

A CENTURY OF HEROES

Introduction

Massillon's Proud History Includes Rockne and Brown, Pro and High School Championships

Massillon, Ohio is a city of heroes. Most of them are well-muscled teenagers who don shoulder pads and

helmets for Friday night battles every fall. For over a century these post-pubescent warriors have made Massil-

lon the most tradition-rich football town in the USA. Massillon is located in the



Massillon fans jam Lincoln Way, the town's main thoroughfare, in a snowstorm, to honor their gridiron heroes in 2005.

PHOTO: JOE NAGY

helmets for Friday night battles every fall. For over a century these post-pubescent warriors have made Massil-

lon the most tradition-rich football town in the USA. Massillon is located in the southwest corner of north-eastern Ohio, about an hour south of Cleveland, on the Tuscarawas River. Through

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its early days as a wheat port, and its heyday as a world leader in the steel industry, Massillon has forged its identity as a football town. And while the steel industry has died, football remains the lifeblood of the city.

It begins at birth when each baby boy is given a football, and it ends at the grave when diehards are buried in Massillon Tiger coffins.

Luther Emery, Massillon's great sportswriter and newspaper editor expressed it best.

"Football is bred in Massillonians," Emery said. "The native citizen has heard it talked about from the time he opened his eyes in the cradle, and new residents have frequently been bored to tears with the boasts of the old guard until they, too, become convinced that there's something more than usual

about the game as it is played here. The whole community enters into the spirit of the thing."

The reason for this undying devotion to their gridiron heroes dates back to the turn of the century when the Pro Tigers were dominating professional football. By the time Massillon was producing its first steel in 1909, its high school was producing its first undefeated football team. A century later, Massillon's high school team has enjoyed 23 undefeated seasons.

"You can go back as long as you want to go back," University of Michigan coaching legend Bo Schembechler said of Massillon's tradition. "That's one school that has been a consistent, traditional powerhouse down through the years. That's one of the greatest high school programs in the nation."

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Schembechler, who coached the Michigan Wolverines from 1969-1989, may be looked at as an outsider by many Massillon fans, but he grew up with a great respect for Massillon football and the players who played there.

“What do I know about Massillon? I was born and raised in Barberton, Ohio. Yes, I know all about Massillon. I *know* Massillon, I know Canton McKinley. That’s my home.

“Massillon kids were always in a program where they were well coached, well trained. I’ve coached Massillon kids at Ohio State and Michigan. I’ve coached ’em everywhere. Back in the ’50s when I was with Woody Hayes at Ohio State, I coached linemen Jim Schumacher, Jerry Krisher and Jim Reichenbach. They all came down at the same

time. Mike Takacs was already there. They were the Massillon Middle. When you come out of a program like that, these guys are guys who have been around. They know how to play, they’re highly competitive, they’re used to winning. They know what they’re doing.”

Massillon teams have maintained a standard of excellence for over a century. When the high school team started playing in 1894, their debut was inauspicious. It was the Pro Tigers who started Massillon’s championship tradition.

The Pro Tigers won pro football’s first five professional football championships, from 1903-07. In 1915 they shared the title with Canton.

In over 100 years of playing football, whether on the professional, semi-professional

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or high school level, Massillon has produced All-Ohioans, All-Americans, All-Pros, college head coaches, National Football League head coaches, general managers, and owners.

Massillon has 22 high school state championships, 9 high school national championships, 6 professional football championships, and who knows how many semi-pro championships.

Seven football stadiums in the USA are named after Massil-

lon players and coaches. Paul Brown is probably the only person to have *two* stadiums named after him, Paul Brown Tiger Stadium in Massillon and Paul Brown Stadium in Cincinnati, home of the Cincinnati Bengals.

Knute Rockne starred for the Pro Tigers before becoming Notre Dame's legendary coach. He has a stadium named after him in Chicago.

Bill Edwards played during the early years at Massillon and went on to achieve great coach-



Lori (Liebermann) Miller with a tray of Tiger Tails. The orange and black striped cream sticks are big sellers at the century-old bakery—Liebermann's—in downtown Massillon. It's an example of how Massillon football permeates the community.

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ing success. The stadium at Wittenberg University bears his name.

Edwin “Dutch” Hill was Edwards’ teammate at Massillon, leading Massillon to its first state championship after starring in Burgettstown, Pennsylvania. The stadium in Burgettstown, where he grew up, bears his name.

Lee Tressel, father of Ohio State coach Jim Tressel, was Massillon’s head coach from 1956-57. He left Massillon to begin his legendary coaching career at Baldwin Wallace University, where he had been a star running back. The stadium at Baldwin Wallace is now named Tressel Field.

Bob Commings, Massillon’s head coach from 1969-73, has a stadium named after him, too, at GlenOak High School in Canton. Commings coached GlenOak

after head coaching stints at Massillon and the University of Iowa.

Earle Bruce, Chuck Mather and Don James probably *should* have stadiums named after them. Both Bruce and Mather are members of the Ohio High School Coaches Hall of Fame. Bruce and James are members of the College Football Hall of Fame. Bruce was selected for his coaching success at Ohio State, Iowa State, University of Tampa and Colorado State. James was elected to the Hall of Fame after his legendary career at the University of Washington, where he led the Huskies to six Rose Bowls and a national championship. The impressive glass-enclosed Don James Center is a vital feature of Huskie Stadium in Seattle.

Massillon may be the most productive coaching cradle

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in football history. Two of the most famous coaches of all time, Brown and Rockne, played in Massillon.

Brown, who grew up in Massillon, won championships at the high school, college, and pro levels—14 in all—and may just be the greatest football coach of all time.

Through the years, Massillon has produced hundreds of college players, dozens of NFL players, four NFL general managers and three NFL head coaches.

The College Football Hall of Fame in South Bend, Indiana, has 11 Massillon players or coaches as enshrinees. The Ohio High School Football Coaches Hall of Fame counts 12 Massillon members on its roster.

Six Massillon players have been elected captain at Ohio State. Three Ohio State head coaches were former Massillon coaches. Four former Tigers are Cleveland Browns Legends. Massillon players are often captains of their college teams.

Massillon's love of its football team shows no sign of waning. The tradition just grows stronger with each succeeding generation.

Some say Massillon is a town stuck in the 1950's because of their unbridled enthusiasm for their team and their adherence to tradition.

Maybe that's not such a bad thing.