

Pride Still

Fordham's head football coach surveys the playing field

By Bill Glovin

Dave Clawson reaches above his head and pulls *When Pride Still Mattered* off a shelf. The best-selling biography of Vince Lombardi, he explains, is a must read for football fans, especially Fordham fans. Clawson opens the book and points to a photograph. "That's Alex Wojciechowski," he says. "Wojciechowski was probably the greatest player among the Seven Blocks of Granite."

Hired as Fordham's head football coach a week before Christmas in 1998, the former political science and economics major soon began studying the 101-year evolution of



Football Matters

Fordham football. "Fordham has played in some of the greatest games in history and has as much of a storied tradition as any program in the country," he boasts. But in the mid-1950s, a money crunch caused a number of Catholic schools, including Fordham, to do the unthinkable and drop the sport.

Clawson credits a group of committed alumni and students with football's return as a club sport in 1964. In 1968, Fordham won the national club championship, which sparked its move to Division III in 1970. In 1989, Fordham joined the non-scholarship Patriot League, then known as the Colonial Conference, and was elevated to Division I-AA status.

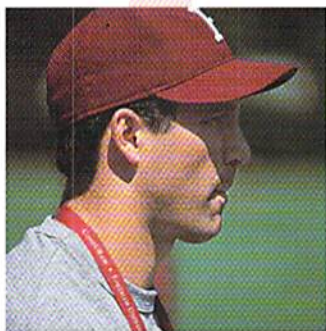
Clawson, who grew up near Niagara Falls in Youngstown, New York, is now focused on bringing stability and respect to the program. Despite last season's winless record, he instilled in his players the work habits necessary for success. Trailing Harvard by 31 points at halftime on homecoming weekend last year, the Rams stormed back and dominated the second

photos by Jon Roemer

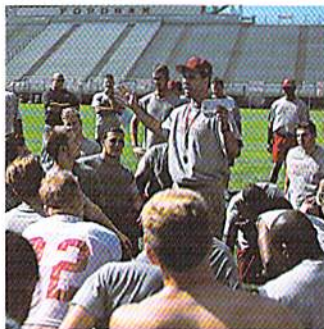
half only to lose 37-30. "There were many reasons for last year and it was an extremely rough period," Clawson admits, "but I know we improved from game one to game 11 and, considering the circumstances, our morale and work ethic remained high. Our goal is to win each and every game and eventually the Patriot League championship, but programs don't turn around overnight."

Recruiting, according to Clawson, is the key to winning in college football. "By the time we came in as a staff in mid-January 1999, we had a mere two months to recruit. We added some good athletes, but we probably put one of the youngest and most inexperienced teams in the nation on the field last year."

Of the 80 players on last year's squad, 60 were freshmen and sophomores. "You can't recruit experience," says Clawson. "Most winning teams are dominated by juniors and seniors. Let's not kid ourselves, football's a very physical game, and there's a considerable difference in the physical maturation of an 18- or 19-year-old versus a 21- or 22-year-old."



With significant catching up to do, Clawson and his staff spent countless hours during and immediately after last season watching videotape of high school games, then hit the recruiting trail hard through the winter and spring. In the past, Fordham rarely recruited beyond the two- to three-hour radius of the Rose Hill campus, but a new philosophy has



brought it 10 players from California and 15 from Florida in the last two years. "Not only do we have a better talent base this year," says Clawson, "but we have a solid foundation to build on."

The program is also recruiting in greater numbers. In the past, the goal was to recruit from 15 to 20 players a year, about 10 players less than top conference teams like Colgate and Lehigh attract. This year,

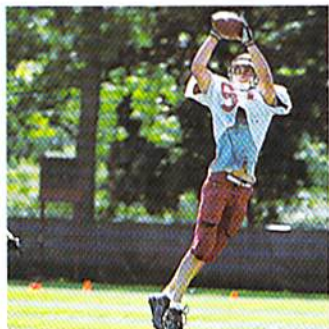
Clawson and his staff recruited 35 players. "Based on our Jesuit approach to education, smaller classes than big state schools, and the cultural and career advantages of New York City, I feel we can attract players from throughout the country," says Clawson. "And we also have the advantage of our great football tradition; talking about it not only can inspire future players and their parents, but current players as well."

One of Clawson's prized recruits, freshman quarterback Mike Mucci turned down a full-scholarship offer from the University of Maine to play for the Rams. Although he is not likely to see a lot of action this season, Mucci, a native of Staten Island and a two-time New York *Daily News* All-Star for St. Peter's High School, says he is impressed with the dedication of his teammates and excited about the direction of the program.

With more depth at every position, Clawson expects across-the-board improvement from a year ago. The defense, which lost only one starter, should be faster and stronger. They will be led by senior defensive back Ray Reddin, the team's only captain; strong safety Lance Pack; and defensive lineman Maurice Briscoe. "We are still very young at linebacker, but we should be better in every way," says Clawson. "We will play a very pursuit-oriented style to give our guys a chance to make plays and disrupt the timing of opposing offenses."

Although Clawson was a defensive back at Williams College in Williamstown, MA, he has spent the bulk of his 10-year coaching career as a quarterbacks and running backs

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coach and offensive coordinator. After three .500 or better years at Patriot League rival Lehigh

University, Clawson moved to Villanova University in 1996. In three seasons, he helped Villanova become one of the top Division I-AA programs in the country, set almost every school offensive record and established his own reputation as one of the bright young offensive minds in college football.

Clawson is a proponent of the pass-oriented West Coast offense, which in recent years has adopted new run formations and emphasized more balance. “Very few teams, with the possible exception of Nebraska, can succeed without the ability to do both,” Clawson points out. “If the defense overplays the pass or the run, you have to make them pay.”

Clawson is eventually expected to bring some of his offensive acumen to Rose Hill. “We lost our three best receivers, only Kendal Creer is back,” he says. “But all our offensive linemen, plus our two quarterbacks, Matt Georgia and Mark Carney, return. We’ve recruited three new quarterbacks, so competition for playing time at that position

should be more intense. Of our four running backs last year, three were freshmen and one was a sophomore. Everyone returning should benefit from playing in the same system for a second consecutive year.”

Clawson, a fit-looking 33-year-old who looks like he could suit up and play, is the nation’s second youngest head coach in Division I-AA football. Coaching, he believes, is an all-consuming profession that is more about effort than age.



Stronger, Meaner and Ready to Butt Some Heads

The Fordham Athletics Department unveiled a new Ram logo for the start of the fall season. Focus groups comprised of students, coaches, faculty, alumni and University administrators met to discuss the characteristics that were important in designing the new logo. This was a group effort, said Frank McLaughlin, Executive Director of Intercollegiate Athletics and Recreation. “We wanted a Ram that the University community could rally around.” The new logo was developed with the help of SME Power Branding.



“My age helps because I’m not that far removed from some of the social issues and academic pressures that student-athletes face,” he says. “But ultimately, I’ll be judged on my ability to put a winning football team on the field.”

Clawson has great faith in his 10 assistant coaches. To his credit, only a position coach of the seven coaches who were offered new jobs after last season left. “Successful programs all have a degree of continuity,” he says. “I’ve known most of my assistants since I got into coaching and they all come from winning programs. They hated to lose last year, but they all understood that this is a process and that you don’t build a successful program overnight.”

Would the coach like to convey a message to the fans? “Be patient,” he says. “I promise you that in a very short period of time, you’ll have a winning football team that you can be proud of.”

—Bill Glovin is a free-lance sportswriter from Nutley, New Jersey.