

Central Catholic proves it can overcome all odds

**By JOSHUA FUNK
For PA Football News**

Death is, sadly, inevitable. It is one of the few certainties of life. But while it is a certainty in one sense, it's uncertain in another. Nobody knows when their time will come. For some, that time comes too soon.

The St. Joseph's Prep football team found that statement out only weeks ago this summer. Southern Columbia, a small school located near central Pennsylvania's coal regions, experienced the loss of two players before one of its runs to a Class "A" state title earlier in the decade.

Pittsburgh Central Catholic found that very same fact out last season, but unlike the Prep or Southern, whose losses occurred in the pre-season or off-season, theirs happened *during* the season.

Kyle Wilson, a junior running back who played a role as a reserve on the Vikings' 2007 state championship team, tragically passed away from complications of a stroke between the Vikings' regular season finale with Fox Chapel and the school's opening-round WPIAL playoff game against Penn-Trafford.

Wilson's death could have been the straw that broke the Vikings' back last season. Central Catholic had already faced quite a load of adversity leading up to that juncture of the season.

Graduation ripped apart a Viking program that finished 16-0 for the second time in four years in 2007 and scored a school-record 612 points, one of the top-10 scoring teams all-time in WPIAL history. To make matters worse, the Vikings were going up against a nationally-recognized Florida powerhouse, Lakeland, in their season opener as a part of the inaugural Friends of Coal Prep Football Classic.

Central Catholic not only was defeated 35-0, but their starting quarterback, Nolan Krivijanski, was lost for six weeks with a dislocated knee cap. Then, weeks later, with all of the WPIAL watching, Penn Hills ripped the Vikings 30-7 in a Thursday night showcase game televised on FSN-Pittsburgh.

At that juncture in the season, the Vikings, who owned a 4-2 record, had allowed more points than they had scored.

So when one of their own was felled so suddenly, the decision to keep the season going was a tough one to make, said head coach Terry Totten.

“It was obviously a tremendous blow,” Totten said. “I had to look them in the eyes and tell them, ‘Guys, your lives will never be the same.’ For some of them, that was their first experience with the death of someone close to them.

“(The team) found out that he was in critical condition about 9:00 Friday night after we played Fox Chapel. Kyle subsequently passed away the following Monday. At that point, it was very difficult to decide if we were going to go on (in the playoffs) or not.”

Ultimately, the Vikings decided to continue their season. At 7-2, Central Catholic entered the playoffs against Penn-Trafford, a team with a 4-5 record.

“We didn’t have much of a practice week,” Totten said, “but they went out and really put on a performance in Kyle’s honor that was something to be proud of.”

Not only did Central Catholic win the game, they did so in dominating fashion, blanking the Warriors, 42-0. It was the fourth time that season that Penn-Trafford had allowed a team to top 40 or more points in a game – the other three teams, Gateway, McKeesport, and Erie McDowell – each topped the 450-point plateau last season.

But Central Catholic, unlike the three other teams, was on a mission that week. And they weren’t to be denied, so even after the Vikings’ season ended a week later at the hands of McKeesport, 28-6, Totten said that it was a season that was, in a way, rewarding, even though there was no WPIAL or PIAA trophy added to the school trophy case.

“It was in many ways,” Totten said. “We talk to our kids all the time about their faith, about developing character, about overcoming adversities, about sticking together, and it showed that week.

“In many ways, those intangibles that we talk to our team about showed up that week, that Friday night, and really, ever since,” Totten continued.

The seniors on the Central Catholic football team have dedicated their season to Kyle, who too would have been a senior in ’09. Wilson’s locker is glassed off and won’t be touched, Totten said, adding that Wilson will be in the team’s prayers and memories and that his family will be kept close to the program.

So with this added motivation and emotion, and with a team on a mission to rebound from its worst season record since 2002 (6-3), is it enough to carry the Vikings?

“It (emotion) can,” Totten said, “but eventually you have to block and tackle. Generally, it can only get you so far.”