

Ebersole a pillar in Altoona's glory days

By Jim Lane

John Ebersole ranks among Altoona's all-time greats when it comes to football accomplishments.

He played at Altoona High School during the Mountain Lions' heydays in the mid-1960's. He played on two undefeated teams at Penn State, and he played eight seasons with the NFL New York Jets.

"I guess you could say I went from the good to the bad when I went from Penn State to the Jets," Ebersole quipped. "We didn't have many outstanding seasons with the Jets, but it was fun. It was pro football."

One of his few regrets is that his father, Jack, didn't live to share in his success.

"I was 12 when he died. He had a heart attack when he was in his early 40's. He never saw me play football," Ebersole said.

"In fact, if I hadn't lived beside Mansion Park, I probably never would have played football," noted Ebersole, a Blair County commissioner the past five years.

"We lived right off the corner of the main gate and I used to watch practice a lot. Finally, I got tired of watching and went out for the team (Roosevelt Junior High) in ninth grade. My mother was opposed to it, but the rest of the family got behind me and she finally gave in."

Ebersole was a two-way tackle for Dean Rossi at Roosevelt, then moved up to Altoona High where he continued his outstanding line play. He also handled the placekicking chores for the Mountain Lions.

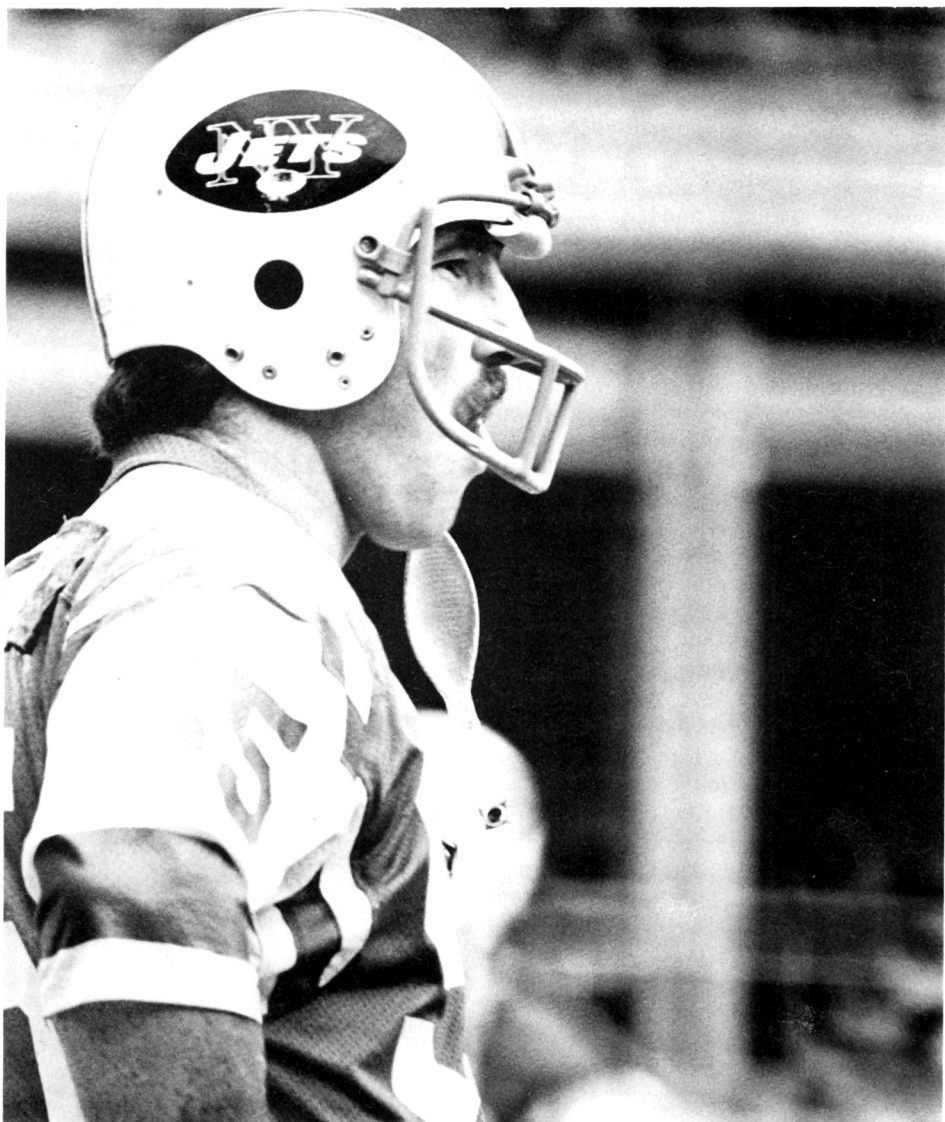
"The thing I remember most about high school is that first trip to Massillon. I think pride was at an all-time high then. You were the big man on campus. It was that kind of atmosphere," Ebersole recalled.

During the 1965 season, Ebersole won All-State and Big 33 honors and became Altoona's first Parade Magazine first-team high school All-American.

"It was kind of a dog-eat-dog situation. There was a lot of competitiveness at every position, but we all had fun. Earl (Strohm) was that kind of coach. You didn't mind sacrificing your body because you had a good time doing it."

Ebersole also attributed some of the Mountain Lions' success during that span to the size of the players.

"I think we had some of the biggest teams Altoona High ever had during that two- or three-year period. The 1964 team, in particular. We had (John) Kaltenbrunner, (Tim) Murtiff and (Mike) Reid across the line. We must have averaged about 215 or 220. We were giants.



John Ebersole was a cornerstone of Penn State's great defensive team of 1968-69 before playing eight years with the New York Jets.

"We were a bit conservative offensively, though," he chuckled. "Steve Thompson, Vince Nedimyer and myself have been putting some of those films together and I think we only threw about three times a game. But, that was Earl's style, and it was successful."

Ron Rickens, who was line coach at Altoona High during the time, recalled Ebersole as "one of the most talented athletes to ever play football here."

"I remember he used to hate practice. He was really good at his position and he didn't like the repetition of practice. But when game time came, he always did an outstanding job," Rickens noted.

"John was one of those guys who could have played anywhere and done a good job, particularly on defense. He was that type of person."

When Altoona football was at its height, the Sideliners Booster Club used to award trophies each week to the outstanding lineman and back of the previous game.

"I'm almost certain he won it seven times out of 10 weeks," Rickens said. "We used to grade the films and he graded out so well that he almost always won the award."

From Altoona, Ebersole went to Penn State and earned a starting job as a defensive tackle in his sophomore year.

"I tore up my knee against Navy. I got blindsided and missed the remainder of the season," he said. "I probably should have had an operation, but I didn't."

While Ebersole was sidelined, the Lions went to California and lost to UCLA. It was

(Continued on next page)

the only time the Nits were defeated during Ebersole's three-year varsity stint.

Steve Smear replaced Ebersole at tackle and Ebersole was switched to defensive end when he returned for his junior year. He was a two-year starter at defensive end.

"I guess the highlights at Penn State were the bowl games and the fact that we didn't lose the last couple of years," he said.

State won the 1968 and 1969 Orange Bowls, beating Kansas and Missouri. Ebersole was a standout in both games and became a fourth-round draft pick of the Jets and spent eight seasons in the NFL.

Ebersole was mainly a special teams player for the first two-and-a-half years. He was inserted into the lineup at middle linebacker and played there for two seasons. Then he moved to left linebacker, then to right, then back to the middle.

"I played all three (linebacking positions) in one game," Ebersole noted. "I didn't have a problem with that. Our defense was sophisticated, but not complicated. I called the defensive signals, so I had to know everybody's spot.

"I wish I could have stayed at right linebacker. I could have played 20 years. In those days, everybody ran to the left."

During Ebersole's eight years in New York, he played for four coaches — Weeb Ewbank, Lou Holtz, Ken Shipp and Walt Michaels.

"We didn't have many great years. It was the twilight of (Joe) Namath's career and the start of (Richard) Todd's. There were a lot of coaches and different philosophies each year. It was pretty trying, but I had a great time. It really was a lot of fun."

However, it wasn't all peaches and cream in the Big Apple.

"It's a great place for superstars because of the media and all, but it's not a great place to raise a family," he said.

Ebersole's football career wound up after eight years with the Jets.

"I developed an arthritic knee and couldn't pass the physical anymore," he said. "Plus, my kids were going into school and I had stayed in New York myself the previous year. I couldn't have done that

again. Emotionally, it was too much to take."

So John Ebersole came back to Altoona and he's still here. He got involved in a couple of business ventures and he also got involved in politics. He's been a Blair County commissioner for five years.

"I always liked the community and intended on staying here," Ebersole noted. "Rather than sit back and complain I decided to do something about it, so I got into politics. I still have the ski and bike shop and, in the winter time, I work on some skis. But, my wife, Janice, pretty much runs it."

John and Janice have two children — Lauren, 14, a ninth grader at Roosevelt, and Lee, 12, a 7th grader at Roosevelt. Both are involved in athletics.

"I encourage them wholeheartedly. My son has played football and wrestled. My daughter has been in track and baseball. She also rides horses. I try to give them as much help as I can," Ebersole said.

Ebersole said he enjoys helping and coaching youngsters, but it's something he

hasn't been able to pursue.

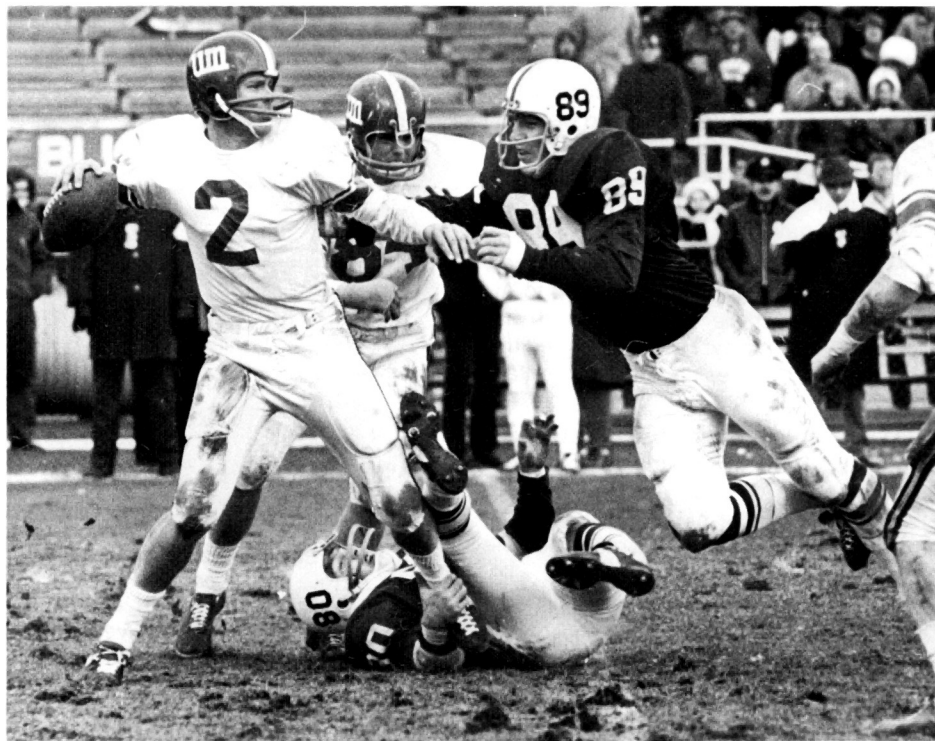
"I've volunteered my services a couple of times to the high school, but it hasn't worked out," he said. "I would enjoy coaching, but not on a fulltime level and it's tough to draw the line. Head coaches are looking for a commitment. That would be difficult for me and selfish, too. I just couldn't do it on a day-to-day basis. I'm afraid I'd like it too much."

Ebersole admits he loves politics, and draws a parallel between politics and football.

"I really enjoy politics. It's a lot like football. People respect you for the most part, although there's always some controversy.

"Plus, it's an excuse never to grow up. In pro football, you're still a kid at 30 because you're playing a kid's game. Politics are similar. It gets in your blood and becomes somewhat addicting.

"The majority of people who get in politics and like it, try to stay in. I really enjoy politics and I have aspirations of going to a higher area someday."



Ebersole puts pressure on Maryland quarterback, Jeff Shugars, during a game at Beaver Stadium, 1969.