

MANHEIM'S MAIN MAN

Mike Williams talks about his coaching career and closing in on 300 victories

By Joshua Funk

For PA Football News

To get something running at maximum efficiency takes time. Think of it like an 18-wheeler starting out after a red light. After a couple shifts, it starts rolling right along.

Think of what it took to get Manheim Central football going in roughly the same manner. When Mike Williams was named the head football coach in 1981, there had been some good coaches and tough, hard-nosed kids.

“The state of the program was decent because we had good kids,” Williams said. “The first thing we did was start a weight program, and it took four or five years to get that thing rolling.

“That (lifting weights) developed the confidence needed to play at a higher level. We had something positive in place. It wasn’t like the program was in terrible shambles or there were lousy coaches.”

If you sit back and think about it, four or five years to get the program rolling would have put Manheim in the 1985-1986 range. It would be little coincidence, then, that Central’s first of many successful teams came in 1988. That edition of the Barons reached the District 3 championship game against Middletown, falling short, 33-7.

The next year, 1989, Manheim met Berwick for the first time. Then the rest, as they say, is history.

Williams brought with him an offensive philosophy that, if run effectively, could make opponents look flat out silly. It was called the Veer offense, a style of the triple option mixed with an effective play-action pass game. Manheim made its living on the Veer in the early days of its success.

“It’s like anything else – you find something that you like to do, and you study it, learn from it, study, study, study, and learn every facet of it,” Williams said. “The Veer was our thing, and it was difficult for others to stop.”

Berwick found that out the hard way in 1989. The highly-touted Bulldogs were down 10-0 to the Barons at halftime.

“He ran the Veer offense,” said longtime Berwick head coach George Curry, “and I had never seen the Veer before. We never saw the true Veer (in District 2). He (Williams) read it. He read it. His Veer was a true Veer, not a bastardized Veer.

“The way we beat him (in 1989) – we didn’t give him the ball.”

Williams said the game was tough for another reason, not just because the opponent was Berwick. Entering the second half with a 10-0 lead, the Barons thought they already had the game won.

Williams and Curry would have many more encounters in the state playoffs, including a classic in 1994 played before a sold out HersheyPark Stadium. The winner of the game would face Sharon Area for the “AAA” championship game.

“We played them in ’94, and we practiced our butts off,” Curry said. “I was ready for them. We were ready for that Veer. Guess what? He (Williams) came out spread, no backs, shotgun, five wide. I said, ‘Momma Mia!’”

“When you play Williams, you better be ready, buddy, because he always has something up his sleeve.”

Manheim was a run-and-shoot team before Williams had taken over as head coach. Once teams began to catch up to the Veer, he said, Manheim spread things out. It seemed that the Barons were always one step ahead of the rest of the field, unlike some teams that hang on to the same philosophy year in and year out.

“I’ve always said that those Wing-T guys will run that Wing-T come hell or high water,” Williams said. “If they win, they win, and if they lose, they lose.”

Despite the crushing losses in the Eastern Finals (the game before the state championship game), Manheim kept pushing forward. The Monday after the 1994 loss to Berwick, the Baron football team was back in the weight room, working toward the 1995 season. Manheim’s steady, focused approach is what contributed to a lot of its success, Williams said.

“We’re passing through all these teams, Berwick. Strath Haven, Allentown Central Catholic, but we’re still there,” he said. “We’re the one that’s facing them. They rose and fell, rose and fell. Manheim kind of stayed steady in the ’90s and early 2000s. I think if you can use the term ‘dynasty’ or ‘top-level program’, then that’s it.”

The numbers speak for themselves. Between 1992 to 2008, Manheim won 200 games and lost 28. The Barons won 56 straight regular season games between 1992-’97, 13 of their 15 District 3 “AAA” championships, and their lone PIAA championship in 2003 in that 17-year span.

“I think we proved that if you keep your nose to the grindstone, good things will happen,” he said.

Just last season, Williams passed former Cedar Cliff head coach Bob Craig as the all-time winningest coach in District 3 history. To date, Williams has a career record of 287-59-3, and sits 13 wins shy of 300 for his career.

“I have to admit I didn’t even think about 300 until last year,” Williams said. “I wasn’t even aware that I had passed Bob Craig until someone told me about it.

“But I’m thinking about it (300 wins) right now. I’ll admit right now I’m thinking about it.”