

FOOTBALL

By TIM PANACCIO



Turnover of staff helped sink coach

John Champ had an inkling he wouldn't survive another fall at Neshaminy High.

The clues were obvious: four Suburban One League victories in two years, an ugly 41-0 beating by Pennsbury to close a 47 campaign last fall.

"There are only two kinds of coaches," Champ said. "Those who have been fired and those who will."

Champ was fired on Jan. 16. The firing came only three seasons after Neshaminy went 8-0 in the Patriot Division, 11-1 overall, losing in the opening round of the state playoffs. Neshaminy had some fine teams under "Chaumpy," as friends call him. Between 1987 and 1989, the Redskins recorded 11 shutouts in 33 regular-season games. The '88 club allowed only 57 points in eight games, second-fewest in school history.

Credit the defense to Tony Varacallo, the Redskins' defensive coordinator, whose seven-year research of C.B. West "tendencies" helped to produce a 27-13 Redskins upset in 1989.

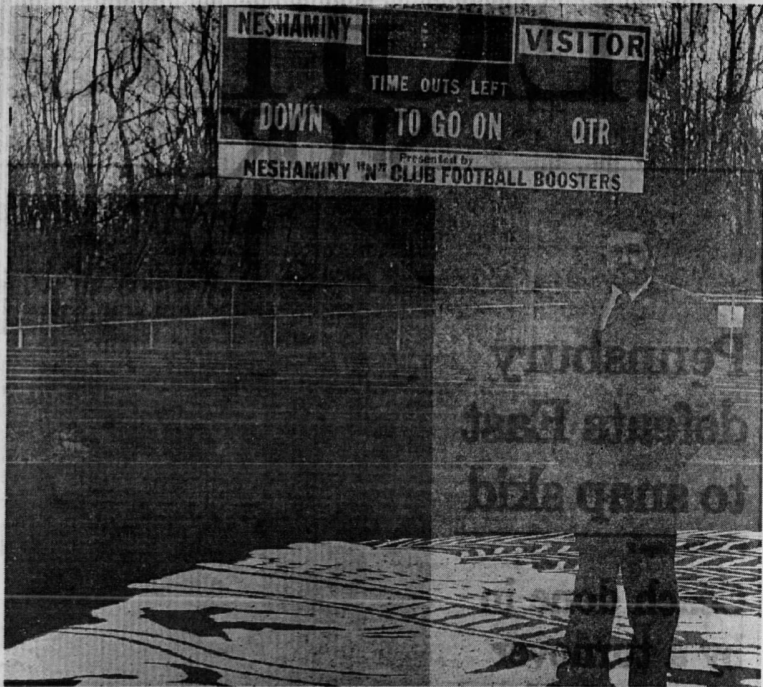
By the following fall, however, Champ had lost his entire defensive staff — Varacallo included — to other jobs, not all in football. Champ carries eight assistants.

Champ's downfall at Neshaminy is indirectly tied to staff turnover, which, in turn, produced confusion on the field.

Since 1989, Champ has had to replace seven assistants in two years, including three last fall. The replacements were tenderlofts at the high school level.

Only three coaches — Denny Cox, Tom Macielinski and Ed Place — remain from the '88 staff.

Other than Champ, who teaches biology, only assistant Colin Trickett



John Champ was fired this month as head coach of the Neshaminy High football team. He will continue to teach at the school.

taught at Neshaminy. But that's common: 95 percent of most high school football staffs are composed of coaches who teach outside the building.

"It's very difficult for an assistant who is getting paid \$3,000 to ask him to work year-round on football like I do," Champ said.

Champ says athletic director Ray Kelly fired him because he couldn't retain his staff. When a team loses

seven coaches in two years, its team chemistry becomes unstable.

Though Champ would argue the point, Neshaminy was somewhat undisciplined on its sideline.

At times, his players didn't seem to have their minds into the game. Toward last season's end, a coach pleaded to the players: "Can I have a volunteer at offensive guard?"

Sources at the school say the side-

line picture the Redskins painted weighed heavily against Champ.

His assistants should have had better control. They didn't.

"Our sidelines are going to look disorganized because I carry 85 players and have another five or 10 trainers and managers, but that doesn't mean our kids were fooling around there," Champ said.

Kelly said little about the firing except that wins and losses weren't the sole criteria.

Champ's five-year record at the school was 36-20. His log in Suburban One, where the pressure to produce competitive football teams is great, was 22-19-1.

As for holding a staff together...

"You're in charge of seven adults and 100 youngsters," Kelly said. "Ultimately, that person is in charge of the whole program."

Champ says he won't contest the decision with the teachers' union.

"I would still have to work with Kelly, and he is of the opinion I can't do the job, plus this could drag on for months... It would be a giant mess," he said.

Champ is a genuinely nice guy, maybe the funniest, most frank football coach in Bucks County. His dry sense of humor ends him to many. Champ likes to poke fun at himself and the game too.

"I never took myself too seriously," he said.

Likewise, he seldom tried to make other teams seem larger than life.

Regarding Mike Orman's dreaded run-and-shoot offense at Council Rock, he would chide reporters time and again: "When are you guys going to wake up and realize it's not a true run-and-shoot?"

In the classroom, Champ seemed to have good rapport with his students. Everyone liked him.

Like most coaches at Neshaminy, Champ had only one free period daily. That limited his contact with players.

"I asked for lighter teaching duties but couldn't get it," he said.

A coach is not merely a coach in high school. He's a surrogate parent, a cop, a social worker, a guidance counselor and a shrink.

Which is why the more coaches you have inside the school, the better handle you'll have on your club.

Champ plans to continue teaching biology and watch his two sons, John Jr. and Tom, grow in the Neshaminy football program.

"At this point in my career, it's time for me to take a rest and enjoy my own kids," he said.

For now, Champ can forget about dissecting film.

Frogs are another matter.

Neighbors

Neighbors is a section of the Inquirer that provides news about people, events, schools and governments in the Bucks County communities shown on the map. Neighbors is published on Sunday and Thursday. During the school year, Neighbors Sports is published on Monday.

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