

For Akron Buchtel, it's all about 'starting over'

**By Joshua Funk
For PA Football News**

NOTE: Some might wonder what exactly a feature about an Ohio high school football coach and program are doing on a Pennsylvania football website...it's not got anything to do with geography, but the message. It's a message of hard work, dedication, and learning how to deal with adversities of life. And those lessons transcend state borders. - JF

If you give Akron Buchtel head football coach Ricky Powers a call on his cell phone, and you reach his voicemail, you'll reach a recording talking about starting over despite making mistakes or having failed at times. The recording could best be summed up in two words: "Start over."

Since he took over the position of head coach for the Griffins' football program two years ago, Powers has had to do some starting over. But, before he got the job at his alma mater, he learned about starting over and overcoming adversity the hard way.

It could be classified as the "hard way" because Powers enjoyed nothing but success in his playing days for Buchtel. He was the running back on consecutive Ohio Division II state championship teams, in 1987 and 1988. It is impressive to note that, to date, Buchtel is still the only Ohio team from a city league to win a state championship game.

Powers was a *Parade* Magazine All-American and an All-USA selection by the *USA Today*, and he was considered one of the best running back prospects in the country before he went on to the University of Michigan.

Early on at Michigan, the success continued to pour Powers' way. He set the Wolverines' single-season freshman rushing record (789 yards), which stood for 14 years, and followed that up with over 1,200 yards as a sophomore. Life could not have been better, or so it seemed.

Then, the adversity struck. After his sophomore season, Powers sustained an ankle injury, and his understudy at running back, Tyrone Wheatley, exploded when given the chance.

"Everyone remembers Tyrone Wheatley now," Powers said.

But it was the way Powers responded to the adversity. Granted, he still went on to the NFL, spending time with the Detroit Lions, Cleveland Browns, and Baltimore Ravens, but at the time, he didn't know how to deal with it.

“How do you respond when you get hurt?” Powers asked rhetorically. “Are you going to go into a tank like I did, or are you going to go ahead and get yourself together and understand that you’re there for a reason?”

“I had a player of mine at Michigan State who broke his collarbone, and he didn’t know how to handle it, so he called me,” Powers explained. “The biggest thing you can’t do is blame yourself for getting hurt because there’s nothing you can do about it. Once you get back (healed), you need to hit the ground running. They need to know you’re dedicated.”

That experience and knowledge Powers gained from that adversity helped him in many ways, perhaps more than ever when he got to Buchtel. The Griffin football program is a proud one – 12 state playoff appearances, two state titles and two state runner-up finishes, and numerous Division-1 recruits help make it one of the better city programs in the eastern half of the state of Ohio.

But Buchtel was in need of some fixer-uppers. The Griffins didn’t have any bum ankles or collarbones, but a mindset that needed to be addressed, stat.

“We’ve got to stop thinking like an inner-city school,” Powers said. “Just because we’re an inner-city program doesn’t mean that we have to act like it. We can have things like everybody else. We just have to remain focused on getting those things.

“It’s almost like *Field of Dreams* – you build it, they will come,” Powers added.

The first year was rough. Buchtel finished 2-8 overall, but it wasn’t for a lack of talent. The Griffins usually always field a team that possesses decent talent. It was, again, the whole mindset issue.

“A lot of kids didn’t understand how I run things because I’d hold them accountable,” Powers said. “I think what was happening was...you’ve got that great player and you turn the other cheek when he does some things...I’m not that guy. I’m not that guy that’s going to ignore it and turn the other cheek.”

The players started to catch on, and that 2-8 record from 2007 turned into 5-5 last year. If the pattern continues, then Griffin fans might enjoy the prospect of a potential 8-2 season in 2009.

But Powers said he can’t put an exact time frame on how long it takes to establish a firm program.

“All that I know is just that we keep preaching, keep preaching, keep preaching,” he said. “Somebody’s going to pick up on it.”