

Magical 1978 season led HV to AA state championship game

By Greg Hanberg
of the Daily Courier

There are no banners hanging in the Hidden Valley High School gym for the 1978 football team. Maybe there should be.

It was 40 years ago when Hidden Valley, in just its second year as a school with a new coach, nearly pulled off the impossible before losing in the AA state championship game to undefeated Gladstone.

Left for dead after a 1-3 start and an 0-2 mark in league play, the Mustangs won eight consecutive games, including impressive playoff wins over Tillamook and South Umpqua, the two state finalists from 1977, along the way.

"A lot of us were just country boys who just loved to play football," said Jeff Southern, Hidden Valley's all-state running back. "I was from Wilderville, for crying out loud. I just remember us playing for fun, playing together as a team. We just wanted to go as far as we could and put Hidden Valley on the map. And we sure did."

The Mustangs were led by first-year coach Mike Mitchell, who left Montana Tech to return to Grants Pass after leading GP High in 1975-76.

"We weren't a very big team, but that team had as much heart as any team I've ever coached," said Mitchell, who just wrapped up his 50th year of coaching. "Once we got going, we just refused to lose."

In Hidden Valley's first year as a school in 1977, head coach Mike Sparlin led the Mustangs to a 5-4 record before leaving to take over at Grants Pass High. No one really knew what to expect from the Mustangs the following season.

"Back then we didn't have summer camps to go to and even though I knew we had some good players coming back I don't think anyone was really expecting great things out of us," said Kelly Richardson, who was HV's starting quarterback as a junior in 1978. "I think it just took us a while to feel comfortable with a new coach and figure out their system. We had great coaches and they didn't panic."

Vince Randall, who was a starting offensive tackle on the '78 squad, remembered being optimistic.

"Having a winning record the year before as a brand new school was quite an accomplishment," Randall said. "I had a feeling we would be good, I just didn't know how good."

Things got off to a promising start as the Mustangs started the season with a 21-0 win in the rain and wind at Bandon. Southern made his mark right from the start, running for 211 yards and two touchdowns.

The good feeling, though, didn't last.

In its first-ever game against a AAA school (that was the highest classification back then), Crater spanked the Mustangs 21-0, as HV generated only 60 yards in offense, fumbled five times and committed 10 penalties.

"We're a lot better football team than that," Mitchell told the Daily Courier after the game. "This could be the best thing that's happened to this team. It should wake us up."

But it didn't happen right away.

Before a packed house at the Josephine County Fairgrounds, new rival North Valley beat Hidden Valley 32-26 in double overtime. Richardson's touchdown pass with one minute left in the game tied the game, but he was sacked on the game's final play to end it.

"We had beaten North Valley (10-0) the year before and we did not expect to lose," Randall said. "That loss to North was hard to swallow."

Things hit bottom the following week when HV fell at league



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SECOND BEST

favorite Phoenix 26-7. Richardson threw for 208 yards but the Mustangs committed 10 penalties, wiping out any chance for any momentum.

At that point, on Sept. 30, Hidden Valley was 0-2 in the Skyline Conference, all alone in last place.

"We knew, obviously, that not only we were 0-2 but they only took two teams to the state playoffs, so we knew we had to win out," Randall said. "We picked up the intensity and effort in practice and we also got back (injured) fullback John Benson. That made a big difference."

Benson joined tailback Southern and wingback Ron Wilson to form a potent three-headed running attack. And Richardson was incredibly efficient passing — he had a streak of 100-plus passes during the season without an interception.

The turnaround started with a 30-21 win over Henley as Richardson and Southern each ran for two touchdowns. The defense, led by linebacker Steve Wallace and linemen Jim Krouse and Dan Funkhauser, shined in a 16-0 victory over Lakeview as HV overcame 12 penalties to limit the Honkers to just 91 yards in offense.

That set up a huge matchup against Rogue River, which was 3-0 in league play under coach Tony Brauner. But the much-anticipated showdown turned into a rout as the Mustangs piled up 371 yards, including 262 on the ground, in the 40-8 win. Rogue River managed just 79 yards and six first downs.

Hidden Valley kept it going with a huge 28-22 win over Eagle Point as Southern rambled for 267 yards, including a 64-yard TD run on the first play from scrimmage. HV committed four turnovers, but Krouse, who would be a first-team all-leaguer, made a game-saving interception to keep the Mustangs' playoff hopes alive.

The Mustangs finished the regular season by not having to play, receiving a forfeit win over Illinois Valley after the Cougars canceled their season in late August. On the final week, league-leading and second-ranked Phoenix played at Rogue River — a win by Rogue River would put the Chieftains into the playoffs, a loss would boost Hidden Valley into postseason play.

"I know a bunch of us players drove over to Beck Field (then-Rogue River's home field) to cheer on Phoenix," Randall said, laughing.

Phoenix prevailed 33-0 and Hidden Valley was in.

The Mustangs' first-ever playoff game was at Tillamook, which lost to South Umpqua in the state final the year before.

"If Hidden Valley can score three times on us, they are a super football team," said a confident John Woodward, the Tillamook coach, earlier in the week.

Tillamook led 16-13 after three quarters before the Mustangs scored three touchdowns in the final period for a 35-30 victory. Southern had an all-world game: 187 yards rushing, 70 yards receiving, a pass for a 2-point conversion, three interceptions and a fumble recovery. He left the game with four minutes left after pinching a nerve in his left arm, but the injury wasn't enough to keep him from missing any more action.

In the AA quarterfinals on artificial turf at Eugene's Autzen Stadium, HV crushed Junction City 36-12 in a driving rainstorm. Southern had 134 yards rushing, 64 yards receiving, two touchdowns, an interception and also passed for a 2-point conversion. Richardson was no slouch, either, throwing for three TDs on 7-of-8 passing and rushing for 89 yards.

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Gladstone fullback Joel Frederick (35) is met by Hidden Valley defenders Terry Sokolowski (74) and Mike King (89) during the 1978 AA state title game at Civic Stadium in Portland.