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Waynesburg to honor 1966 national football champions

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By Robert Dvorchak, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The freight trains tugging coal cars still rumble by the Waynesburg College football stadium on game days, just as they did 40 autumns ago during a run to a national championship.

A lot of years and locomotives have passed since, but players and coaches involved in that special season have reunited this weekend for a special halftime tribute to the team crowned champions.

"It means more now than it ever did. It grows in importance the longer we're away from it," said Fran Bedont, a co-captain on that team and one of the organizers of the reunion.

"One thing I can tell you about this team is that there is nobody on it I didn't like. Everyone worked hard because you didn't want to let any of your teammates down," he added.

The victory in the Championship Bowl of the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics represents the only national title won in the 158-year history of the Greene County institution.

Back in 1966, the college football landscape was divided between the major powers in the NCAA and the small colleges in the NAIA.

There were no cable TV giants to broadcast the title game or to move it to a Thursday night for ratings, and there were no BCS rankings -- just a playoff system and a championship game.

After finishing the season undefeated, the Yellow Jackets opted to play for the NAIA title rather than accepting a bid from the Tangerine Bowl.

Despite falling behind by 20 points on the road to New Mexico Highlands in the first playoff game, Waynesburg rallied to win. They then dispatched the Wisconsin-Whitewater Warhawks in the championship game.

No achievement meant more to a small college team comprised mostly of players from western Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio, players considered too small or too lacking to play for the major-college football factories. The playoff games marked the first time most of the players ever flew on an airplane.

"It was one of greatest experiences of my life. I'll never forget it," said Jim Macioce, another of the reunion organizers. "The shared experience and the shared accomplishment is something that doesn't diminish over time. We are all very close and still are to this day."

The NAIA presented a Bulova wrist watch to each of the 44 Waynesburg players for winning the title, and the running joke has always been that they never really kept good time. Some years back, the players chipped in to buy themselves championship rings, and no Super Bowl bling is worn with more meaning.

The weekend festivities include a golf tournament today at Rohanna's Golf Course, a tailgate party before tomorrow's game between Thomas More and Waynesburg, halftime introductions and a team dinner tomorrow night at the Moose Lodge in Waynesburg. About two dozen players are expected to attend, along with head coach Carl DePasqua and three assistant coaches. A special tribute is planned for DePasqua, who later coached with the Steelers and Pitt.

Attendees will be coming from California and the state of Washington. And the old roster now includes retired airline pilots, self-made millionaires, orthodontists, school superintendents, environmental Ph.D.'s, corporate bigwigs and entertainment moguls.

Three members of the team went on to play in the NFL -- receiver Don Hermann, lineman Joe Righetti and Dave Smith, a cornerback who transferred to what is now IUP before becoming a wide receiver with the Steelers.

"I wear my ring all the time," said Macioce. "I'm very proud of what we accomplished and how we worked as a team to win a national championship."

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