

# Lakeville North is Different

By Brian Vossen, Head Football Coach

I like to tell players and parents that I hope it breaks their heart when their time here at Lakeville North is done. It's not that I want them to be heart broken, but this program is special, and those that get to be a part of it are forever changed from their experience. I should know; I was fortunate enough to be a Panther myself. And from the second I left for college I knew I would come back and coach for them. I was more than thankful when Larry Thompson offered me a job coaching the defensive line when I graduated from Mankato State. That year we went 14-0 and won the state championship. Within two years of that memorable team, Lakeville High School split into North and South, in part to provide more opportunities for kids to play sports. I won't go through the play by play of the last 7 seasons of Panther Football like my first draft of this article did. Instead, I will run through the Cliff Notes.

We have had above .500 seasons each year, except for our second when we went 1-8. The salt in the wound was the fact that Lakeville South went 13-1 that season and played in the state championship game. The following season we made some changes that I will discuss in this article that led us to an 8-4 season and our first state tournament appearance. We struggled early in the North-South rivalry losing the first 4 games, but winning 4 of the last 5 has made the rivalry competitive. In the last 5 seasons, we have made the state tournament 3 times. Last season was our most impressive because we got there on a 10-0 record but lost by a field goal to Cretin Durham Hall in the Dome with 7 seconds left in the game. We have experienced the state tournament, and we have had the opportunity to play in front of some 10,000 plus in our rivalry games. I would be a fool to try and say this was because of our defense or my coaching. In reality, it is because of the combined effort of a lot of dedicated coaches and players and the simple fact I alluded to before – this place is special. That being said, I have coached the defensive side of the ball for the last 6 seasons, so the remainder of this article will be about our defense and what we have done to help our program be successful as a team.

Panther Football hit rock bottom during North's second season in 2006 when we finished 1-8. Our players made the commitment after that season that this would never happen again. They dedicated themselves to living in the weight room. We joked about packing up our cots and moving in for the winter, spring, and summer, and not coming out until we looked like a different squad. Mike Zweber, pushed each athlete to make an 'uncommon commitment' to our football program. Our players took that to heart and trained relentlessly that off-season and bought fully into the new workout ideas. After a 1-8 season that takes a lot of faith.

We had to change as a staff and as a defense, too. Lakeville North was not Lakeville High School. We no longer had one and two-sport athletes. In order for every sport to succeed, we had to

share athletes and teach them to become two and three-sport athletes. We developed a workout program that could benefit the multi-sport athlete. We took the bigger, faster, stronger concept and applied it to bench, squat, and clean. We were far too weak and slow to focus on the science behind lifting. I had watched us get pounded in the run game, and we had to get in that room and move weight. Coaches committed their time after school 5 days a week to help train our. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday we benched, squatted and cleaned. We followed the BFS reps and did our 3x3's, 5x5's, 5,4,3,2,1's, and our 10,8,6's. All we talked about was breaking records in that room. We needed guys benching 300+ lbs., we needed them squatting 315 lbs. for reps, and we needed them cleaning 225 lbs. Those were our marks that we strived to reach as a team. If we didn't get there, we weren't going to win. I met with in-season coaches and said I would help train their athletes 2 days a week and only ask them to bench, squat, and clean one time. However, they would do it with the intent of breaking their previous best. My hope was to have them experience getting stronger in-season and make it easier for them to want to enter the weight room after a practice. Luckily, I had the support and involvement of these other coaches. Without it, this program never would have been successful.

I also knew we had to make changes on our defense. We had used an odd stack defense in 2006, and we played cover 3 every play unless we blitzed. Then we played man. I don't think it took coaches too long to figure out how to move the ball on us.

Mike Zweber, the head coach at the time, made me the defensive coordinator and gave me the freedom to create whatever defense I wanted. I wanted our defense to be one that other teams watched on film and knew they had to prepare for us, not the other way around.

Our defensive staff had watched teams line up in their 4-4 cover 3 or their 3-4 cover 2 on every single play. We had listened to our offense immediately develop their list of plays that work against that defense and saw how much it simplified their preparation. I am sure this is no different than what teams had done to us. Meanwhile, our defensive staff was breaking down hours of film and sifting through hundreds of formations to try and find the 8-10 core plays an offense was running. So, I made the decision to run a multiple front defense. I wanted to show as many looks as possible on defense and force offenses to wonder what blitzes or coverage we were calling. We stemmed between defensive fronts and coverage's in hopes of confusing offenses to we could create a big play. We wanted to create down and distances that gave us the advantage and caused offenses to play defensively.

For this to work, we had to change our philosophy of what type of players we put on the field. We only play the 11 best, and all 11 had to be football players. That means they all have

to be able to run and tackle and pick up a football. We wanted to make sure if one of our defensive linemen were across a lineman that screwed up, he would be athletic enough to make the play. So we eliminated the idea that d-line had to be played by big guys and searched for aggressive and strong athletes that react quickly and know how to use their hands. You don't have to weigh a lot to get rid of a blocker, especially if you are a better athlete.

We created a concept at practice that every ball is live. Incomplete passes were no longer the job of the receivers to shag down. Our entire defense would sprint to that live ball and create the mentality that footballs on the ground belong to us. Along those same lines, we changed the way we pursued to the football. We stopped chasing the play in hopes of making the tackle; we pursued to get the football out.

Next, we made a change in how we coached our players. Football is known for being a game where coaches scream and holler. The reality is, kids these days are different than 50 or 30 or even 10 years ago. If we spend the whole practice screaming at a kid, he can quit and play Madden 2012 and make his player "Tebow" after he scores a touchdown. Don't get me wrong, we didn't become totally soft. I am a passionate person who expresses himself with a lot of emotion. But we agreed as a staff that effort is the only thing a player can control. It takes no talent to play your hardest. An athlete who makes a mental mistake can be talked to. If it continues he has to be removed from the game, but he doesn't need to be screamed at in front of his teammates. Now effort...that's a different story. Our defense learns very quickly that we play the 11 best, but, if you don't play your hardest on every play, your talent is irrelevant.

At Lakeville North we will find a way to win at everything we do. We will warm-up sharper and louder. We will catch more balls in soft toss before the game. We will come out more stretched and more relaxed. We will run onto the field faster. Heck, we will tie our shoes faster and tighter than the other team. Winning doesn't happen by accident: it happens as a result of winning in other things. For that reason, we made the commitment to become winners off the field as well. Every program talks about character and wanting student-athletes to win off the field. We decided to take 30 minutes each week to build character on our team. We continue that character building once a month with our seniors after their high school football career is over. We encourage our players to sit in the front, ask questions, and compete in class like they compete on the field. We encourage them to go out for other sports; even at the risk of training less. That time spent competing and learning how to win has proven at our program to be far more important than the time spent training. It's simple: we will find a way to win at everything we do. On Friday's, it will take care of itself.

With those changes in place in 2007 we finished 5-3 in the conference, won our section allowing only 27 points in 3 games, and played Cretin Durham Hall in the State tournament. We held teams to less than 10 points per game. In 2008 we finished 5-3 again but lost to South in the section championship game. In 2009 we finished 6-2 in the regular season, won our section for

a second time, and lost to Moundsview in the state tournament. In 2010 we only had 18 seniors that had never been above .500 as a group, but managed to finish second in the conference with a 6-2 record and lost in the second round of the section to South. Last season we won the conference with an 8-0 record, won our section for a third time, and had the privilege to play in the Dome the first round but lost a close game in the final seconds to Cretin Durham Hall.

Every year since 2007 we have won the turnover battle. The years we went to state we held teams to around 9-12 points per game. We did it with a handful of division 2 players and some division 3 players. I don't use that to point out how great we are as coaches, but rather to point out that football is the ultimate team game and when everyone involved is competing for something bigger than himself success is possible regardless of the challenges.

Lakeville North Football is special. A large part of the reason is because Larry Thompson and his outstanding assistants were committed to giving so much time and energy for so many years to create a program the community could be proud of. It is also due to Mike Zweber, and his own personal uncommon commitment to this school when it split and his courage to take over. It's because of the tremendous support of our community and our youth football programs. It's because the parents recognize the goal of creating better young men as well as football players and view the program beyond their son's individual playing time. It's because the current coaching staff works tirelessly to build relationships with our players and help them achieve at their highest level possible. And it's because it's football players make it their mission to find a way to win at everything they do. ■