

## 2017 FOOTBALL BANQUET REMARKS

In my decade of delivering these types of season reviews, I have typically made it a point to deal simply with the seniors on a given season's club. I always figured that the underclassmen would get their turn in later seasons.

This year's a bit different than past seasons.

The youth of the 2017 North football Huskies played such a role in their season that it would not only be impossible, it would be an injustice not to mention the many accomplishments of the underclassmen.

So let me begin with the "idea" of the word TEAM.

A football team is comprised of a group of young men striving for a common goal. Performance is required from every individual on every play to accomplish a team goal. Ten players performing at their best cannot overcome the lack of the eleventh player not pulling his weight.

Football requires everyone to focus on and accomplish their particular tasks if the team is to be successful. This requirement is why it is especially true in the sport of football that no one accomplishes anything alone.

To that end, the accomplishments of the 2017 Huskies will be measured out over a period of seasons. The challenges that faced this club were tremendous to start the season. Having graduated 28 seniors in 2016, there was no choice but to play many fresh faces who had not seen the varsity playing field before. In many instances, those summoned to answer the call would likely, in past seasons, have toiled on the JayVee and Freshman fields and gained another year of seasoning.

Necessity required otherwise of them and those young men did their best with their limited experience.

In this light we can look at 2017 with a fair amount of pride and optimism. The lessons learned at the hands of older, more experienced SIAC ball clubs only serve to put the next few seasons of Husky football ahead of schedule. There were many lessons learned this season that only experience can teach and once taught, need not be learned again.

Let's begin with the subject of Freshman contributions. I have been associated with North football since 2003. In the fifteen years of following the Huskies, I have never witnessed a freshman position player make a significant contribution to the varsity football team. In 2017, we were blessed with a pair of young men who started as freshmen.

When the varsity lost **Drew Routh** to a season-ending injury, the squad was left with a big hole to fill. A junior team captain and defensive end with 15 tackles to his credit through the season's first four games, filling his shoes was not an easy proposition. The Huskies shifted a starter from another position to fill for **Routh** and turned to freshman **Tyler Burnett** to fill the empty linebacker slot. He wasted no time filling the breach in the defense's center. **Tyler** recorded three solo tackles and threw a runner for a loss in his very first start. His progress continued throughout the season and he finished eighth on the team in tackles despite only playing in five games. His best performance came against Castle when he recorded six tackles, five of them solo, and caused a fumble as well as throwing a runner for loss. In combination with Routh next season, the Husky linebacker crew should have a solid middle.

The other freshman was a starter from day one—and not just any starter, but a two way player starting in both the offensive and defensive lines. **Gage Sales** is as technically skilled as any young offensive lineman I have seen at North. His ability to stay low and drive with his feet is uncommon for someone so young. At six foot tall and 210 pounds, he was up against much bigger defenders throughout the season but held his own in the trenches while splitting time between right tackle and right guard. At defensive tackle, he finished the season with 34 tackles—an unparalleled accomplishment for a North freshman and good for sixth best on the team.

A thorough search of the data base showed no other Freshman in North's football history had ever recorded that many tackles. **Sales** had a quarterback sack, a fumble recovery, and four tackles for loss to go along with the record number of tackles.

The entire defensive line provides the greatest hope for success in the near future because the other starters in that group were all underclassmen. **J.T. Skinner, Braylen Neighbors, Alex Smith** and **Caleb Weber** provide a corps of talented, experienced, and productive linemen on which to build a front seven in 2018.

For his part, **Braylen Neighbors**—the third member of the Neighbors clan to start for North over the years—was amongst the most productive sophomore defensive linemen in school history. Another search of the data base failed to turn up another second-year lineman with 43 tackles (of which 25 were solo unassisted tackles). With similar production in coming seasons, he could graduate among the all-time leaders for tackles by a lineman.

At times **J.T. Skinner** was the most dominant player on the field. His 37 tackles were one thing, but in the game against Henderson County he was down right on fire. He caused one fumble and recovered two others in the game. Against Harrison, he recorded ten tackles, a quarterback sack, and stopped a runner for a loss. Against Reitz, he managed seven tackles and nailed another quarterback sack. In the season finale, he drew double duty and started at offensive tackle while playing solid defense.

Not only did **Alex Smith** finish in the top 7 on the season in tackles but he also performed brilliantly as the team's long snapper on punts and place kicks. His flexibility allowed him to play both defensive end and linebacker and his size gives the team options on where to use him in 2018.

Junior **Caleb Weber** showed that he could fill in at any position on the line and plug the hole admirably. With 21 tackles, a quarterback sack, and a tackle for loss, he showed that he can be an impact player as well.

Amongst the defensive backfield, youth was also served. Sophomore **Steven Kince** started every game at cornerback and while the season was full of learning experiences, he more than held his own by coming up with a pair of interceptions and 16 tackles. Junior **Doug Whatley** manned the other cornerback for a portion of the year and routinely knocked down and batted away passes. Junior **Trevor Rumsey** proved to have a nose for the ball and came away with a fumble recovery, a pair of tackles for loss, and 20 tackles while playing defensive back. Transfer **Kaylen Wilson**, also a junior, brought down 14 runners and provided the size to match up with taller opponent receivers. That foursome should make the secondary a particular bright spot next season.

Youth wasn't only served on defense. Over the course of the season, no fewer than five underclassmen started at one time or another along the offensive line. **Sales** and **Skinner**, as already mentioned, ended the season starting up front in the trenches. Sophomore **Jacob Guest** worked his way into the left guard starting slot during the season and junior **Will Moss** started every game up front. Fellow junior **Caleb Brown** saw starting assignments during the season at both center and tackle. To have five such experienced players returning can only provide a boost for next year's running game.

At the skill positions, two underclassmen had major impacts. Junior **A.J. Wheeler** returned as the starting quarterback after assuming the role late in his sophomore season. In his career he has now thrown for over 1,000 yards passing, completed 53% of his 180 passes, and tossed five touchdown passes. North hasn't enjoyed the luxury of a three year starter at quarterback in over a decade and there are few positions in sports where experience pays off as well as it does at quarterback.

Sophomore **Dylan McKinney** came off the bench in the season's first game against Princeton and literally ran away with the game. He 'took it to the house' from 30 yards out on just his second touch of the football and then caught a pass from **Wheeler** and went 25 yards for the score on just his fifth touch. He scored again from 12 yards out and finished with 157 yards rushing and 35 receiving. He jetted for a 78 yard score against a powerhouse Memorial club and garnered a 19 yard score as well. Against Bosse he enjoyed his third 100 yard game of the season and ran for two more scores. His high knee action combined with liquid hips give him a slashing style of running that accounted for a team high 683 yards and nine touchdowns.

Only **Kendell O'Donnell**, **Cornell Garrett**, and **Casey Sellers** have run for more yards as a sophomore at North. **O'Donnell** led his team to nine wins in his senior year and was a first-team AP All-State choice. I had to play against **Cornell** and he was possibly the best back Evansville produced during the entire decade of the 70's—a big picture of him hangs in the gymnasium here. **Sellers** was a three year starter at fullback and linebacker and helped his team to a State Finals appearance in '95. If your name is mentioned with those three,... well then... you have accomplished something worth noting.

Ultimately, though, this speech is about the seniors. North was blessed with a small but dedicated group of young men who taught these younger players about “heart” and “technique”.

Nowhere was that more apparent than at the receiver position. One thing that defined the Huskies early season success was something that goes unnoticed by the casual observer: receivers blocking downfield. Sure, everyone can see when a back gets a gaping hole in the line to run through, but how many people notice that the “next” ten or twenty yards gained were due to a well-placed, difficult-to-execute, open field block or screen of a defender. **Ryan Huebner** and **Caleb Hague** provided some of the best downfield blocking I've seen at North. They constantly looked for the next potential roadblock to a big gain and easily brought about some of **McKinney's** long touchdown runs due to their particular skills at taking out a safety or cornerback.

Both players finished one-two in receiving for the Huskies this season and both were in the top 10 in tackles. It is safe to say that their leadership on both sides of the ball taught valuable lessons to the young players around them.

Some players don't always provide their contributions during regular plays on the field. The Huskies were fortunate to have a handful of seniors who made names for themselves on special teams and in special assignments. There are likely a number of opposition kickoff and punt return men in the city that will remember seniors **Isaac Conger** and **Konner Pepper**. **Pepper** was a 'wedge buster' who pursued kickoff

returners with abandon. **Conger** performed similar exploits and eventually worked his way into a starting role in the defensive backfield. He led the team in tackles against Reitz and recovered a fumble against Bosse.

**Jaydiss Butler** provided solid return work on kickoffs and was blessed with sure hands. He never dropped a return in two seasons handling the job. **Thomas Samuel** was faced with the unenviable task of replacing a North legend in kicker Zac Turi as a sophomore and filled the role with flying colors over his career. **Samuel**, a three year starter, ended his career in 8<sup>th</sup> place all-time for kicking points scored and 6<sup>th</sup> for career field goals. He even managed a few tackles on kickoffs over the years. **Cameron Seaton** was a late season addition to the defense who brought size and aggressive play to the perimeter. He proved his mettle against Reitz when he came away with eight tackles including a tackle for loss.

One player who earned his 'stripes' in my book provided a special contribution over the years off the football field. It was my pleasure to work side-by-side with **Ethan Fritts** as he diligently recorded the video for team review before winning a varsity jersey his senior year. A young man of uncommon courtesy and character, I was thrilled to see his commitment pay off with pass receptions on the field of play this year.

Three seniors made what, from my position perched high above the field with a pair of binoculars and a pencil, were the most significant contributions to the character of the 2017 Huskies. These three never quit and they would not allow those around them to give less than their best.

Senior **Jacob Hansen** at 5'9" and 205 lbs is slightly undersized for an offensive lineman. If there was a player this season who typified the expression "it's not the size of the dog in the fight but the size of the fight in the dog", it was **Jacob**. A two-year starter, he anchored the offensive line from his center position and helped to educate the young lineman on either side of him. He sought out linebackers at the next level, he trapped and double teamed, and he managed line calls. He was scrappy and took off downfield looking for someone else to hit when the opportunity arose.

**Tyler Tasa** brought something to this team in his first and only season as a varsity football player: no one was allowed to push North around. He typified a classic 'full back' with his ability to knock defenders down with a block or run over them if they got in his way with a football. In his 111 rushes with the football, on fewer than a handful was a single defender enough to bring him down. He gained nearly 600 tough yards the old-fashioned way: with fire in his eye, he burst into the line, and dared a defender to take him on. His fiery ways occasionally earned a penalty, but no one, absolutely no one got away with a late hit against North without paying a penalty for the Husky enforcer.

Finally, there was **Eric McClain**. Here was a senior who played every position over the years at which he was tasked by coaches to play 'for the good of the team'. As a junior he had finished second on the team in tackles and recorded three quarterback sacks from his defensive end position. As a senior, the team needed "more" from him.

So he gave it.

On opening night he started at left offensive tackle even though he was woefully undersized for the position. His game experience and leadership were needed while a group of young linemen matured. On defense they moved him from an end position on the outside and asked him to replace the All-Time tackles leader, **Cage Street**, at inside linebacker. He made the move and led the team in tackles his senior season. When someone was needed to handle the punting chores, he took on that role as well and averaged over thirty yards per punt. By the end of the season he was also filling in at running back and averaged 14 yards per carry when called upon.

**Eric McClain** was whatever his team needed him to be, wherever they needed him to play, whenever the team needed him to do so.

**Eric McClain** is a leader and a teammate. His senior season should serve as a role model for those young players on whom we will be counting in coming years. When the team needs you, answer the call. It

takes eleven players executing their tasks to accomplish a goal on any given play. Without other players doing their jobs, there are no spectacular one-handed catches. Without others sacrificing and executing their tasks, there are no breakaway runs. Without a team in front and behind you, there is no success.

Learn from this season, young men, and treasure it for the reward of experience. For the seniors, take pride in knowing that you contributed to the future success of this program mightily. For the underclassmen, take the obligation that goes with early playing time in your career and strive to use that as a foundation for getting better, getting bigger, getting stronger...

...and becoming a force to be reckoned with.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to review the 2017 North Husky football season.