



Pine River Pride

At this Division 6 school in Michigan, character is number one

"All the hard work, all the planning and dedication from players to coaches, shows what you can do if everyone is pulling in the same direction!"

These are the words of Mark Kassuba, head football coach at Pine River High School in LeRoy, Michigan. What he is referring to is the 8-2 record his team achieved in 2004, along with a playoff berth for only the second time in school history. He's also referring to the academic all-state award his players received with the top GPA of 3.761 in Division 6. He is also referring to a program that is doing things the right way.

One of the keys to the Pine River Bucks' athletic success is a dual emphasis on developing a balanced strength training program and on encouraging athletes to participate in multiple sports. Says

Kassuba, "Our strength and conditioning class, which is run by Coach Chad Phillips, is really starting to make a difference in all our programs." Take, for example, the baseball team, which won the regional championships and made it to the state semifinals, the best performance by any baseball team in the history of the school. Then there's Ben Bowyer, just one of the model student-athletes at Pine River.

A junior last season, Bowyer was captain of the football team, led the team in tackles, was all-conference and all-area as a linebacker. In baseball he earned three varsity letters and was named first-team all-conference. Carrying a 4.0 GPA, Bowyer works hard in the weight-room and has a 300 bench press and 405 squat at a bodyweight of just 185 pounds.

Beyond the Numbers

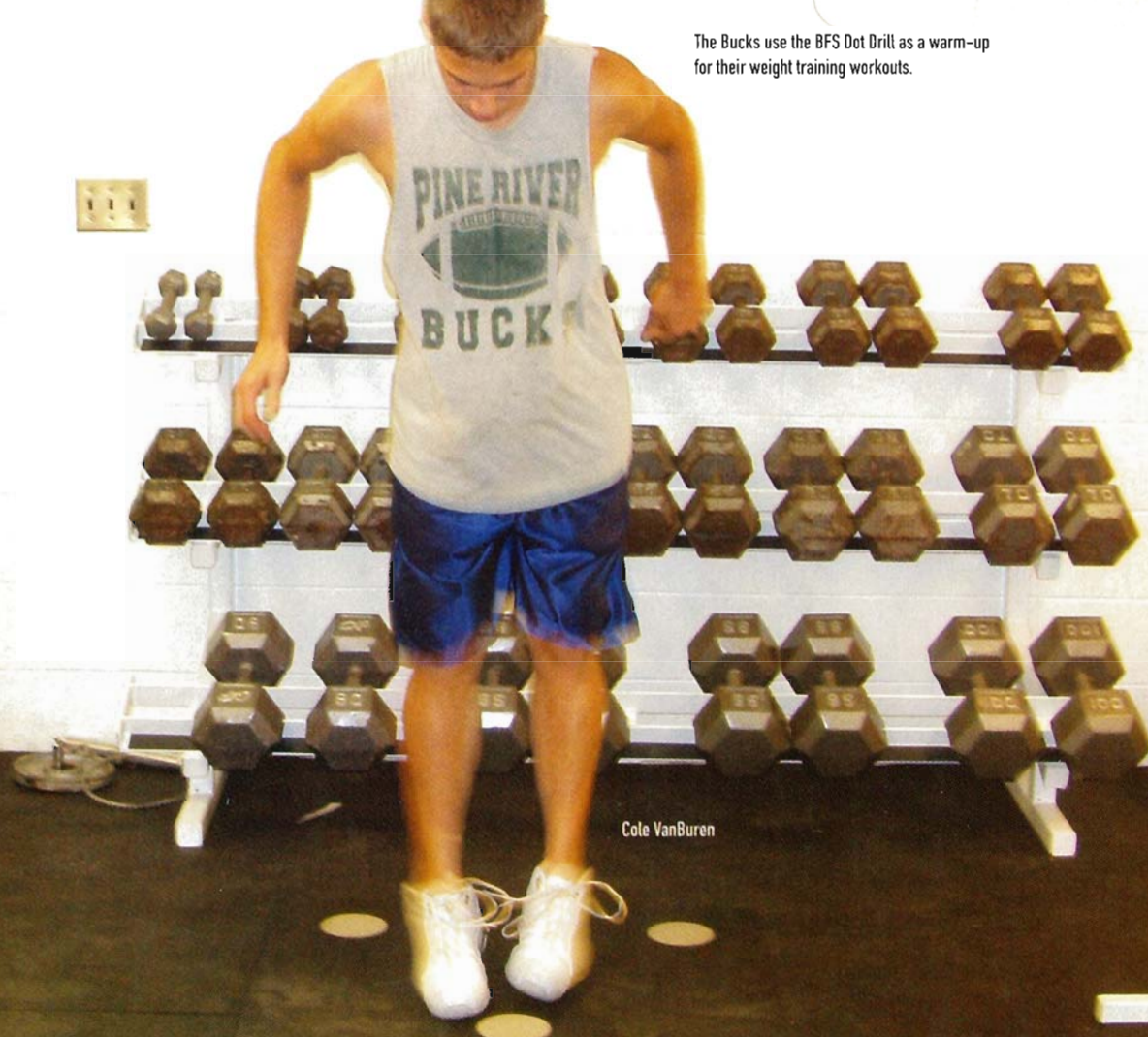
Coach Phillips is entering his tenth year as a coach, having been at Pine River for the past three. In addition to coaching defense, he's also the strength and conditioning coach and teaches four weight training classes a day. Phillips says he was inspired to become a coach by those who coached him. "My football coaches were role models for me—they were doing a lot of positive things in their lives, and that attracted me to teaching and coaching." Phillips says they were nothing like the coaches depicted in the movie *Friday Night Lights*.

"First of all, you have to understand that what happens in Texas is quite different than what happens in a lot of states," jokes Phillips about the controversial Texas team portrayed in the movie. "But seriously, most kids in our school are playing multiple sports, so

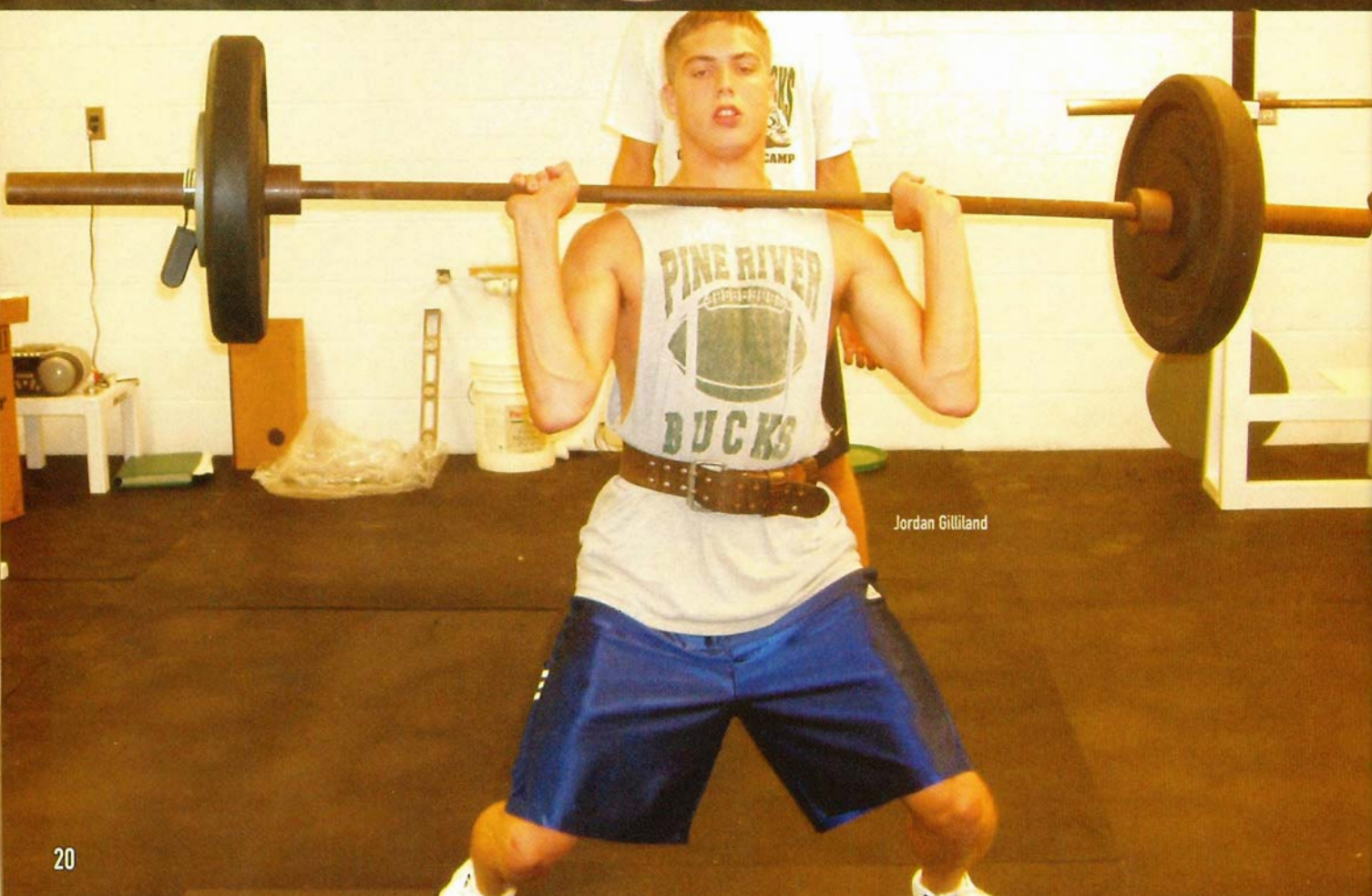
there's not such an intense focus on just football. My last two schools had about 1,800 students, and that's the biggest level in our state. At those big schools it's a lot harder to make the team if you're not focusing on one sport. At smaller schools the coaches may just be trying to get enough numbers to have teams. At a school our size you really kill all your programs if your best basketball player just plays basketball or if your best football player just plays football. You need those athletes all year round."

One stereotype about coaches Phillips says he always makes a point of correcting is that many people don't believe football coaches are as dedicated or as good as other teachers. "What many people fail to realize is that we may not get home until seven or eight o'clock, whereas other teachers are going home at three or four. Most importantly, I believe most coaches are trying to teach character and are

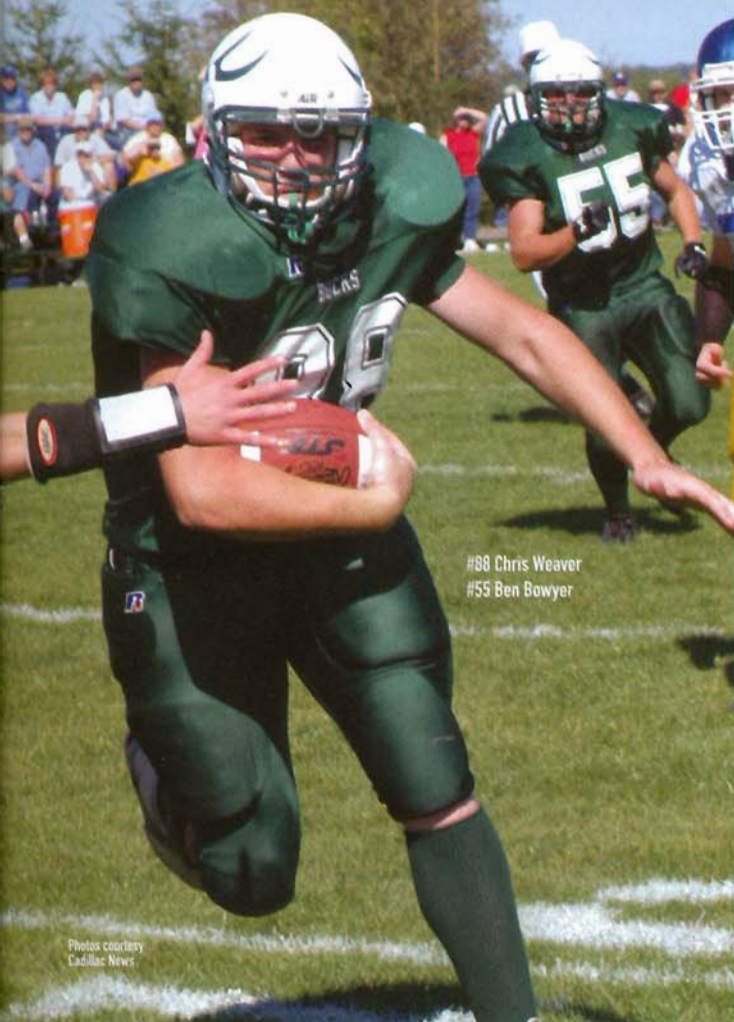
The Bucks use the BFS Dot Drill as a warm-up for their weight training workouts.



Cole VanBuren



Jordan Gilliland



#88 Chris Weaver
#55 Ben Bowyer

Photos courtesy
Cadillac News

not like the tyrants or win-at-all-cost coaches portrayed in some movies," says Phillips.

"Most of us who are coaching are trying to teach that you need to have heart, that you need to be a good person and that there are no shortcuts to success. There are always some exceptions, but I know that those athletes who have gone through our program have made great friends, learned how to work as a team, and were taught that character is more important than anything." Coach Kassuba agrees: "I always tell the players, 'Play the game the right way. Play with your hearts, your heads, and with Buck Pride.' It's my way of reminding them to Be an 11."

Building Muscles the Old Fashioned Way

In his weight training classes, Phillips has the same expectations for every student: female, male, athletes, non-athletes. "Everybody is expected to work hard and everybody is equal." Such an approach is one reason for the popularity of his classes and the success of Pine River's athletic program.

"If you go back about five years there wasn't a conditioning class at all, since nobody was lifting; and that was part of the reason we were behind some of the other schools in our conference," says Phillips. "At first most of the coaches were unsure about weightlifting, but the more success we've had, the more sure they've become – now they expect the athletes to get what they need out of class." He adds that

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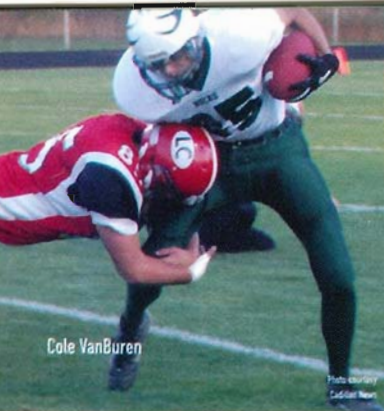
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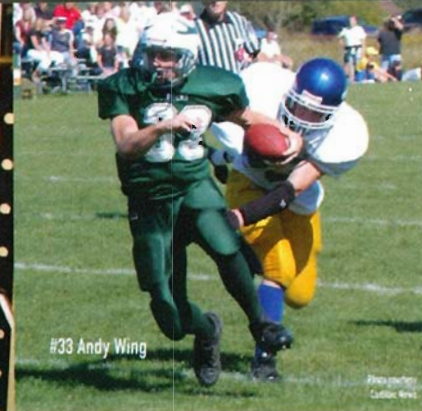
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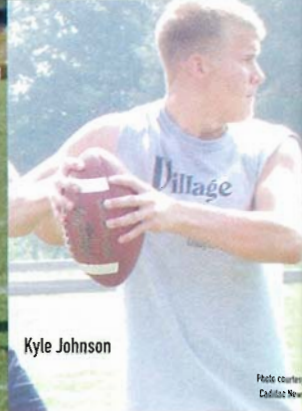
21



Cole VanBuren



#33 Andy Wing



Kyle Johnson

when he started teaching strength and conditioning classes three years ago he only had eight girls participating and now about one third of the students in his classes are girls. Such a turnaround, he says, is due to education.

"One of the things many girls are afraid of is getting big and bulky from lifting weights, so we do have to explain to them that females don't have the testosterone levels of males so they're not going to put on massive amounts of muscle or look like bodybuilders. I also do a lot of testing with them – whether it's the Dot Drill, parallel squat or vertical jump – so they can see that they are getting stronger and faster. I also started doing bodyfat testing to show that even though they might gain a couple of pounds of bodyweight, they are actually losing bodyfat." The strategy worked, and it also has translated into results in the athletic arena.

"The first feedback I started hearing was that the girls in the program were having fewer muscle pulls and injuries," says Phillips. "The word got around, with the girls telling their teammates, 'Hey, the weightlifting class is hard work, but you get a lot out of it. I feel better, I'm a better ball player, and I look better – I didn't develop huge biceps.'"

Even with his program's success, Phillips says he still has to do a big sales job with the younger kids. "It's important to educate them about the benefits of training and about some of the myths about weight training, as there are still a lot of misconceptions about this type of training."

In the area of motivation, one way Phillips helped turn around his program was to have a Be an 11 clinic in 2003 with Jeff Sellers. "For whatever reason, kids tend to listen more to people they don't know than to people they do know. Having that reinforcement from BFS was huge, because BFS has been doing these seminars for so long all

across the country. After the Be an 11 clinic I found our athletes were more willing to listen to what we say."

Another motivational tool the Pine River coaches employ is a team mission statement with such intentions as "to have fun, always give our all, have a winning record, and practice as a team." Says Phillips, "After we decided on our mission statement, we wrote ten things that would help us accomplish that mission, such as "be optimistic in games or practice, have a team GPA of 3.5 or above, play one game at a time, stay away from drugs and alcohol, and conduct ourselves with class at all times."

"We had everybody sign it, and I posted it right in the locker room window, and everybody got a copy. We told the athletes to put it somewhere where they're going to see it every day. Some put it on their bedroom wall, some put it inside their football locker, so they would think about what they would have to do to make the team better."

Another character-building practice at Pine River is to make realistic team rules and enforce them. "If you allow a player to cross the line and do something that harms the team, it just gets worse and worse – you have to put your foot down," says Phillips. "This year a player of ours decided to skip practice to go fishing and so we took him off the team – in the past we would have let that go and given him a second chance."

Finally, Phillips says he teaches his athletes not to let their success go to their head. "We tell our kids, 'Don't go around with your chest puffed out, but be humble – congratulate others on their success. If you walk around like a big shot, people are not going to think much of you. But if you're humble and treat people with respect, they will respect you.'"



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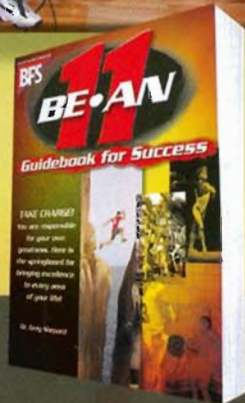
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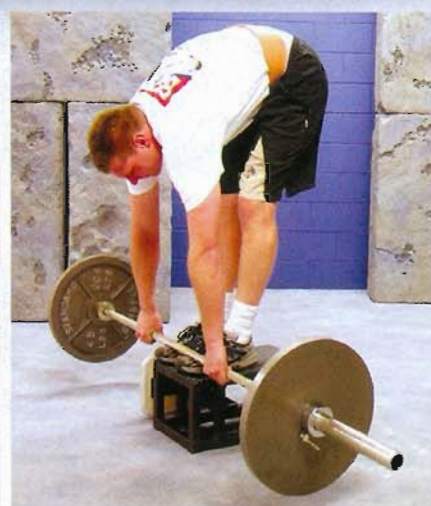
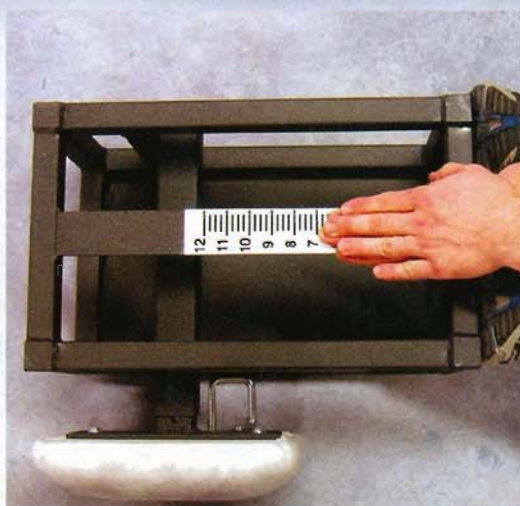
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