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Summit Academy guides players in life

by Marty Stewart

Shady Side Academy hosted Summit Academy in football last Friday. The schools share the word "Academy" in their name but there are few other similarities. Though the schools are around 30 miles apart, they are worlds away in socioeconomic backgrounds.

The Knights are composed of court-adjudicated young men who have been sent to a prep school in Butler County. Steve Sherer has been coach of the football team since 2004 while John McCloud, a New Kensington native and a 1972 Valley High School graduate, has been the athletic director, defensive coordinator and wrestling coach since the school opened its doors.

"In terms of win and loss record, we're not the most successful school around," said Sherer. "For us, a win is seeing these kids develop some goals and achieve them. A win is seeing the kids develop necessary job skills. A win is seeing them grow and develop."

"These kids have not been good decision makers socially. They need discipline in the classroom and in sports. That's what we try to teach. We expect them to represent their families, their teammates and the school in a positive way."

In that respect, the Knights have succeeded. The 125-acre school is regularly recognized as the conference Sportsman of the Year. They are a regular opponent on the Shady Side Academy football schedule.

"Our coaches and players have developed a great respect for Summit Academy over the years," said SSA head football coach Dave Havern. "Their teams always have played us tough. Their players are extremely respectful, and Steve and his staff do a remarkable job bringing a new group of players each year to the field."

"They're a class act."

The Knights don't have many players and the problem is compounded when some leave school during the season.

"We have about 35 players on the varsity and 22 on the JV team," said Sherer. "We have a lot of turnover here."

"We sometimes lose players during the season when they are going back home. We know who we're not going to have a few days before the game, and we always have someone else to step up."

Sherer described the path his players must take to achieve success.

"For many of our kids, this is the first time they have strapped on a helmet," he said. "Some of them played Pop Warner, but this is a large adjustment and a new experience in a lot of ways. If they choose to play football, they know they have to also make a commitment to keep their grades up."

McCloud feels a sense of pride in the many success stories at Summit.

"Well, we have success stories and failures," he said. "We feel so proud when we get phone calls and letters from kids who are doing well in the world. That's a win for me and I get my fortune from that. It keeps me going."

"We're starting from scratch with a lot of these kids, both in football and wrestling. The fun of it is watching them catch on and watching them develop and establish healthy relationships, something that has been missing in their early development."

Despite some frustrations, the men continue doing what they do best - preparing these players to be winners in the game of life.

"We do all the legwork so they have a place to go when they leave here, whether it's at a college, junior college, community college or working," said Sherer. "A lot of these kids are pretty good with their hands so they show an interest in plumbing, welding, carpentry or computers, that's why we offer the industrial trades program that we have."

"Some of them think that once they leave here, they can stop learning. We stress that life is a continual learning process. We believe in our kids. They are our passion and we try to restructure them to prepare for success in the real world. Sports is a great vehicle to teach kids how to succeed in the game of life."

When the team departs the bus at an opponent's field, the players are all dressed the same. They wear formal school attire, consisting of a navy blazer with the school crest, dress shirts with red and blue striped ties, khaki slacks and penny loafers. It's very impressive, but not nearly as impressive as the efforts of Steve Sherer, John McCloud and the rest of the staff at Summit Academy.

With a completion rate that hovers at 89%, an exceptionally high percentage in the field of juvenile justice, the staff at Summit are molding a group of young kids, who learned early on that life is anything but fair, into young men who want to contribute. They want to show that they are worth the effort.

They want to make a lifetime of getting caught doing something right, and they're not asking for the world. They're just asking for a chance. And the folks at Summit Academy are prepping them well to earn that chance.

I'll be rooting for all of the teams at Summit Academy as they compete in the WPIAL, and I'll be rooting especially hard for the kids who will graduate and walk into a much tougher playing arena.

You can bet they'll be ready for it though. They've been knocked down plenty in their young lives, and they've gotten up every time. And it helps when you have guys like Sherer and McCloud devoting themselves to watching their kids' backs.

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