



Trying To Get Over The Hump!!

By Rick Van Roekel
Head Football New Ulm High School

About the Author

Graduated from Worthington High School 1973
Played football at Bemidji State University 1974-77
Head Basketball Coach at Spring Grove 1980-82
Head Track Coach at Spring Grove 1981
Assistant Football Coach under Clayton Copple at Spring Grove 1978-82
9th Basketball Coach in New Ulm 1984-94
9th Football Coach in New Ulm 1982-83
Assistant Varsity Football Coach under Jim Schmidt in New Ulm 1984-88
Head Football Coach 1989-Present

I would like to thank my wife, Kathy, for all of her support over the years. Thanks also to my most loyal fans, my daughter, Megan (18) and my son, Nathan (15) for all of their patience and understanding when I would be gone all of the time. I could not have done it without you guys!!

First, I would like to thank the Minnesota High School Football Coaches Association for giving me an opportunity to write an article that tells how our program in New Ulm got "over the hump!" I have enjoyed reading articles over the years from other great coaches on what has made their programs successful, and hope I can share an idea or two that will help your team as well.

Historically, New Ulm's football program never experienced much success. Everyone would say, "New Ulm football just can't get over the hump to win games." When our current coaching staff took over the program in 1989, the last time New Ulm had won a conference championship was in 1981 when they were co-champs with St. Peter. Prior to that, the last conference championship was in 1941. You can see that New Ulm has not had much success by winning only two conference championships in the last 80 plus years. The nice thing about taking over a program with those kinds of records is that there is no where to go but up.

We first felt like we began to get over the "hump" in 1993, when we went from last place the year before, to co-conference champs the next year. Since

then, we have either tied or won the conference championship five out of the last ten years. We were section runner-up in 2000 and Section champs in 2003, and gained a State playoff birth for the first time in New Ulm's history this past year.

I will never forget my first year as a head coach, walking through the line after a loss to shake hands, and hearing one of our players say, "You got us in football, but we'll get you in baseball." I thought to myself, "That does not do our program much good." Yes, New Ulm has a rich tradition of having success in baseball, and Jim Senske is the winningest baseball coach in the state. But my attitude was, "Why can't we win both sports!"

That observation was my first incentive to change the attitudes of our players. I believe that there are three main components that built our program into being competitive year in and year out.

1) Coaching Staff

Consistency in the coaching staff is, in my opinion, the biggest element to being successful. I have been very fortunate that I have two great varsity assistants. Scott Stuckey coaches our defensive and offensive linemen and is also our special teams coach. Ron Bunkers is our Offensive Coordinator. The three of us have a combined total of 52 years of coaching. Being together this long has definitely



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been an attribute to our program. All head coaches know that without good assistant coaches, you will never have a successful program. When I took over the program in 1989, I was looking for coaches that had the same beliefs and philosophies that I had. They were to make sure the kids have fun, and for the coaches to put in the time it takes to be the best we can be. But the biggest challenge was to change the attitude in our school that we could win in football.

In my first six years in New Ulm as a football coach, two years with the freshmen and four as varsity assistant, we ran four different offenses. I felt that was one of the reasons New Ulm had a hard time winning games. The players never really got a chance to feel comfortable running any offense, so the end result was always failure. That was our first thing to change. We picked an offense that we felt knowledgeable about, that would fit our personnel, and went with it.

The numbers were another big concern to us because having a history of losing all of the time had a big impact on kids wanting to play football in New Ulm. Our goal was to contact all of the students in the high school and try to convince them to try football for the first week of practice. If they felt like it was not for them and they had to try their hardest, then they could quit. The coaching staff tried very hard to make all of the new players, that had never been out before, feel that they were just as important as our starters, and that together we could make a difference. In order to accomplish this, they had to believe in us and the direction we wanted our program to go. Football is a numbers game, and without numbers we were not going anywhere. We gradually started to get more and more students out for football. We still struggled early on, but things got better as our younger players in the program started to have success.

2) Weightroom

Just like everyone else, our success is a byproduct of the weightroom. The first priority for the off season was to get the players in the weightroom. We encourage our players to participate in a winter and a spring sport, but if they do not, we want them in the weightroom. Our weightroom had been an old storage room with a couple of univer-

sal gyms and a few free weights that were hardly used except in Phy Ed. We did some fundraising and bought new equipment. After a few coats of paint, new mirrors, and some football logos on the walls, we were up and running. We wanted an environment where the players could go and feel like it was their place to perform.

The next step was to find a weightlifting program that would be simple for the players and yet meet our needs. We went with the Bigger, Faster, Stronger approach, and are happy with the results. Our weightroom is staffed totally on a voluntary basis during the off-season. We make the weightroom as appealing as possible with motivational incentives such as T-shirts, certificates, and other rewards. We keep a monthly log of each individual so he can see his weight gains, as well as we can. They get rewards for attendance and different weight gains throughout the year. We stress to our kids that off-season lifting is just as important as practice is during the regular season. We never tell our players that if they do not lift, they will not play. We want to motivate, not punish.

3) Youth Program

The third thing we did was start a 5th and 6th grade tackle football program to go along with the existing junior high program. New Ulm has two other high schools, Cathedral and Minnesota Valley Lutheran. My staff, along with the other two head coaches from those schools and volunteers, got together and came up with a plan to start a full pad youth football program. The first big ticket was to raise \$20,000, which we felt we needed to get the program started. We explained to the business people what we were doing, that this was a one-time donation, and that we would be self-sufficient after our startup. Once we raised the money, we checked with other schools that had successful youth programs and got their input and ideas on what they did to get their program up and running. It took us roughly a year to get organized and start playing Saturday morning games. We charge all of the players \$50 for participation fee, which also includes a T-shirt and rubber football. This will be the 8th year of our youth football program, which averages between 110-130 kids. It has definitely helped all three schools in New Ulm.

In closing, I would just like to say that by no



means do I have all of the answers for turning a program around. This is what worked for us. It does not happen overnight, so a coach and his staff must show some patience. I feel that these three key components have helped us build a solid foundation for the present and future teams here

in New Ulm. We still have a ways to go to catch up with other strong programs, but we feel we are on the right track and definitely “over the hump.”

Pierz Pioneer Screens

Head Football Coach: Leo Pohlkamp
 18 years as Head and 6 years as an assistant(all at Pierz)
 Graduate at St. Cloud State Univ.
 Career record at Pierz: 120-60
Assistants: Rick Scublewski, Dean Dahmen
 DaveRocheleau, Adam Langer, Dan Saehr
Jr. High: Pat Watercott, Simon Waltman

Over the years at Pierz High School the screen pass has become a very effective play for the pioneers. Running screen plays at the right time is the key. Sometimes we run the screen off of a good run action play in a running situation and it can be even more effective. In a passing situation where players are watching for it and everyone is yelling watch the screen, it usually doesn't work well. Timing is important and running the screens on 1st and 2nd downs can be very productive.

We run a variety of offensive sets at Pierz and we can run a screen off most of them. Here are some of the screens we run: We have a middle screen thrown to the wing back, a tight-end screen run to the weak side, a flare screen run by the wing back, and a fullback screen.

The middle screen is run out of several formations where we use a wing or slot back. Here are 2 formations where we run the middle screen:

