and Notre Dame in tough losses. For bringing such a competitive team to the field, head coach Mark Zavagnin was named co-coach of the year in the conference.

In 2009, the Chargers defeated Ridgewood once again, 34 -14. Hopes were high to beat Marian Catholic and Notre Dame as the Chargers and the opposition were tied 7 – 7 at halftime in both games, which resulted in two losses.

In 2012, Anthony Griffin was named head coach and a 47 – 0 win was the only victory that team recorded that season.

In 2013, the team recorded two wins, a 41 – 0 victory over Catalyst Maria and Hales Franciscan (forfeit).

The Chargers would make history in 2016, beginning the season with 5 wins before finishing 7 – 2. St. Joes recorded wins over Elmwood Park, 15 – 12, Chicago Kelvyn Park, 63 – 0, East Moline United 41 – 19, Lake Forest, 28 – 21, DePaul Prep, 21 – 7, Leo, 40 – 30, and Aurora Christian, 32 – 26. More important to its fans was the fact that the 2016 Chargers played in the IHSA state playoffs for the first time in the school's history. That game did not result in a victory, as the Chargers fell to St. Bede, 40 – 13, but showed that David wasn't yet tired of meeting his Goliath.

Coaches over the years included (head varsity in bold): **Jack Annetti**, Mike Buckley, Sal Catanese, Brian Dobry, **Jerry Fox**, **Nick Goshe**, Don Heldman, Bill Hessler, Gil Hessler, Jeff Hester, John Laffey, Dean Magro, Russ Markovic, **Tony Manfre**, **Tom Mitchell**, Joe Niezgoda, Nick Novich, **Sal Nuccio**, Tom Patronski, Tom Reif, John Seno, George Strnad, **Paul Swaitly**, John Trumbull, **Rob Wagner**, Paul Waszek, **Mark Zavagnin**.

*According to its players, Charger football was synonymous with teamwork, pride, commitment, loyalty, discipline, brotherhood, playing with heart, and a never-quit attitude. Players were taught to “lift each other up emotionally,” especially during those challenging seasons when it was hard to put one game in the win column. But it was like “war with your buddies,” “a bonding experience like no other,” and it resulted in “friendships for life!”*

#### **Further reflections from Chargers:**

Not the #1 sport (basketball) or even #2 sport (soccer) at St. Joe's, ***but we still got plenty of support to make it memorable.***

I was very fortunate to play football at St. Joes. My coaches were inspiring and taught us the true meaning of team and teammates. ***The total football experience help me throughout my life and I am grateful for the opportunity. My teammates at every level will always be with me. They were my friends then and today.***

I punted shoeless and I had a few great kicks in our first game. I believe that Carmel was scouting that game and protested to the league that I wasn't wearing a shoe which was against the league rules, so I had to kick with a gymnastic slipper that I had to put on and take off to punt for the rest of the season.

Played cornerback. Don Heldman was our head coach and Joe Niezgoda was one of his assistants and defensive back coach. ***I believe we practiced or played for 72 straight days as seniors, always in full pads.***

Third game in the fall of 1971 and the undefeated Charger football squad is staring at a close loss. But senior Terry Crowley, Class of '72, lines up and kicks a last-minute field goal to lift Joes to a 15-14 victory over Marian Central (I believe that was the score and team), touching off a joyous celebration and moving the team to 3-0. Of course, that would turn out to be our last win on the gridiron (we did have a loss overturned and a win added by forfeit after the season). The following week we were crushed by St. Pats, our lone blowout, and then a string of hard-fought, narrow losses. ***Oh, what could have been.***

We were caught up in the original break-up of the conference my freshman year {and Andy Fredrick's senior year}. They had divided the conference into East and West Suburban Catholic Conference for the first time in 1974 I believe. We should have been placed in the West Suburban Conference with teams like Driscoll, St Francis, etc., as they were the smaller schools, but being all male school with approximately 650 students then the IHSA doubled our enrollment and we were playing in a conference with a much higher class than that we should have been playing in, vs. St. Pats, Holy Cross, Carmel, St. Viator, Marist so we were pretty much the doormats for the league.

We all learned self-discipline, working together for a common goal, hanging in during tough times. ***Perseverance, camaraderie, results of hard work, respect for one another were part of our experience as well.***

***My best friends to this day include some of my former teammates.*** And it wasn't just football, but there's always been something about being a part of St. Joe's that stays with us, even after all these years. Truly a feeling of family, even with grads that I have only gotten to know in recent years.

My junior year was Coach Nuccio's first year at Joes. He was very meticulous and made sure we were prepared for each practice and game. ***I learned a lot about football and getting prepared for a challenge from Coach Nuccio. I drew from that year many times as I coached myself.***

We always seemed to have ***less players than the other team, but we had quite bit of talent,*** not enough size though.

***I learned something useful about football and life from every St. Joe coach, God Bless Them All for spending all the time with us, even with losing records.*** You can find all the names in the yearbooks, but I fondly remember the late Coach Strnad, one of our freshman coaches....made us men really quick. And I remember Coach "Woz", never the head coach, but a faithful servant and good teacher.

Robert Early was a great running back, a pleasure to block for him and to watch him run. Joe Mohr was my best man. Great HS friends and memories made, sorry for not keeping in touch with all my teammates, but wish you all the best.

My friends to this day played FB with me. ***The feeling of team, games and practice were a bonding experience like no other.***

More so than the wins and losses, I appreciated my teammates and coaches. Learned lots of life lessons. My football experience with St. Joe started with the ***"Tony Manfre Camp of Champs" which was a summer camp he hosted when I was still in elementary school.*** I remember he taught our priorities in life should be "God, Family, School, then football". I remember cold fall mornings coming to freshman football games when it was still dark outside and passing the football around the chapel saying who we'd like to dedicate the game to.

***Tony Manfre, Bill Hessler and Jerry Fox were great role models and coaches.*** I probably didn't fully appreciate then all the time, effort and energy they sacrificed for us.

***Although it didn't reflect in wins, Mark Zavagnin did the best job I have seen anyone due with that program.*** He coached St. Joes when they had possibly their toughest schedule and made the team extremely respectable. You don't get coach of the year and not win a game for not doing such.

***Playing football help to shape who I am as a person for sure. It was an honor to be able to come back and coach at the school as an adult.***

#### Contributors

Mark Piraino '69

Tom Tuleja '69

Bob Tumbarello '69

Kevin Fitzgerald '71

Dan Breen '72

Bob Brown '72

Vince Seida '74

John Trumbull '75

Dan Kelley '77  
John Kaminski '78  
Tom Tripicchio '79  
Patrick Griffin '80  
Pat Tanzillo '81  
Roger Witek '84  
Craig Lottie '87  
John Salka '93  
Don Keller '95  
Josh Belluomini '01

**THE REMAINING HISTORY IS UNDER CONSTRUCTION**  
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