

Wildcat 1997 state football team reflects on historic season



Players from the 1997 Louisburg High School football state runner-up team posed for a quick photo last Friday after being honored before the crowd at Wildcat Stadium.

Several members from the Louisburg High School 1997 state runner-up football team returned home Friday – home being Wildcat Stadium.

As they entered through the gate, emotions came flooding back. They remembered the packed stadium, the thrill of playing football on Friday nights and all the history they created together.

“The longer I have been here the more it has meant because more memories come back,” Jason Worthington, a lineman from the 1997 team, said. “You forget some of this stuff until the sights and smells come back in. I stepped in the locker room, and the coach (Robert Ebenstein) was gracious enough to come let us talk to the team, and it was just a wave of emotions coming back. They may be 20 years old, but they feel like they are brand new.”

The 1997 team received many ovations from the crowd that year as it was the first squad in school history to reach the state

championship game.

A lot of those players came back to Wildcat Stadium to be recognized one more time as they were introduced to the home football crowd at halftime of last Friday's game with De Soto to commemorate the 20th anniversary of that state runner-up finish.

"It is pretty exciting," Sari Antisdell said. "We were in the locker room before the game. To have those same exact feelings as you had 20 years ago, I mean we are old men now and to see the crowd and be a part of this whole experience has been fun. It is pretty impressive to see what has changed with the football program since all those years ago."

Antisdell, who was a starting fullback and linebacker as a senior, was among several players who returned to be honored from that historic Wildcat team. He was surrounded by former teammates and coaches, who all had a chance to relive the 'good-ole days' during the first half of Friday's contest.

"I haven't seen a lot of these guys in 15-20 years," Antisdell said. "I recognize some of the faces, but it was good to see them again. Even some of the freshmen off that team – I asked one of them what their name was again and he told me and he said 'Yeah, I remember your thigh pad a lot running over me.' They were just as much of the team as anyone because we needed them for practice and helping us to get better."

Louisburg rolled through much of the regular season with wins over Eudora (54-0), Anderson County (40-7), Wellsville (22-20), Gardner (28-0), Prairie View (30-6), Osawatomie (33-7), Baldwin (64-6), Paola (22-0) and Spring Hill (33-8).

The 1997 season was a memorable one for many. Not only was it the school's first appearance in the state championship game, but it was also filled with many unforgettable games along the way and it started in the playoffs.

In that season, Louisburg opened with a 40-0 win over Prairie View in bi-districts, before facing the defending state champion – Fort Scott – in the regional round.

The Wildcats pulled a shocker as they knocked off the Tigers 13-6 to earn a regional title and a spot in the sub-state championship game.

“I think my favorite win during that time was probably Fort Scott,” Antisdel said. “They were the best team and beating them was pretty impressive. We were a tight knit group that thrived on every play from getting turnovers or kickoffs. We tried to take advantage of every single down.”



Kevin Vohs (left) and Sari Antisdel look out onto the crowd while they were being honored as part of the 1997 state runner-up team.

Louisburg did that same thing in its sub-state matchup with Topeka Hayden, which was ranked No. 1 at the time. It was memorable in more ways than one.

The game was played in sub-zero temperatures and Louisburg forced eight turnovers on the night as it pulled off a second-consecutive upset with a 21-14 victory.

“My favorite memory is just how tough that team was,” said Gary Griffin, a former head coach and defensive coordinator on the 1997 team. “We beat Fort Scott, which was the defending state champion, and came back and beat the No. 1 team in the state in Topeka Hayden and both them were better than us, but we were just tougher. We found ways to win games and it was a good bunch of kids. Coach (Kris) Kehl got them to buy in to the team concept and we had three really good classes in a row. The sophomore class helped us out quite a bit, but the senior class was as good of leaders as we have ever had.

“It was the coldest game I have ever been at. Their running back was really good and he didn’t have sleeves on and I will never forget that. It was so cold that we had space heaters on the sidelines. He platooned with another guy and he had to have been cold. We probably forced him to fumble three or four times.”

The Wildcats were considered a ‘tough’ running team that found a lot of success behind a veteran offensive line of Worthington, Ben Coffey, Aaron Cain, Chad Hardesty, Trevor Finch and tight end Joe Pate.

A pair of sophomore running backs, Billy Neff and Phillip Bowden, saw a lot of time in the backfield and were led by Antisdel – a senior fullback. Jason Harwood was the team’s starting quarterback, while Nate Peters, Jeremy Heston, Kevin Vohs and Ben York saw time at wide receiver.

“Our 152-pound wrestler, Chad Hardesty, was our starting center and nose guard and played both sides of the ball and

was all-league,” Worthington said. “I don’t know that we were all that big, but we had a lot of experience. Most of us on that line, we had played together since our sophomore year so we gelled really well. Then we had some young guys like Billy and Phillip come up and were great running backs for us and got some great leadership from Sari back there as well. We always tried to be good leaders to help some of that young talent that we had and those guys had some great years in their own right.”

Defensively, the Wildcats were led by much of those same players on the defensive line, while Neff, Bowden and Antisdel put on a lot of hits at linebacker.

“Our offensive stats that year were really low, but the reason being was we won the field position battle a lot,” Coffey said, who was also an all-league lineman. “Our defense did a great job and our offense started on our opponents side of the field a lot. The fabric of our team was we just grew up together starting in elementary school and had a great senior class. We didn’t have the best athletes in the state, but as a unit, we were right there.”



(From left) Ben Coffey, Ryan Dunn, Jason Worthington and Chad Hardesty were just a few of several players from the 1997 team that made school history and were honored last Friday at Wildcat Stadium.

Then came the state championship game against Sabetha that was held at Emporia State University. Louisburg came up short in its quest to get the school's first state championship as it fell, 14-13, and ended its season with a 12-1 record.

Sabetha opened the game with a 69-yard touchdown run and then blocked a Louisburg punt in the endzone to jump out to a 14-0 lead. The Wildcats came roaring back as Neff scored on a 1-yard touchdown run to cut the lead in half in the second quarter.

In the third, Harwood found Peters for a 20-yard touchdown, but the Wildcats missed the extra point. Each team committed three turnovers on the day.

"We missed an extra point that we all thought was good,"

Griffin said. "They had college goal posts, which were narrower than high school ones, and on a high school field it would have been good for sure. We just ran out of time at the end. Of all the playoffs games that we played, Sabetha was probably the worst team of the bunch and that is probably what hurt us worse than anything is we knew we were a better team when we left the field. We just left one out there.

"It was pretty disheartening, but no one expected us to be as good as we were. We surprised everyone. We got no accolades in the preseason, and as the season went along, we just steamrolled people and caught Fort Scott and Hayden on good nights."

Despite the loss, the state championship game is still a fond memory for a lot of the Wildcat players.

"It was very foreign," Coffey said. "We were traveling to the middle of the state and playing on a university campus in the afternoon. It was different for us. We were really giddy and nervous on the bus on the way up there and we couldn't believe we were here.

"We were just smashing heads with everyone. It seemed like we were in the middle of the field the whole game and neither team could move. It felt like the team that made the most mistakes that day would lose. They just made one less mistake than we did."

It was a time the Wildcats coaches wouldn't forget either.

"That put Louisburg on the map," Griffin said. "We had a good run. I think we were 8-1 the next year and 9-0 after that. Year after year we would have great seasons and that 97 team was the team that kind of propelled us. That is when we turned into a football town. The whole town of Louisburg was at Emporia. We would fill the stadium several years after that and it was a good time."

Several of the players know that a lot of their success was in part to head coach Kris Kehl, who molded the group of Wildcat players together and changed the culture of Louisburg football.

“I give so much credit to coach Kehl,” Worthington said. “He was one of the most intense guys that I have worked with, whether it was in high school or college. I remember that state game, him grabbing me by the face mask and yelling at me to ‘Protect your (bleeping) quarterback Worthington,’ and seeing Copenhagen fly at my face at the time. There are few people I respect more in life than coach Kehl.”

Antisdel added, “I think our eighth grade year we only won like one football game. When Kehl started when I was a sophomore, he kind of set the tone for what the program was going to become. He wanted it to be a 365 day type of deal, whether it was with weights or whatever. Our goal was to win state and we came close.”

Those were just some of the celebrated times that were shared on a special night at Wildcat Stadium – a place where history was made 20 years ago.

“The memories I shared with everyone means a lot,” Coffey said. “If anything, I hope it allowed the younger guys and the other classes to know what needed to be done. From there, it just built a heck of a run with this sport and others. Everyone went their own separate ways after that season, and that season is the most common thing that we have and that is kind of cool.”

Members of 1997 football team are:

Class of 1998: Jeremy Heston, Jeremy Criswell, Josh Meek, Jason Worthington, Ben Coffey, Chad Hardesty, Trevor Finch, Eric Nauman, Nate Peters, Ryan Shaffer, Joe Klassen, Micah Drake and Sari Antisdel.

Class of 1999: Jon Batchelder, Luke Siebenmorgen, Jason Harwood, Kevin Vohs, Ben York, Justin Kesterson, Troy Meek, Patrick Page, Ryan Kuepper, Matthew Trapp, Aaron Cain, Joe Pate, Brad Torrence and Adam Longgood.

Class of 2000: Bret Marks, Tyler Witt, Matthew Donegan, Dustin Bollinger, Thomas Overly, Ryan Dunn, Ian David Hall, Jeremiah Brittingham, James Ward, Grant Hash, Billy Neff, Andrew Shaffer, Dereck M Kerr, Phillip Bowden, Darin Hollrah, Cooper Smith, Craig Hufferd.

Class of 2001: Troy McKitrick, David Alexander, Bradey Ewy, Ian Hansberger, Monte Harwood, Andy Donegan, Jared Dorsch, Kurt Nauman, Ryan German, Eddy Monteil, Eric Pemberton, Noah Hoppe, Mitch Langley, Matt Sauber, Jeremy Oehlert, Winston Koechner, Brian Batchelder and Jeremy Yeager.

Head coach Kris Kehl and assistant coaches Gary Griffin, Wayne Whiting, Darin Gagnebin, Doug Elias and Mike Krull.

STATE CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

SABETHA 14, LOUISBURG 13

S: 7 7 0 0 – 14

L: 0 7 6 0 – 13

First quarter

S: Jason Hartter 69 run (kick good)

Second quarter

S: Adam Pyle recovered blocked punt in endzone (kick good)

L: Billy Neff 1 run (Sari Antisdel kick)

Third quarter

L: Nate Peters 20 pass from Jason Harwood (kick failed)

STATISTICS

RUSHING: Sari Antisdel 14-56; Billy Neff 9-32; Jason Harwood 10-16; Nate Peters 2-9; Phillip Bowden 2-6. Totals: 37-119

PASSING: Harwood 8-17-121

RECEIVING: Peters 3-63; Kevin Vohs 2-25; Antisdel 2-6; Ben York 1-27