

SPORTS

Football fanatic works to document great era

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Ted Mooney may be one of the few people to ever take dance lessons and still be called "Tank."

Mooney, a 1950 graduate of Rochester's Aquinas Institute, remembered that he took a lot of ribbing from his teammates on the school's football team the first day he practiced because he had to leave early for dance lessons.

"They laughed me off the field," Mooney recalled.

But his teammates' laughing quickly ceased when legendary Aquinas football coach Harry Wright spoke up in Mooney's defense.

"In order to become light on my feet, I went to dance school myself," Mooney remembered Wright telling the players.

That was just one of several stories 70 former Aquinas players shared with each other at a reunion in the school on Thursday afternoon, Aug. 20. The former players talked, ate barbecued chicken, and pored over old photos, news clippings and film footage available at the reunion.

The reunion was organized by Howie Nielsen, whose son, Brian, an Aquinas sophomore, currently plays for the school's junior varsity football team.

Although players from several different years showed up for the reunion, Nielsen said he organized it to particularly honor Aquinas football players from the years 1946 to 1951 when the team was a nationally known powerhouse.

Nielsen, who owns Chester Cab Pizza on Park Avenue, has turned his shop's office into a small-scale Aquinas football historical archive on that six-year era. Nielsen is currently researching those years for a potential TV video documentary, he said, noting that he has no release date yet planned.

Nielsen pointed out that from 1946 to 1951, Aquinas consciously sought out the best players both within Rochester and from around the country in order to field a nationally powerful team.

"(The administrators) saw football as a

way to make some money and get exposure for the school," he said. "It was right after World War II. People were looking for things to do, and high school football took front stage at Aquinas for six years."

The school's administrators brought in Wright, who had learned his coaching skills while playing for Frank Leahy, the coach of the Fighting Irish at the University of Notre Dame. Wright was succeeded in 1949 by Harry "Mickey" Connolly, a Boston College graduate who had also played for Leahy when he coached at Boston.

Wright and Connolly fielded teams that competed against the best high school and preparatory school teams in the nation, posting a 36-6-2 record over six years. Games regularly drew more than 20,000 fans, and one game, Thanksgiving Day, 1948, drew more than 23,000.

Followers of Aquinas football generally rate the 1950 team the best of all. That team alone contained five future college All-Americans, including Don Hollender, who played at West Point, became an Army major and was killed in 1967 in the Vietnam War. Aquinas renamed its now-defunct football stadium in his honor.

John Palermo wrote about the Aquinas glory years in an extensive 1978 article for the Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle's* *Upstate* magazine. In an interview with the *Catholic Courier*, Palermo credited Aquinas' coaching staff for its ability to dominate teams throughout the nation.

"They had at least college-level, if not professional-quality coaching," Palermo said. He added that Aquinas produced 97 Division I college players in six years, several of whom later played professionally.

Jack Landry, a 1947 graduate of Aquinas, echoed Palermo's comments during a phone interview with the *Courier* from his home in Rochester Hills, Mich. Landry later played both for Notre Dame and briefly for the NFL's Chicago Cardinals.

He said Coach Wright, in particular, stressed extensive pre-season conditioning as well as innovative field formations that were more advanced than what many



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Above, Aquinas Institute parent Howie Nielsen displays some of the scrapbooks, old game films and other memorabilia he has collected for a documentary about Aquinas football. Nielsen's son Brian, a sophomore at the school, is a member of Aquinas' junior varsity football squad. Below right, Aquinas senior Mike Rossi looks over scrap books after football practice during a reunion of former football players at Aquinas' cafeteria Aug. 20.

college and even professional coaches were using.

"I think that's what excited people — Aquinas moving the ball," Landry recalled.

He added that Coach Wright was a great motivator.

"He wasn't a screamer, and he never used any bad language," Landry remembered.

Aquinas football eventually began fading from the national scene when the school's officials publicly declared in December 1951 that they had decided to de-emphasize football at the school. Hence, only a small group of former players like Landry will ever be able to remember what it was like to play on a nationally known high school team.

"I think it teaches you work ethics," he said of playing on the disciplined, high-caliber squad. "Anything you feel you want is worth working for."



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