

Strohm's basic approach worked

By John Hartsock

Other than wearing plaid shorts to practice, Earl Strohm didn't do too much that could be considered unusual during his 20 years as head football coach at Altoona High School.

He didn't need to.

Strohm took over the Altoona program in 1953. By the time he left in 1972, the program had become one of the strongest in the state.

Strohm turned out 20 All-State players, six All-Americans, four National Football League standouts, and a career coaching record of 133-59-9 at Altoona.

His days as a high school football coach and social sciences teacher are behind him, but the 67-year old Strohm, now employed as a staff worker at the Blair County Detention Home for youths, had some thoughts about his coaching success.

"I hope that the kids I coached have learned that hard work won't hurt anybody," Strohm said. "We had a lot of fun, but the fun came about through winning. And the winning came about through hard work. Hard work is the key to success in anything."

The Mountain Lions won with a brand of football that was as down-to-earth as the western Pennsylvania railroad town in which it was played.

"In Altoona, you tend to get the big, physical kid out for football" said Strohm, who played semi-pro football with the Altoona Mountaineers in 1947 and 1948. "If you get that kind of kid in proper physical condition, and teach him the fundamentals of blocking and tackling, you can wear (opposing) teams down."

"That's what the Altoona teams in the 1960s did — they wore opponents down," Strohm added. "We weren't dirty, but we hit people, and we won. We had to start going out-of-state to pick up opponents, because a lot of Pennsylvania teams just didn't want to play us."

John Ebersole was a two-way starter at tackle for Altoona during the 1963, 1964 and 1965 seasons. Ebersole later went on to college stardom at Penn State, and played eight years in the National Football League as a linebacker with the New York Jets.

Ebersole joined Ed Flanagan (Detroit Lions), Mike Reid (Cincinnati Bengals) and Brad Benson (New York Giants) as Strohm-coached Altoona products who made it to the professional ranks.

"Coach Strohm often came to practice wearing these baggy, plaid shorts that



Earl Strohm during his heyday as Altoona High football coach.

sagged down around his knees," Ebersole said. "The players used to get a chuckle out of that, and we called him the 'Big Bopper' behind his back.

"But Coach Strohm demanded a tremendous amount of respect from his players. He worked us a great deal, but we respected him and gave him 110 percent. He was a very receptive person,

and I think most of the players got along with him very well. If anybody had a problem, Coach Strohm was the type of coach they could talk to about it. In his time, I think he was one of the best coaches in the state."

Ron Rickens, who succeeded Strohm as the Altoona coach in 1973, said that
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Strohm's staff in the 1960s included front row, left to right: Buddy Geis, Jim Gardner, Ron Rickens. Back row: John Colombo, Strohm, Mel Frye. Geis is now an assistant with the Green Bay Packers.

Strohm was one of the best because he was one of the most industrious.

"I don't think there was anybody who was more dedicated to coaching than Earl," said Rickens, who served as Strohm's assistant for 14 years. "He was particularly good at evaluating personnel

and putting people at positions for which they were best suited. Earl was continually watching game films and stressing fundamentals. His brand of football wasn't fancy, but it was excellent."

Strohm, who played high school football at Altoona and college ball at Ship-

pensburg University, began his coaching career at Bellwood-Antis, where he produced a 37-4-1 record over four seasons.

Among his best teams at Altoona were the 1962 and 1969 squads (both went 10-0) and the 1959 unit, which compiled a 9-1 record. The 1969 team dropped a 22-15 decision to Gateway in the WPIAL championship game at Pitt Stadium.

The game Strohm will never forget, however, was Altoona's 20-14 road triumph over national power Massillon (Ohio) in 1966.

"Back then, Massillon played a predominantly out-of-state schedule," Strohm said. "They played teams from Iowa, Massachusetts, all over, and up until 1972, they lost only three games to out-of-state opponents. (The Altoona win in 1966) was probably the best win in my career, although there were a lot of good ones."

There were also a lot more spectators at the games. Strohm fondly remembers the days when Altoonans would charter a train to Massillon for road games, and line up two blocks away from Mansion Park for home games. Crowds of eight to 10,000 people at Mansion were the rule rather than the exception in the early and middle 1960s.

"Altoona High football was so popular back then that a season ticket was something to relish," said Strohm. "An attorney who was handling a divorce case told me that there was a big argument over which party would get the season tickets that the couple had purchased."

Strohm currently resides with his wife, the former Virginia Thomas, in Sinking Valley.

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