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The Year Norwalk High Went to a New Year's Day Bowl Game

By Mike Errico, Class of Feb. 1938

There are very few Norwalkers left who remember the year Norwalk High went to a New Year's Day Bowl Game.

It was nearly 71 years ago. Actually on January 1, 1939 and it was in Jacksonville, Florida, against a selected high school all star team. Norwalk won 14-7 and it was Norwalk High's one and only bowl game.

In the late 1930s, despite the apparent disadvantages of double sessions at the then West Avenue high school building, Norwalk High sought to maintain a decent level in high school sports. The main interest was the football team, which played its games at Amusement Park in South Norwalk. Wesley "Mike" Wilson, a teacher in the school, served as coach and came away with some decent teams over the years, especially when the Buschbaum twins, Joe and John, were playing.

Then, in January, 1938, the "new" high school on East Avenue opened.

Along with the magnificent new building came a level of school spirit which probably will never again be paralleled. No small measure of credit had to go to Judge Paul Connery, a local politician (his political opponents referred to him as "Little Caesar") whose son, Bill, was a halfback on the football team. Suddenly, things began to happen. Instead of a teacher coaching the football team, a star razzle-dazzle halfback at Colgate, Eugene "Ike" Kern, was hired to coach the team. Judge Connery was a Fordham graduate and one of his friends at

Fordham happened to be Frank Leahy, later to become one of Notre Dame's greatest coaches, often compared to Knute Rockne. At the time, Leahy was coaching the "Seven Blocks of Granite" at Fordham under Coach Jim Crowley.

Soon, Leahy was showing up regularly at Norwalk High's football practices. In fact, he also accompanied the team to its pre-season practice camp at a Ridgefield estate.

Conveniently, Judge Connery had other friends in high places. Radio and Broadway friends. Colonel Lemuel Stoopnagle, a star in radio (there was no television in 1938), became an immediate supporter of the Norwalk High team. Not only did he attend some practices but, later, he was to become a permanent resident on the Norwalk bench during games, or right behind it. He and several other noted Broadway stars of the era had earlier organized a variety show at the Palace Theater in So. Norwalk to provide funds for new and modern uniforms for the football team as well as for the newly organized band under the direction of Alton Fraleigh. Fraleigh was to be the first of the many great Norwalk High band leaders who followed over the years.

Norwalk fans watched these things developing with high expectations for Norwalk High and especially for Harry "Mickey" Connolly, a triple-threat star who later was to follow Leahy to Boston College where Leahy coached prior to Notre Dame. Triple threat? Connolly ran, passed and punted. He did it all. After four stellar years at Boston College, Connolly later starred with the then Brooklyn Dodgers professional

New Years Day Bowl Game

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football team and went on to become a successful college coach and athletic director of several major colleges.

Was there excitement in Norwalk? Not only the students but the townspeople followed the team in droves to out of town games and packed the stands at Amusement Park as Norwalk vanquished its early opponents.

Led by Connolly and Bill Connery at running back, Vic D'Amato at fullback and Jay Schwartz at quarterback, Norwalk had a starting line of Dan Meder and Jack Gearin at ends, Lou Renzuelli and Capt. John O'Connor at tackle, Brod Goldstein and Bill Lengyel at guard and Bill Fitzgerald at center. Rudy Costa was the fifth back doing the kickoffs and extra points. Two others who played in the Jacksonville game were Al Aquino, lanky end and tackle Mike Petropolous.

Needless to say, the team was outstanding. The season began with a 39-0 win over Stafford Springs and followed with one-sided wins over Central (27-0), Fairfield (20-0), Greenwich (21-7) and Milford 46-0). Then, on October 29th, came a hiccup – a loss to their then traditional rival, Danbury, 9-0. But the onslaught continued with wins over Leavenworth, Staples and Bassick before a discouraging 13-13 tie with Middletown on Thanksgiving Day to end the season.

With the season typically over, suddenly there were soundings on the horizon of a bid being offered by the Jacksonville Kiwanis Club to a team in Connecticut to play the Jacksonville High School All Stars on New Years Day. It was never actually proven that the Judge had anything to do with this, but it was decided that Norwalk and Stamford High would play for the prize, a trip to Florida for a bowl game.

Norwalk had not played Stamford for many years. Long a powerhouse in Connecticut football, Stamford was

heavily favored. It almost seemed hopeless. But Norwalk fans packed Boyle Stadium in Stamford and watched the Norwalk High team beat Stamford, 20-14. And so it was off to Jacksonville.

Excitement was rampant as Norwalkers crowded the railroad station in South Norwalk to see the team off and nearly a thousand made the trip south in a chartered train. In Jacksonville, the Norwalk team and its followers were feted at the Seminole Hotel, where they were housed, and the band led a rousing parade of Norwalkers from the train station to the hotel, with Alton Fraleigh leading it.

The game was a see-saw affair for the first half, with Norwalk trailing 7-0 at half time. They missed a scoring chance when Al Aquino dropped a pass from Connolly on the goal line. In the dressing room at half time, Kern and Leahy put their heads together and, in the third quarter, the team came out roaring.

In a 67 yard drive, Connolly and Connery took turns carrying the ball, with Jay Schwartz and Vic D'Amato doing some great blocking, and Connolly took it over from the one-yard line. His place kick tied the score.

Later in the third quarter, with the ball on his own 45, Connolly threw a 34 yard pass to Connery, who turned and ran the remaining 21 yards for the score. Again the point after was by Connolly's place kick. Now leading, Norwalk was hard pressed to hold off the stars from Jacksonville. The game ended with the ball on Norwalk's one-yard line when time ran out. With the game over, the jubilant Norwalk fans spilled out on the field to mob their heroes.

Estimates ranged from 5000 to 10000 Norwalkers who greeted the team and the chartered train on its return on January 4th, with City Hall decorated, streets blocked off and everybody making a speech. It was a memorable time when Norwalk celebrated its first and only New Year's Day Bowl Game, which some of us still remember with nostalgia.

2010 Wall of Honor Dinner



From CCHS to NHS

By John H. Palmer

If you attended Central Catholic High School back in 1990, you remember the front page headlines all too well, even 20 years later.

Despite promises from the Diocese of Bridgeport to keep the school open no matter what, the school would close forever at the end of that school year.

For many students at the beginning of their high school career, it might not have been such a big deal. But if you were an upperclassman, it was a different story. With three years under our belt, we'd be forced to start all over again, transitioning into another school and another circle of friends.

"I felt as if my high school career was cut short after only three years," said Diana Cappuccia McCarthy. "I was not ready for college, yet high school as I knew it for three years was over. I was in limbo."

It was a decision none of us wanted to make, but we had to decide where to go for that one last year of high school. Some of us went to Trinity Catholic in Stamford or another Catholic school to finish off our education. For those of us who chose to stay local and go to Norwalk High School, it took some getting used to.

"I think the big thing for me was the size of the school," said Josh Drew. "I grew up going to St. Philips and Central and each class was tiny compared to Norwalk High School. I remember visiting Trinity Catholic and Immaculate and felt like I fit in better there but logistically there was no way I would be able to attend those schools."

Class size and the actual size of Norwalk High School itself was a factor that seemed to intimidate everyone. Central Catholic was a much smaller building, and it made it easier to socialize.

"Going from a small school where I've been with kids from kindergarten on - they were my second family - to such a larger school was scary," said Mona Solano.

But in the end, it's safe to say we all did fine at Norwalk High School. A bigger school meant more choices in the curriculum, and that opened up doors for students used to a rigid college prep program. I can attest that it's likely I never would have started a career in journalism if I didn't have the opportunity to join Mrs. Versage's Mass Media class. I meant to take it as an elective simply to graduate, but I enjoyed learning about television news production and ended up 20 years later in a satisfying career as a newspaper reporter. "I took art and painting classes, drafting, automotive - classes that were unheard of at CCHS," said Josh Drew. "That was a lot of fun and plugged me in quicker."

Drew added that he played football at Norwalk High School, and that is what helped him to make friends at the school. "I did the summer training and met a lot of guys that helped me transition easily," he said. "Even though I never made it through the full season, it helped knowing a few more people in the hallway."

In the end, we all made new friends and found our way around Norwalk High School. Almost 20 years later, the memories of Central Catholic will always stay with us. CCHS Alumni are a tight bunch - Just log onto Facebook, and you don't have to look far to find a page dedicated to the memories. But everyone agrees that Norwalk High School was an important part of who we have become today. "I must say everyone at Norwalk High was welcoming and that really helped," said Mona Solano.

John H. Palmer is a 1991 graduate of Norwalk High School. He currently lives in Norwalk and works as a freelance journalist for several publications including the Norwalk Hour.



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Upcoming Class Reunions

(Note: Check the Reunion Link on our website for any changes to these reunions: www.norwalkhs.org)

Class of 1990: Fall 2010, date, time and location to be determined. For more information contact Jennifer Zinsser-Wilson, via email at jenniferzinsser@yahoo.com.

Class of February 1938 73rd Reunion Luncheon, Saturday, July 9, 2011 at So. Norwalk Boat Club. Contact Mike Errico at 203-441-8024.

SAVE THE DATE!
CHRISTMAS PARTY
WEDNESDAY
DECEMBER 8TH
NORWALK CITY HALL
7:00 PM



Norwalk High School Alumni Association



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