



The 1972 coaching staff: (top row from left) Frank Fultz, Larry Schrecengost and Al Shilling and (bottom row) head coach Joe Stewart and Harry Miller.

The only way a high school football team can accomplish what the Franklin Knights did 50 years ago is to win the state championship – that is, put together an unbeaten, untied season. And the Knights did it not just once, but twice, going 9-0 in 1971 and again in 1972.

It hasn't been done before or since in Franklin or Venango County history – although the Oil City Oilers registered back-to-back undefeated *regular* seasons in 2019 and 2020. But then came the playoffs.

There were no playoffs 50 years ago.

Close, but no cigar

The Knights came close to perfection in 1967 and 1959, going 8-0-1 under coach Joe Stewart in '67 and 7-0-1 under coach Jim McCullough in '59.

It was Stewart – given name David and the high school chemistry teacher – who found the perfect formula in the early 1970s. This was in the midst of Golden Age II of FHS football. The

Knights were 72-14 from 1965-74, and boasted once-beaten teams in 1965 and 1966. In fact, Franklin would have gone undefeated in 1966, but a game with a big WPIAL school was tacked on at the end, and the Knights, who were virtually without their star player, Red Law, went down to defeat at Kiski Area, 13-2.

But they would rise again in 1971, claiming their first Northwest Conference title ever and their first Section 2 crown since 1967, and then rinse and repeat in 1972.

The routes to perfection were completely different, though. The 1971 team won eight of its nine games by 14 points or less and six by fewer than nine points. The most lopsided victory was 19 points, 25-6, against Meadville.

The next year, with "everybody back," they rolled all comers by an average score of 39-6 until Week 8 when they played Warren. Then they fended off the Dragons, 7-0, before following that up with a 22-14 victory over Hickory for a second straight El Perfecto.

It was against Warren that the Knights clinched the Section 2 and Northwest Conference crowns in 1971, but they had to rally from a 14-0 first-quarter deficit for the 24-14 win.

Otis Law's 47-yard run in the third quarter put the Knights ahead to stay before a 9-yard scamper by QB Frank Trinch extended the lead to 24-14 with 6:22 left. Brad Crawshaw (136 yards) and Law (127) answered the output by Warren's Tom Bright, the late coach Toby Shea's latest tailback sensation at the time who ran for 167 yards on 26 carries.

Franklin celebrates

The conquest also prompted a spontaneous celebration that erupted at a little after 10 p.m. from the football locker room at Miller-Sibley Field, then home to the Knights, to downtown Franklin.

This is partly how the late Jack Mays, sports editor of The News-Herald, described the scene: "Liberty Street was filled with horns honking the Franklin victory...Confetti and tissue paper streamers lined 13th Street along with car loads of shouting deliriously happy FHS fans."

The next week the Knights beat Hickory, 20-8, to wrap up the unbeaten campaign as the 5-7, 145-pound Trinch passed for a touchdown and scored two others, one on a 38-yard lateral from Dave Hasson.

Another celebration was held at the South Park bandstand that night – Nov. 6. Several school officials were there to speak, and MC Larry Beightol, the voice of the Knights on WFRA, introduced Stewart and his assistants – Larry Schrecengost, Lou Slautterback, Frank Fultz and Mike Romaniszyn. Booster Club president Bruce Turner said players would receive white jackets, which would become the trademark of FHS championship teams.

Law and Crawshaw were the mainstays of the Knights backfield for two straight years.

Crawshaw, who transferred from Meadville to Franklin after his sophomore year, rushed for more than 1,600 yards in his career at Franklin, and Law added more than 1,200 and picked off 12 passes.

Law provided two more highlights in '71 – a 30-yard TD against Titusville and a 67-yard jaunt against Sharpsville were the differences in those games.

Later, Corry held the Knights scoreless until Steve Eakin tossed a 10-yard touchdown pass to Gene Ray before Dave Baughman's 43-yard run with an intercepted lateral put the exclamation point on that 20-6 victory.

Eakin was one of four Franklin players to toss a TD pass that season.

Mick Harris was a big contributor at fullback, not only with his running and his blocking, but with his kicking. His field goal in the opener against Reynolds was Franklin's first since 1924 when Howard Foster put one through the uprights against Knox.

Trinch was a senior in 1971 and led Franklin with seven TDs and 44 points. With the Knights nursing a 7-0 halftime lead against Oil City, his 68-yard kickoff return for a touchdown gave them some breathing room in a 15-6 decision.

Trinch, Crawshaw, OG Bob Wagner and DT Dave Beichner were first team on the Northwest Conference and Section 2 all-stars. They were joined by Law, Hasson and Baughman on the S-2 stars. Harris, Fred Moffitt, Steve Phillips, Fred Johnston, Buzzy Scott, Jay Davis and Corby Allen were also honored in some capacity.

Big things expected in '72

With Trinch lost to graduation, Eakin became the quarterback in 1972 when big things were expected.

Franklin did not disappoint, running roughshod over its first seven foes, including a 53-0 romp over Oil City. I remember leaving the Oil City press box after that one. Principal John O. Kaufman, a former Oiler coach, said to me, "That's some kind of football team they have." Or words to that effect.

Even though the Knights would seemingly have their way with their next two opponents, Meadville and Grove City, Stewart would later say, "I think we peaked against Oil City. We just weren't as sharp the rest of the way."

Franklin enjoyed 27-point third quarters against both teams and they sorely needed it against Grove City, which led at halftime, 15-13. Grove City couldn't stop Crawshaw (190 yards) or Law (112) and the Franklin dynamic duo posted three-TD game against both the Eagles and Meadville. Law had an 85-yard punt return against the Bulldogs.

Warren again

As it happened, it all came down to Week 8 against Warren. The defense pitched its fourth shutout of the season and held the Dragons to 57 yards, allowing Franklin to survive, 7-0. Brad Crawshaw's first-quarter 58-yard TD was the difference. He took an option pitch from Eakin and scored behind blocks by Mike Wagner, Harris, Bob Woods and Allen. While that touchdown stood up, the Dragons were pesky. They were on their 45 late in the game when Gary Blair made a key tackle and batted down two passes as time ran out. Earlier, Warren was on the Franklin 33 when Woods sacked quarterback Jeff Mead for a 9-yard loss on fourth down. The Knights then ended their second straight undefeated season with a 22-14 victory over Hickory.

School record for Crawshaw

Crawshaw rushed for a then-school record 1,021 yards and Law added 851. Each tallied 14 TDs. Harris added 51 points on four TDs and 27 kicking points. He ran for 341 yards. Eakin had almost 700 yards total offense and Hasson led the receivers with 13 catches for 222 yards.

The defense yielded 2.8 yards per running play and forced 32 turnovers – 17 INTs and 15 fumbles. Opponents averaged 3.1 yards on their 45 plays per game.

Franklin boasted seven first- team and seven second-team all-Northwest Conference players. It had 11 first-team All-Section 2 performers, three more on the second team and another six on the honorable mention list.

Some of the players went on to have college careers – Hasson at Westminster, Bob Wagner at Harvard and Crawshaw at Edinboro to name a few.

Hasson played on two of the Titans' NAIA championship teams, and led Westminster in receiving three times. He caught 67 passes for 1,051 yards and 12 touchdowns in his career as Westminster went 10-1 his junior year in 1976, and 11-0 in 1977 – which certainly wasn't anything new to him.