

**SUCCESS** *from B1*

The last time the Elkton seniors found a high level of success on the football field was during their eighth-grade year. Nearly the same group that is on today's high school team competed on that middle school team.

The year started with a coaching change. Mike Hughes, an education administrator and former football and wrestling coach who prides himself on conditioning his teams, took charge. Having never coached eight-man, he had to overcome a steep learning curve in addition to finding a way to reach his team.

"They had got to the point where, in my opinion, they thought they couldn't win. You know, they had just got to that point. It had nothing to do with the previous coach or anything like that, it's just, they had just got stuck in this rut," Hughes, now 69, reflected.

After getting this middle school team into the weight room and in shape, they were ready for the upcoming season. They were ready for their first game. Their first test.

Ready until the day of the game came and proved otherwise.

"Our first game was against North Douglas and we just got hammered. And I thought I had them mentally and physically prepared. I didn't. So I apologized to them. And I said, 'I promise you this is never going to happen to you on my watch again,'" said Hughes.

While the Elkton team complained, both then and now, about a North Douglas player being over the weight limit in the game, it was the team from down the road in Drain getting the best of them.

Hughes stayed true to his word and the team turned the season around and didn't lose another

game the rest of the way. They beat teams that had previously walked over them by over 40 points and for the first time on the field, they were winning.

"Their confidence was there, they started believing in themselves and they believed in the system," said Hughes.

Hughes became a believer in this group. So much so that when the team asked him to coach them at the high school, he agreed and ended up switching with a high school coach who was looking to coach middle school.

In those first years at Elkton High School for both the group of once successful eighth graders and Hughes, the group took their collective knocks. Two wins their freshmen season was paired with three wins their sophomore year. In the second season, they lowered the amount of 40-point losses to three games.

"It was exciting because we had a young group that was all in and wanted to get better. It was frustrating because opposed to playing a JV schedule where you knew they would have some success we were going to play a schedule where we were playing seniors and that wasn't going to bring us a lot of success," said Elkton head coach Bill Shaw.

Under the surface and through the pool of losses, there was a genuine feeling that this group, this resilient group, still could be something special.

"Obviously, we weren't that great but we still knew that if we worked on playing together and sticking with each other that later on as we became seniors and juniors that we would be pretty good," said senior Jaydn Woody.

To know about this current Elkton football team, and the eight seniors who are at the core of the roster, is to know about that they genuinely care about each other. Having been around each other their entire lives, they have created

bonds deeper than football.

"If it wasn't for these guys, I wouldn't be here. I grew up with them. Born and raised with them from kindergarten all the way up," said senior Russell about what kept him coming back each season.

In any time spent around this group, it is easy to see this is the case. In interviews all of the seniors talked about the familial nature of this team. They laugh with each other and then they laugh at each other. They make inappropriate jokes, they swear and they drive their coaches crazy.

"This group of kids is a pretty wild group of kids. They've been wild since they were in elementary school," said Shaw. "They are a handful."

There is a feeling that with this team, even if they were not all at football practice with each other, they would most certainly be hanging out in some other capacity.

"We all have fun on the weekends fishing and stuff," said senior Austin Luzier. "We're all best friends you know and we fight and then next minute we're best friends but we all work really good as a team."

For the coaches, they see this togetherness manifest on the field in the form of accountability. After a blown coverage in practice, the defense turned not to the coaches or to push blame on one another but to have a conversation about what went wrong and how to fix it. On the offensive side of the ball, they know that the team feels comfortable changing the play-call on the field if they see something that they think will work better. And they trust them to do it.

The coaches also like to give them a hard time.

"I tease the seniors about next year's team is going to be a more cerebral group. I gave them that the other day and they couldn't decide if I was talking about breakfast cereal or I was making fun of them," said Shaw.

"There was this blank look and I'm going, 'Dear god, how are we winning?'" added Hughes.

But despite blank looks and barbs traded between one another, it is clear that this group of players have developed deep bonds.

"They're the kind of kids that they don't have all the money in the world. They have not had all the privileges a lot of people have. They've been questioned about their ability to succeed and... on the football field there have been two adults that have been telling them constantly that we love ya. Sometimes we would like to smack the living snot out of you," said Hughes. "They're these kids that they come along once every now and then. And it's like they're overachieving now. Not just on the field but in the classroom, outside the classroom, they are overachieving."

Last year, the Elkton football team went 7-2. In their wins, they ran away with games and were now on the other end of blowouts. Three times they won by at least 60 points. They had their first winning season since 2013, finished the season ranked #8 in 1A and hosted a playoff game

for the first time since the early '90s.

But they hit some bumps in the road along the way. Both losses were blowouts (52-6 and 44-6) that saw the other team dominate in the first half. While the Elks became deer in headlights in their losses, the coaches still saw positives to take away in those contests. With a bad taste in their mouth from a playoff loss to Wallowa, Elkton came in to this year wanting another chance at success and the playoffs.

"A light flipped on for them. And that was their first winning season in high school," said Hughes. "So this year, we've been preaching, this is your time, this is your year."

To start the season, the team was a force that could not be reckoned with. The Elks won their first three games by a combined score of 186-8. But then their first real test came in the form of a familiar foe: North Douglas. With the Warriors and Elks now in the same league, the teams met for the first time since the 72-0 loss in the seniors' freshmen year.

"I remember losing to them... that's always been in the back of my head. So I've always wanted to play them again since eighth grade year to get our revenge," said Russell. "Being out there out on that same field where we lost eighth grade year just brought back so many memories. And with the same guys, too. It was awesome. That energy on that field is just amazing."

In a dramatic come from behind fourth quarter victory, Elkton got their revenge and pulled out a 16-12 victory. The lowest scoring 1A game of the year.

"It's just something we always wanted to do before we graduate. My class in general, we always wanted to beat Drain before we graduated. That's just on the bucket list and we pulled it off in our last year," said Billman.

The following week the Elks stumbled at home against Lowell 38-28 before rebounding last Friday with a 48-22 win over Oakridge. With the loss, the team dropped from their lofty ranking of #2 and have fallen to #13 according to OSAA and sit at #7 in the coaches' poll. But regardless of what any ranking system, this team has tasted a dose of winning and don't want to stop anytime soon.

"I think that all of us seniors have had a beating. And we know that if we put our hard work in like we have over the last four years and we know we can take it all. We just need to work together," said Moore.

But for the coaches, and especially Hughes, they believe that this team has already done something special.

"I've told the kids this... I want you to set your standards so high that even if you don't achieve that, whatever you do achieve is going to be outstanding. So we set the state title, if we get it, god bless us," said Hughes. "If we don't, whatever we do get is great. Because right now, it's a hell of a year. A hell of a ride."

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