

1980 HHS Football- Mountain Valley Conference- CJ Group III State Champions



In the summer of 1980, Head Coach Joe Paulino, Defensive Coordinator Otto Gsell, assistants Tony Treonze and Fred Keiper led 45 seniors, juniors and sophomores into what would be one of the most memorable football seasons in HHS history. Football meant something in Hillsborough. HHS teams played hard, physical football and they were expected to win. A tradition had been established by Coach Paulino since he started the program in 1969 and everyone who played knew what was expected. The 1980 team wanted to do their part. The season began during one of the hottest and driest summers on record. The practice field was a dust bowl in days. Training camp was reminiscent of the “Junction Boys” – the tale of Bear Bryant’s first year as head Coach at Texas A&M. What didn’t kill them made them stronger. Coach Gsell and Coach Treonze were the trainers, water was “for the weak” and needless to say- nobody wanted to admit they were tired or hurt.

The team began its last season in the Mountain Valley Conference and would play a few future Mid-State Conference opponents and was classified as a Central Jersey Group III school for the first time- moving up from Group II. Coach Paulino Guided an offense led primarily of seniors with some talented Juniors and a few sophomores and the team ran off workman-like victories over Franklin, David Brearley of Kenilworth, Middlesex and long-time rival Ridge. The defense emerged as a growing force led by a mix of many juniors and seniors. Coach Gsell came up with new blitz packages every week and brought pressure from everywhere. With a roster that dressed only 41 healthy JV- Varsity players by season’s end- the team had surprisingly developed into a two platoon system with only a few players having to play both on Offense and Defense.

The Week 5 matchup against Bridgewater-Raritan West was a key moment in the season. While the first loss in a closely fought game left the Boro at 4-1, it also was a “wake-up call” of sorts. Chris Bates- the outstanding Senior QB who guided the efficient offense was out for the season after suffering two knee injuries and strong-armed sophomore Steve Grober would have to take over. Everyone knew that they would have to work a little harder and do a little more. The coaches did a masterful job of taking advantage of the

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team's strengths and exploiting opponents' weaknesses and the Raiders went on beating North Plainfield, Governor Livingston and Roselle Park in blowout wins. The Raider fan base was growing each week and the parent tailgates became a factor in the team's success. A few years later a player from Roselle Park admitted how intimidated they were when they arrived at their own school and were greeted by an army of Cardinal and Gold Raider fans in the parking lot- "We thought we were playing Nebraska" he said .

The 7-1 Raiders qualified for the CJ Group III Playoffs and would have to play at Somerville High School's legendary Brooks Field. Long-time Somerville Head Coach Jerry Moore was in the midst of a 20 game win streak and the odds were against the up-start Raiders. In one of the great games in Central Jersey Football History- " The Boro" knocked off "The Ville 14-12. The highlight, was the 69 yard touchdown pass down the right sideline from Steve Grober to Rich Resavy that was called back on a phantom " Illegal man downfield " penalty. The same combination hooked up on the same route on the left side for a 84 yard TD on the very next play. Great defense stifled the Pioneers all day and the exclamation point was Greg Adams' interception of the 2 point pass attempt in the closing seconds to clinch the win and help the Raiders advance to the Central Jersey Group III Final.

Before their State Championship game the Raiders still had to play Thanksgiving rival Immaculata HS. After defeating Somerville on Saturday, Coach Paulino asked the Spartan's Head Coach Pierce Frauenheim if the game could be moved from previously scheduled Wednesday night to Thursday-Thanksgiving Day at Brooks's field. Frauenheim refused even though the field was available on Thursday. On limited rest and with only 2 days to prepare, the Raiders turned a close 14-13 halftime lead into a 39-13 route scoring on every possession of the 2nd half. Anyone within ear-shot of the Raider buses could hear Coach Gsell shouting as he stood in the bus doorway as the team pulled away. "Anybody else in Somerville want to get their ass kicked??!!"

The 9-1 Raiders would now face the heavily favored, Star Ledger #1 ranked Madison Central High School Spartans from Old Bridge. On Sunday December 7, 1980, the game would be one of the first high school championships played at Giants Stadium. The underdog Raiders brought everything they had. The smallest Central Jersey Group III school was playing one of the biggest. Madison Central had a roster with over 85 suited up for the game and boasted two of the best running backs in the state –each with over 1000 yds of rushing. They were undefeated and loaded with size and talent. The Boro had balance and toughness. A swarming, pressure defense and some key offense drives saw the back and forth game end in a 7-7 tie in regulation. The Boro retained the ball in overtime and a 27 yrd field goal gave HHS its' first CJ Group III Championship - 10-7.

Numerous post-season awards and accolades followed. Joe Paulino was named "Coach of the Year", the team was the WCTC #1 team in Central NJ and won the first "Bateman Award Trophy". Many team members were selected to the All Area, All County and All State teams. The team received commemorative championship plaques and jackets at a banquet at the Sheraton Inn in Somerset. Rutgers Head Coach Frank Burns was the featured speaker. Prior to the Championship game Hillsborough Mayor Thomas Brodbeck and the Twp Committee named the entrance road to the High School "RAIDER BOULEVARD" (The name of the street where HHS is located today) The 1980 team finished 10-1, scored 252 points and gave up 88. An oil painting commemorating the championship game was presented to the team by Jim McGinley of the Hillsborough Dukes and it hangs in the HHS lobby today.

In 2010, a you-tube video highlight clip of the 1980 championship game was posted by HHS Player Dave Bowen. Within weeks many of the HHS 1980 Alumni and to some surprise, many from the Madison Central team all began watching it and communicating. Players and coaches discussed planning a reunion of both teams. On December 7, 2010 a 30 year reunion was held in a hotel in East Rutherford, NJ not far from the original Giants Stadium and coaches, players and friends from both HHS and Madison Central enjoyed an evening of reminiscing about the 1980 season and the championship game. The similarities between both groups of men from both schools and all the things that they all had in common became apparent. They were all tough, blue-collar kids that loved to play football and loved each other and their coaches. Many of the players from both teams stayed in touch. Coach Bob Demarco and Coach Joe Paulino shared a mutual respect and admiration at that reunion and Coach Demarco and some of the Madison Central players paid their respects at Coach Paulino's funeral last fall.

The 1980 HHS Football team was proud to represent Hillsborough and very proud and appreciative in being honored in the Hillsborough High School Hall of Fame.