

*(Editor's Note – This story written by John Kampf appeared in the Willoughby, Ohio, News-Herald in late October.)*

Young Philip and Jake LaVerde grabbed and tugged at the state championship football trophy the Kirtland football team had just won.



The year was 2011, and the sons of Hornets head football coach Tiger LaVerde were on the sideline as ball boys for the Hornets' 28-7 win over Coldwater in the Division V state championship game at Massillon's Paul Brown Stadium.

"Someday, this is going to be us," the boys thought to themselves, young Jake mean-mugging for a photo with the state championship trophy.

The two sons of Tiger and Mary LaVerde probably didn't do that math at the time, but their age difference meant they would only have one shot do it — play for their dad together in a state championship season — and this is that year.

When Coach LaVerde's Hornets take to the field

on Oct. 28 in a Division VI, Region 25 playoff opener against Independence, they will do so with senior Philip and freshman Jake on the same team and playing for their father for the first and only time in any of their lives.

The goal? The same one the boys dreamed of back in 2011 when they held the trophy in the locker room in Massillon — to play for their dad and win a state championship together.

"That's the goal," Philip said. "That'd be special to bring it home with these two. That's what we thought of growing up. This run will be more fun because I'm doing it with them."

Philip is a standout on both sides of the ball for the Hornets, packing a punch in the running game by rushing for more than 400 yards on offense, while leading the team on defense with 104 tackles, 24 tackles for loss and six sacks.

Jake is the starting quarterback as a freshman, having thrown for 810 yards and 11 touchdowns in Kirtland's run-based offense, adding in his share of rushing yards as well. And their father — well — he's only one of the most successful coaches in Ohio history. Heading into the playoff opener against Independence, Tiger LaVerde has a 209-18 (.921) as Kirtland's head coach, having led the Hornets to six state titles.

He admitted No. 7 would be something special if it happens this year because it's the only time he and his boys are on the same team together.

"You're always nervous as a coach in the playoffs and in big games," Tiger said. "I'm more nervous now. You're always hoping your kid does well. There's more anxiety to it this year, but we don't talk about it. We just try to enjoy it."

As young kids — back in 2011 when their father helped bring Kirtland its first state title, and even before — Phil and Jake LaVerde were just like any other kids in that they were always playing sports and doing so at a competitive level.

Just like Tiger and his siblings were when they were growing up in Oil City, Pa.

The only difference was they got to hang out with and be ball boys for a Kirtland football program that was at that time building a dynasty that no one — not even Tiger himself — saw coming.

“I remember coming in on Saturdays when I was really young, maybe 5 or 6, to watch film with the team,” Philip said.

“And to eat donuts,” his father added, which brought a laugh and a nod of affirmation from his eldest son.

A few years later, “Jakey,” as his father calls him, joined in — even though he was only in preschool.

“Dad would send a player down to get me from preschool when I was like 4,” he said. “It was so much fun.”

The LaVerde boys grew up steeped in Kirtland football. The fun and competition was just as prevalent at home, along with sisters Leah and Sophia.

“We always had a game going,” Tiger said, “whether it was deck hockey, whiffle ball, badminton, volleyball or pool basketball. We always had some sort of competition. My wife (Mary) probably thinks we’re too competitive.”

But Tiger, one of eight children, grew up the same way.

“We’re no different than you and Uncle Matt are,” Philip said. “They’re competitive in whiffle ball to this day.”

That competitive nature brought out the best in both the boys — and probably the girls, too. This past summer, when Philip was gearing up for his senior season, he (as always) dragged his little brother along with him, though Jakey is “little brother” in name only since he’s already taller than his older sibling.

“All summer we worked hard on running routes,” Philip said. “I brought him to every workout and worked with him all summer.”

Jake loved it. After all, he grew up playing backyard sports with Philip and his friends.

“It’s just fun to get to play with him,” Jake said. “All summer the last few years we did that, so it’s good.”

Jake won a preseason quarterback competition with senior Luke Chuko. Since then, Chuko has moved to defense and has been one of the most integral parts of the proud Kirtland defense that has allowed only 51 points this regular season.

Now that both LaVerde boys are on the varsity unit, they’ve learned a lot since they were ball boys.

“When you’re young, you don’t realize how impressive it is,” Philip said of Kirtland’s run of success under his father. “When you’re young, just just expect to win. You don’t know how hard it is to get there, the hard work it takes.”

That hard work has paid off across the board, not just for the LaVerde boys.

“We have a lot of great leaders on this team,” Tiger said. “This senior class’ GPA is the best we’ve had in a long time. Just great kids.”

Tiger said the 2022 season has flown by faster than any he's coached. There's probably many reasons for that, including an earlier-than-ever start to the season and a regular season that ended on Oct. 21. But another big reason is likely because his sons are on the team for the first — and only — time they've played together with him as their head coach.

"I can't believe we're at playoff time already," he said. "This season has just flown. ... As always, whenever this ends, I just hope everybody looks back and said, "that was a lot of fun. I'm glad we did that."

That's the feeling every year, he noted.

But a trophy this year? With the three of them together?

"Yeah," Jake said with a smile. "That would be cool."