

# on the **MOVE**

## *Small numbers, plenty of purpose*

A list posted on the locker-room wall sums up Mike Pane's daunting challenge.

*Geneva DeSales, 98.*

Pane is head coach of the DeSales football program. His school's name is at the very bottom of the list, which charts the enrollments in grades 10-12 for all schools in Section 5 with a football program.

DeSales has a total enrollment of approximately 140. But the Section 5 listing of 98 students only includes sophomores, juniors and seniors, because it's rare for freshmen to play at the varsity level.

Only about half the students at the Geneva Catholic school are boys, leaving a base of 50 sophomores, juniors and seniors — and perhaps a couple of talented freshmen — from which to field a varsity football team.

To put it in perspective, DeSales' entire male student body is smaller than the football programs alone at some Section 5 schools.

These statistics alone put DeSales in the underdog class. But the challenges don't end there.

Being a private school, DeSales must do its own fundraising for football equipment and supplies. And, there are no outdoor athletic facilities at the high school, so the Saints practice on a 40-yard field next to the baseball diamond at McDonough Park, located one mile from the school. They rent Loman Field, the home facility for Geneva High School, for their home contests.

Not too many years ago, the school didn't even require practice or playing fields: The program temporarily disbanded in the mid-1990s due to insufficient numbers. Pane, a 1985 DeSales graduate, now says that the program was dangerously close to becoming defunct at that point.

Pane took over as head coach in 1997 after getting the OK from school officials to restart the program. He managed to secure new equipment, and DeSales once again took the field. Remarking on the old, overworn equipment, Pane said, "I'm surprised nobody got killed. Some of the stuff had been around since I played there."

The Saints faced an uphill battle in regaining the reputation they had enjoyed during Pane's playing days. "DeSales

had a good football tradition, going to sectionals. But these guys weren't exposed to that," he said.

Instead, the 1997 players endured ridicule from opposing schools.

They even had doubters in their own community.

"There are many people who told these kids and the coaches, 'You're never going to do it,'" recalled Greg Hurley, 17, who plays quarterback and cornerback for the Saints.

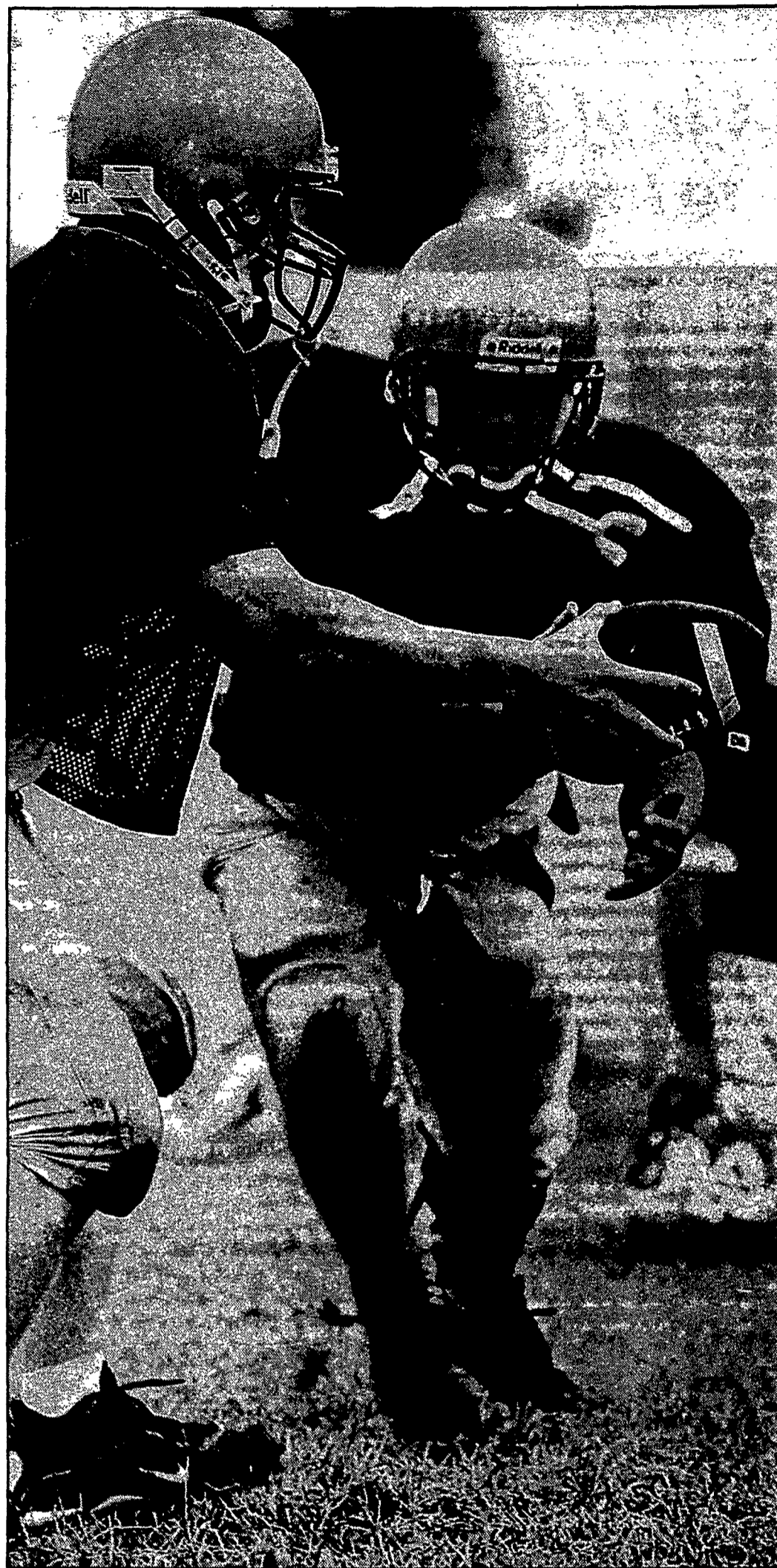
But the program surprised such naysayers. Restarting at the junior varsity level in 1997, it posted a respectable 3-4 record. DeSales then moved up to varsity in 1998 and finished 1-6.

The big breakthrough came in 1999. After losing their first three games, the Saints logged a four-game winning streak to reach the Section 5 Class D playoffs. They were defeated 22-14 by Batavia Notre Dame, the eventual champion.

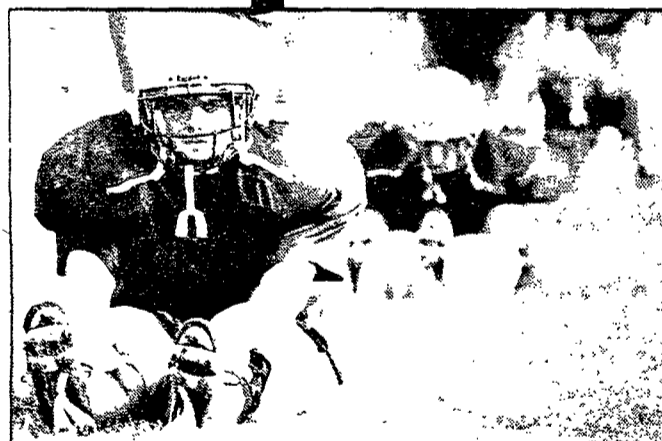
Heading into the 2000 season, the Saints are setting their goals higher. Not only do they aim to improve on their 4-4 record from a year ago, they'd like to bring home a title as well. As they prepare for their Sept. 2 season opener at Lyons (7:30 p.m. start), they're looking forward to a strong showing in Finger Lakes West League play and the playoffs that follow.

"We want to try to win sectionals, and beat (league powers) Red Jacket and Clyde, finally," said Chris Clemenson, 18, a running back and linebacker. Pane bases his optimism on his four senior co-captains, who have been around since the program's resurrection. They are Greg and Chris along with Jake Costello, 17, a wide receiver and defensive end; and Mike Cecere, 17, an offensive guard and defensive end.

However, the slim roster of 25 also includes students who, as Pane puts it, "have never put on a helmet before." Pane said he's extremely cautious about putting freshmen and other inexperienced players into varsity competition due to football's violent nature.



L.J. Partelow, running back for the Geneva DeSales football team, receives a handoff from quarterback Chris Clemenson during practice on Aug. 23.



L.J. Partelow stretches at the beginning of the Saints' Aug. 23 practice at Geneva's McDonough Park.

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"You're liable to get killed," he said.

And yet, there still must be 11 players on the field at all times. That means playing both offense and defense is a way of life for most Saint players.

"After the kickoff, you know you're in there 'til the end of the game. That's the way it is," Greg said.

Not only must the athletes fend off exhaustion, they often play through nagging injuries as well. But Mike said he's up to these kinds of challenges.

"It makes you feel better about yourself, because you push yourself," he explained.

DeSales has been successful in other sports in recent years; for instance, Jake and Mike played for the Saints baseball team that won the Section 5 title last spring.

But even with last autumn's solid showing, the Saints have found that their negative football reputation isn't dying easily.

"The teams that we beat last year all thought it was a fluke," Pane said. "I hope they keep thinking that way."

Mike and Chris, also, said they relish their underdog roles.

"It's the satisfaction of having teams look down on you, and then you go and beat them," Mike remarked.

"I always want to prove them wrong," Chris added.

Greg said it's important for future DeSales players to carry on this winning attitude after he graduates.

"It's not enough to have a team, and then go out and lose and have people say, 'Well, you gave it a try.' That's not what we're in it for," Greg said.

The players and their coach said a good football program can help boost enrollment for the private school. On top of that, Jake said, his football experience at DeSales has provided him with warm memories for a lifetime.

"When I looked back on my high-school years, I didn't want to be the one to regret not playing," he remarked.