“We Walked Off The Field Number One”: The Story of the 1979 Ironton Fighting Tigers

by Jim Ridgeway

“The 1979 team was the greatest bunch of overachievers that I have ever worked with.”

Bob Lutz, head football coach at Ironton High School (Ironton Sports Day 1990)
Where are they now? (with author’s personal memories)

Tim Hodges lives in Flatwoods, Kentucky. (Tim spent much of his senior year wearing a cowboy hat while toting his six-string. He was one of the most amicable guys in the high school. Whether he ever saw himself as a team leader, he certainly filled that role on the team. It was Tim Hodges that helped the 1979 Tigers roar, and it is Tim Hodges that still keeps the memories of that great season alive for all to enjoy. Whether it’s on the Web or at a team reunion, Tim never stops praising his teammates and ensuring they get as much recognition for their state championship season as possible.)

David Kelley lives in Columbus, Ohio. (Mountainous on the outside, David was a perfect gentleman on the inside. He was an easy-going guy that got along with everyone. Dave was an outstanding shot thrower on the track team. Dave’s older brother, Greg, played on a softball team in church league with me.)
Adam Ainsworth lives in Ironton, Ohio. (Adam was the middle son of the very athletic, Green Valley family. The former West Ironton Bear excelled at three sports in high school. I played plenty of baseball against him in Ironton Senior League where he pitched and batted for the Phillies. He was a good hitter, and he could bring the heat from the mound. His father, an outstanding pitcher, and my dad were victims of the high school’s decision to eliminate baseball following the 1953 season. My dad still believes Ironton would have won a baseball state title in 1954 and/or 1955 if that administrative decision had not been made.)

Brian Jenkins lives in Chillicothe, Ohio. (I first met him in grade school at West Ironton. His father worked in administration at the school board office. The weights gave Brian a physique that made him a force on the football field. After high school, we occasionally lifted together at the YMCA in Ashland, Kentucky. He was always a joy to talk with, and one of those guys you just wanted to be around. Brian’s character and sense of humor remains top shelf.)
Joe “Bubby” Fletcher lives in Ironton, Ohio. (“Bubby” was also an incredible basketball player—a rebounding and scoring machine in the paint. When I close my eyes, I can still see him booming placekicks onto the roof of the old building in the end zone at Tanks Memorial Stadium. He was a genuine athletic star at Ironton High. He was a good person, and I am sure the coaches loved coaching him. I ran into him while in college and was amazed at how much muscle his college football coaches had packed on him.)

Joe Hacker passed away on November 1, 1993. (When Joe competed, he did so to win. Joe was the king of dodge ball in gym class at Ironton High. We called it ‘war ball’ in high school, as some of the less-athletic kids occasionally needed medical treatment for bloody faces. Joe was a very mobile guy for his size which he used to his advantage in football.)
We were in the same gym class. While his brother, Gabriel, a running back, got much of the ink in high school, John was busy doing the dirty work in the trenches for the Tigers. Coach Lutz always liked quick, strong and tough kids at nose guard, and John filled that role seamlessly.

Gabriel Lewis lives in Atlanta, Georgia. (My freshman football team used the infield and left field at Beechwood Park for practice while the varsity used the remaining outfield areas. I remember hearing the incredible hits coming from the varsity’s practices. It was not a senior making those tackles. Instead, it was a sophomore named Gabriel that captivated everyone’s attention with his devastating hits. Gabriel likely led the league in cracked helmets, and he remains one of the most feared hitters in school history.)
John Moritz passed away on July 21, 2012. (I always saw him as one of the cool guys in school. He used a circle instead of a dot when writing his last name—something I copied in junior high. When an older kid in junior high tried to pick on me, John let it be known that it was not happening on his watch. My dad liked to talk with John when he worked at the nearby Rich Oil station on North Second Street.)

Jeff Crockrel lives in Ironton. (Jeff was a good kid, and pretty quiet. Jeff’s older brother, Bobby, umpired many of my Senior League baseball games. Bobby was one of the finest ball-strike umpires I have ever seen.)
Craig Thomas lives in Ironton, Ohio. (The youngest of three football-playing sons, Craig grew up as my backyard neighbor. Playing ball is what kids did back then, and Craig was always up for a game. We often used our adjoining backyards as a field for whiffle ball and other sports. Unfortunately, we had an eccentric neighbor that loved to run out and steal our balls whenever one rolled into her yard. I only lost plastic balls, but Craig lost real footballs to her. Craig’s dad, John, was a great Ironton High baseball pitcher and led the Tigers to one of the best seasons in school history.)

Jeff Underhill lives in Columbus, Ohio. (The eldest of the three Underhill boys, General Underhill (retired) turned his R.O.T.C. scholarship at Morehead State into an incredible military career. I still remember his description of how exciting jumping out of a plane was for him. I graduated with Gary Underhill, and played on the same baseball team in Senior League with Shane Underhill, the youngest of the three brothers. The Underhill kids were popular and well-liked students at Ironton High.)
Gene “Tink” Williams lives in Columbus, Ohio. (“Tink”, my Senior League teammate on the Walt Doyle State Farm Pirates, was an outstanding baseball player. As a high school player, I once watched him toss a baseball over the fence in right from the plate at Beechwood Park. He was an excellent hitter with a good glove in the field. Along with Tim Hodges, he represented Lawrence Street Elementary School on the football team in 1979.)

Brent Wilcoxon lives in Proctorville, Ohio. (Brent was an incredible player at every sport he attempted. As a 13-year old in Senior League (age 13 to 15), Brent was likely one of the three best pitchers in the league and one of the best hitters as well. Naturally strong, he was that rare quarterback who enjoyed hitting people. I remember running pass patterns for him in the summer following our graduation. His arm and touch made me look like a competent receiver. Prior to our senior year, he told me I could have his punting job if I would come out for football— a great gesture by a true team player.)
Scott Willis lives in Barboursville, West Virginia. (Scott and I became friends at a young age. His grandmother was our Sunday school teacher. He was a fullback in grade school for Whitwell, but moved to the line in junior high. A good student and a popular classmate, Scott’s imitation of ‘Dusty’ Rhoades, a pro wrestler, at pep rallies his senior season was something to watch. His younger brother, Steve, won the S.E.O.A.L. M.V.P. award in football.)

Steve Sutton lives in Walnut Creek, California. (When Steve did something, he always gave 110 percent. Steve was a brilliant student, and he was one of the most popular kids in the high school. He was a role model as a student-athlete and human being—an enormous challenge he seemed to embrace. As further testament to his character, I can state that I never heard an Ironton student say a bad thing about Steve. Steve was also an Ironman shirt winner in the weight room.)
Terry ‘Cat’ Royal lives in Ironton, Ohio. (Our introduction was at a grade school football preview. Playing defensive end for the West Ironton Bears, I was told to string him to the sideline. When that resulted in a touchdown, I was told to turn him in. Terry scored like three touchdowns on long runs that evening. In either junior high or freshman ball, I watched him hurdle a potential tackler near the Ironton sideline on his way to the end zone. Soft-spoken off the field, Terry was an incredible, but unassuming, athlete.)

Patton Riffe lives in Melbourne, Florida. (Patton and I played freshman football together. He was a good blocker and a physical player. For some reason, he often grunted or growled when he hit you on the field. Patton had a great personality, and I always considered him a true friend. After high school, Patton painted a damaged section of my car for me.)
Bill Allen lives in Rush, Ky.  (I graduated with Bill, but I was not around him as much as other kids on the team.  Bill was just a very nice kid in school.  He was powerfully built— perfect for the game of football.)

David Clay lives in Huntington, West Virginia.  (We first met in junior high and became instant friends.  He was one of the youngest kids in my class, and some parents today might have held him back a year.  Like all the Clay kids, David was a solid student and a model citizen.  We spent a lot of time talking at the lunch table my senior year.  After high school, David joined Jeff Montgomery on the Marshall University pitching staff.)
Dick Carter lives in Ironton, Ohio. (Dick and I played on the freshman football team together. On kick coverage, he was to my immediate left and had the far edge on the strong-side of the field. He was put together well, and could run. He was a great teammate. Dick was somewhat quiet in school, but he was a very good person.)

Darwin Conwell lives in Pickerington, Ohio. (Darwin could pack a punch on the gridiron. In a freshman game against Russell, Darwin destroyed a would-be blocker while we were sprinting down on the kickoff team. It was one of the best hits I have ever seen. On the field and in the classroom, Darwin was a real competitor. He was one of my better friends at school- a good student, too. I remember losing an arm wrestling competition to him which lasted so long that my arm hurt for hours afterwards.)
Kent Koerper lives in Norcross, Ga. (Kent’s locker was to my immediate left in freshman football. We would always talk before and after practice. Kent always liked to wear a cut-off T-shirt under his shoulder pads, and I quickly adopted the practice. His younger brother, Kraig, was also on the 1979 team.)

Jeff Jackson lives in Giessen, Germany. (Jeff was a really good person and an excellent athlete. He was a 200-meter guy on the track team. Despite his unusual shooting form, Jeff had a great outside shot in basketball. However, such long shots only counted for two points back then. During his senior year, he teamed with Chris Barnes to form one of the best-shooting tandems in school history.)
Brian ‘The Bull’ Carter lives in Mauldin, South Carolina. (My right bicep was left totally black and blue after I stuck my arm out to tackle him and he stepped on it at freshman football practice. He was certainly a bull on the field to tackle or block, but he was a great guy off the field. Brian’s nephew is one of my lifting buddies.)

Kraig Koerper passed away on July 25, 1993. (Kraig was a big kid, much taller and stockier than his older brother. He was surprisingly athletic, and probably could have played several spots for the Tigers on the gridiron. He always seemed to have a friendly grin on his face.)
Rick Fritz lives in Galena, Ohio. (Rick seemed to grow a few inches taller every year he was in high school. He was just a few inches taller than me as a freshman, but grew to a good 6’5” or more by graduation. He became a very good, and quite physical, basketball player for Coach Phil Rice’s varsity team. Rick was able to use his size and length to dominate the boards.)

Dennis Bacon lives in Columbus, Ohio. (I first met Dennis at a junior high football practice. The nephew of Coy Bacon, Dennis was a powerfully-built man with amazing track speed. During his final two years at Ironton High, he was Ironton’s version of Hershel Walker. “There goes that man again- nobody is going to catch him,” screamed Ashland’s Dick Martin on the radio as Bacon decimated the Tomcats’ defense. Dennis could dunk a basketball with ease and possessed one of the best physiques in the school.)
Jim Morris lives in Ironton, Ohio. (Jim was a tall athlete blessed with more natural ability than anybody in the building. He was an amazing track athlete, but he could play just about any sport you wanted to see him play. I can still see him robbing me of a double or triple in a Senior League game. I was almost to second base when he charged the left field alley from center and caught a ball no other kid could have come close to catching. I also remember watching Jim trying to dunk a ball in a varsity basketball game from the free-throw line. He made it to the rim, but ended up just ramming the ball into the rim. It was the most impressive missed dunk I have ever seen in a high school game.)

Mark Dickess lives in Ironton, Ohio. (I have known Mark since our West Ironton days. Mark enjoyed playing sports, organized or not. He was a good football player and pretty talented in basketball. His personality made him a popular kid in the hallways of Ironton High School. Even to this day, Mark is the first person to speak when he spots an old friend out and about. When I first elected to write this article, Mark was one person that I knew would be there to help in any way possible.)
Dale Spencer lives in Coal Grove, Ohio. (Dale had great physical size for football. I just do not remember him well enough to provide further commentary.)

Sam Bacon lives in Columbus, Ohio. (I definitely remember Sam. He liked to talk, and I was always up for a good conversation. He always was smiling, and was quite likable.)
Bruce Taylor lives in Ironton, Ohio. (I remember seeing Bruce in the hallways at Ironton High, but he was not a kid I knew very well.)

Brian Rodehaver lives in Ashland, KY. (Brian was a kid with good size who played a variety of sports at Ironton, including varsity baseball. He was a great guy to be around. I have bumped into Brian often over the years, namely at local restaurants. His father, Jim, attended Ironton High School with my father. Jim was a good athlete for the Tigers in the 1950s.)

*Special thank you to Lorie Wyant for supplying senior yearbook photos for the members of her graduation class.*
Vince Murdock lives in Westerville, Ohio. (Vince played on my Senior League baseball team. I was 15 and in my final year. Vince was only 13, but was one of the best baseball players on my team. He was a hard-nosed kid and a great competitor on the field. We became immediate friends in Senior League.)

Mark Hixon lives in Circleville, Ohio. (Mark came from a family known for having great speed on the track. Mark was a good track guy, but he also had a football physique. He was no stranger to the Ironton weight room. We lifted together many times in high school.)
Bruce Roach lives in Ironton, Ohio. (Bruce loves football. He was a solid football player at Ironton. Following his playing days, he became an outstanding football coach in our community. Bruce helped turn young kids into future stars for Coach Lutz. He was the type of person you wanted coaching your child. He did an outstanding job of coaching the Bills in the grade school league. He later had a stint coaching the Ironton Junior High School squad.)

Frank McClellan lives in Kitts Hill, Ohio. (Frank and I go back to our days of playing basketball for the West Ironton Bears. He later played on my baseball team in Senior League. He had a first-rate fastball. Frank was an excellent athlete throughout his playing days. Following high school, we played a little racquetball and lifted together at the Y.M.C.A. Frank never lost his love for football. He has spent many Friday evenings officiating high school football games.)
Mike Smith lives in Buford, Georgia. (As a kid, Mike lived on Waldo Street in Sedgwick Meadows. We became instant friends. He was an outstanding scholar, and a really good kid. Mike was an excellent hitter in baseball. He batted from the left side. He was an outstanding football player in high school, and was lethal as a punt returner. The Naval Academy was blessed to get one of the highest-character graduates in Ironton High School’s long history. Despite some injuries which held him back, Mike produced a notable college football career.)

Rick Ferguson lives in Ironton, Ohio. (Rick was blessed with the tall frame that coaches dream about. He was an excellent baseball pitcher, and his fastball had plenty of velocity. He liked the weight room, and he packed on the muscle to become a rugged player on the gridiron. Following high school, he got into grade school football coaching, where he did an excellent job in developing future Tigers.)
Dave Morgan lives in Flatwoods, Kentucky. (Dave and I probably met in the Ironton weight room. He always seemed to be in there working out. Even as a freshman, he was a big kid. He always had a huge smile on his face. Dave was one of the nicest guys in the high school. Whenever I ran into him after high school, he always spoke first and asked how I was doing.)
Coach Bob Lutz retired with the most wins in Ohio high school football history. He lives in Naples, Florida.

Coach Mike Burcham is retired. He lives in Ironton, Ohio.
Coach Pat Sheridan is retired. He lives in Ironton, Ohio.

Coach Lynn Schrickel is retired. He lives in Archbold, Ohio.
Coach Jeff Handley is retired. He lives in Hillard, Ohio.

Coach Mark Lewis is still coaching football at Raceland. He lives in Ironton, Ohio.
Coach Tom Ben is retired. He lives in Springboro, Ohio.

Coach Jim Payne is retired. He lives in Ironton, Ohio.
Coach Paul Fugitt is retired. He lives in Ironton, Ohio.

Coach Buck Foglesong is retired. He lives in Ironton, Ohio.
These five Ironton coaches were faculty members at the high school in 1979. Coach Sheridan taught my freshman Health class. Coach Handley was my Speech teacher. As my junior high and freshman football coach, Coach Handley would always suggest we go home and have a “potassium stick” (banana) after practice. Coach Schrickel was my Physical Education teacher. Coach Lutz taught General Science. Coach Burcham handled the Occupational Work Experience (O.W.E.) program and served as athletic director.
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