



Otto Kneidinger captained the 1955 Penn State football team.

Football left impression on Kneidinger . . . and vice versa

By Neil Rudel

In 1950, Otto Kneidinger wore the distinction of being the first high school football player Joe Paterno ever recruited for Penn State. Some 40 years later, Kneidinger is set to become Bellwood-Antis' first inductee into the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame.

Since then, Kneidinger was a freshman starter at Pitt, transferred back to Penn State where he wound up serving as a team captain on a squad that included the likes of Lenny Moore and Roosevelt Grier, and then carved his niche as a long-time college football

coach.

Football, you can say, has been Otto Kneidinger's life.

"Like any career, it's had it's ups and downs," Kneidinger said in a recent interview. "But for me it's been very fulfilling and rewarding. I've enjoyed it very

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much.”

To the point that at 56 years old, the coaching bug is not totally out of Kneidinger’s blood. After beginning his career as an assistant coach at Tyrone High School to John Chuckran, who went on to Penn State and recently retired as athletic director at Rhode Island, Kneidinger’s first head coaching job came at York Suburban High School, where his teams went 32-6-1, including a 26-game winning streak.

From there, he spent time on the staffs at Lafayette and Penn, working with Harry Gamble, now the Philadelphia Eagles’ general manager who will present Kneidinger for induction tonight, before becoming the head coach at West Chester State College.

Kneidinger’s teams went 30-21-1 at West Chester, which he used as a springboard to become defensive coordinator at Rutgers.

After six years at Rutgers, which fired head coach Dick Anderson and his staff following last season, Kneidinger is now working as a volunteer assistant coach at the University of Delaware.

He’s commuting the 45-minute ride daily from his home in Voorhees, N.J. to coach Delaware’s defensive line and, at this point, is not sure if a full-time position will materialize.

“I’d prefer to stay in coaching,” Kneidinger said. “I’d say it’s a good possibility.”

Despite the disappointment at Rutgers, Kneidinger felt he and the staff made progress. Rutgers beat the likes of Penn State and Michigan State and tied Florida during Kneidinger’s tenure.

“I think the Rutgers program is in its infancy,” Kneidinger said. “With Dick there, a lot of good things happened. A lot of things were put in place and I think the program became more competitive, but you know what the bottom line is. Naturally, there’s disappointment, but it’s part of the profession.”

Just to be in Kneidinger’s position, though, is testimony to his ability and to

what others saw in his ability.

Others, like his high school coach, Earl Strohm, who will be on hand for Kneidinger’s induction, just as Otto was in attendance when Earl was enshrined two years ago.

Strohm began his storied career at Bellwood before moving to Altoona and first met Kneidinger while serving as an assistant coach under Duke Burkholder in 1948.

After Burkholder went to DuBois, Strohm moved to head coach the following year, when Kneidinger was a junior.

Kneidinger will be the fifth Blair County Sports Hall of Fame inductee that Strohm coached, joining Mike Reid, Ed Flanagan, John Ebersole and Brad Benson.

“Earl was the guy who influenced me most during my career,” Kneidinger said. “He really prepared me fundamentally that enabled me to go on. I’ve always had a lot of respect for him.”

Strohm, recently retired from the Blair County Detention Home, remembers being impressed with Kneidinger’s work ethic.

“When you told him something, you better have been right because he was going to do it that way,” Strohm said. “He seemed like an adult playing with kids. He was tall, he was a farm boy and he was used to working and he was strong.”

Along with the likes of Chet Dillon and the late Mike Hoffer, Kneidinger anchored a 1950 Blue Devil team that finished unbeaten (10-0) with victories over DuBois, Tyrone and Hollidayburg.

“We were a small school — I think we had 65 in our graduating class — but football was very big in Bellwood,” Kneidinger said.

Despite Paterno spending time with the Kneidinger family, Otto went to Pitt. He had family in Pittsburgh and wound up starting for the Panthers but never felt totally comfortable there. He then became one of the few correct answers to a trivia question: How many football

players lettered at both Pitt and Penn State?

“It certainly wasn’t a good choice for me, being where I was from and Pitt being an urban school,” Kneidinger said. “I just wasn’t happy there. At the same time, my father (Otto) became ill and that gave me a way out and I transferred. Basically, I think Penn State is where I wanted to go all along.”

Despite being outsized, Kneidinger teamed with Grier as Penn State’s two-way tackles. Otto remembers the highlight of his career being a 21-20 victory over Syracuse, which featured Jim Brown, at the old Beaver Field in 1955.

“We had Lenny Moore and they had Jim Brown,” Otto said. “We had a fierce rivalry with Syracuse.”

During his three years as a regular (1953-55), Penn State posted records of 7-2-1, 6-3 and 7-2 under Rip Engle. Otto earned honorable mention All-American status in his senior year and was drafted by the San Francisco 49ers.

But by that time, he decided enough was enough.

“Pro football at that time wasn’t what it is today,” Kneidinger said. “At that time, I didn’t feel it was worth it.”

“Otto wasn’t more than 210 pounds when he played at Penn State,” Strohm said. “He was tough as nails, but he took a lot of punishment.”

Kneidinger is proud to be considered among the county’s all-time greats, particularly so because he hails from a period when sports were the talk of the town.

“To me, this is a great honor,” he said. “Certainly coming from a little bit different era. I think at that time, overall, sports affected more people. There are a lot more varied interests today than there were then. The fact that there are enough people there today that feel that way about me makes me feel good.”

Kneidinger is married to the former Emma Sepp of Altoona. The couple has three daughters — Jean (32), Greta (29) and Katie (19) and one son, Michael (32).