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Small Town, Big Dreams

The story of Wautoma High School's 180 degree turnaround

BY JEFF SCURRAN, BFS CLINICIAN

As I drove into Wautoma on Highway 21 from Oshkosh, signs that read “Small Town, Big Dreams” were on every storefront and marquee. These were hefty sentiments from this tiny Wisconsin town, which had fallen on such hard times with their schools’ sports programs that in 1998 the school board actually had considered dropping football entirely. However, the sign that caught my attention the most was the one hanging from one downtown lamppost in handwritten, fresh paint that simply read “WE DID IT!”

Only one week earlier I’d gotten the phone call that all BFS clinicians love to hear more than anything else.

Wautoma High School’s head football coach, Dennis Moon, called me less than an hour after the title game was decided at University of Wisconsin’s Camp Randall Stadium and said, “Start the party; Wautoma is back...and we couldn’t have done it without you.”

Now, after flying all the way from Tucson and then driving from Milwaukee into this now-familiar town to enjoy the celebration with Coach Moon, his staff, players that I’d worked with since junior high school, their parents and what seemed like half of the community, I couldn’t help but think back to my first clinic in Wautoma in 2001.

At that time the Wautoma Hornets

were the laughingstock of Central Wisconsin. It was so bad that the folks at the local restaurant where I stopped for lunch before I went to the high school were completely convinced their town’s boys and girls just couldn’t win. “It’s the water here,” the waitress said. “Everyone knows the wells have gone bad. It’s killed our sports. We can’t win anymore in anything...no way.” And it didn’t get any better when I walked into the high school.

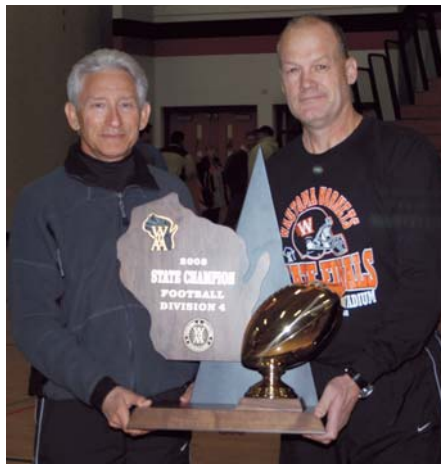
Talk about bad attitude – I was so taken aback walking around on my initial tour that I stopped and asked the secretary at the front desk, “Am I here at a bad time?” fearing something terrible might have happened that morning.

In fact, very few kids even bothered to attend the first part of the clinic.

Coach Moon was so upset he actually thought about canceling the rest of the day. “Wautoma was reeking with a losing mentality,” Moon said in retrospect. This statement was a reflection of the man who had over 20 years of experience trying to upgrade Wautoma’s football fortunes. In the 1980s he had taken on the Wautoma football project but couldn’t get kids to commit to a weight training program.

“Back then, dirtbags ruled at this school, and football players were nothing,” says Moon. “Drugs were everywhere.” Moon was so upset he resigned in frustration and thought about coaching at another school. He was asked to come back again in 1992; but without district support for weight training he stayed only three years, opting to watch his own son play in college.

It was during Moon’s hiatus that Wautoma hit rock bottom, and as a



BFS clinician Jeff Scurran with Wautoma head football coach Dennis Moon.

result the school board formed a committee to look into dropping football. Lifelong Wautoma resident and former coach Neal Olson reflected, “Our district’s dedication to leadership tailed off for a few years. Complacency took over the entire system. It got real ugly for a while.”

In 2001, Moon agreed to come back, but this time, he vowed, things

would be different. “I had done BFS part-time a lot of my career, but I decided if I was going to ever come back, there had to be a total change,” said Moon. “BFS was my last, best hope. I had read all the *BFS* magazines, I loved all the success stories and I knew we could become one of those stories. I called Coach Scurran, and that call has made all the difference.”

It was at that very first poorly attended clinic that Paul Kreutzer, Parkside Middle School’s principal then, and now the superintendent of Milwaukee’s New Berlin School District, stepped up and said, “If the kids here don’t want to do this, let’s go to my school. I love the whole concept. I’ll give you the rest of the day with all my middle school athletes, and I’ll support the program with my entire PE staff.”

Despite the apathy on campus, I decided to stick it out at Wautoma, and that was the start of their climb out of





Football action photo by Visual Image Photography, Inc.

Senior quarterback #3 Jared Abbrederis' hard work on the field and in the weightroom resulted in his being selected as 1st Team All-State QB.

the cellar...and an example that every school in the country that has given up on success should look at closely. "It was like a script was there for a success story because we were just so bad," Coach Moon said.

After that first clinic, Wautoma School District hired me to assist their PE teachers in writing a total district curriculum, which included integrating all athletics with physical education. They also began bringing me into their schools for BFS clinics each year to

keep continuity in their program and to certify their coaches.

The turnaround was first seen in their track program, a result that is typical for schools that use BFS as a total program. Both the boys and girls programs were district champions by 2003. Since the adoption of BFS, Wautoma track has won four district titles and 14 gold medals, and has produced four state individual champions. And since the inception of BFS, the Wautoma Athletic Department has garnered 11

conference championships. Five female athletes have earned college athletic scholarships, and the male athletes have added another 10 in football alone.

Brandon Meckelberg, the Hornets' tight end and winner of the Wendy's Wisconsin High School Heisman (and a 4.3 GPA student) said, "What Coach Scurran did for this program helped make me the athlete I am today. I started BFS in junior high, and now I'm being recruited by Ivy League schools."

Wautoma Superintendent of Schools Jeff Kasuboski, who was the principal of Wautoma High School when I did that now-famous first clinic, told me, "BFS has made all the difference in the world. It turned everything around. Attitude, character, work ethic...everything has changed."

Kasuboski had seen the BFS success formula up close and personal, having had his own daughter, Krista, go through Coach Moon's BFS PE class for four years, even when many of her friends had dropped out. Krista's personal dedication, along with Moon's coaching, helped make her a two-time conference player-of-the-year

and first-team all-state basketball star. Krista is now a scholarship college basketball athlete at Michigan Tech. "One of the teachers grabbed me the day our team left for state," Kasuboski said, "and told me that the most focused kids in class all week long have been the football players. That says about all anyone needs to know about the total concept of BFS."

Neal Olson, retired from coaching but advising the school board on athletics, had many doubts about BFS at the start. Not now. At the reception that brought me back to Wautoma, Olson said, "I've been around Wautoma for

65 years as a teacher, coach and citizen, and through BFS, leadership in this community has been reborn. BFS brings the most important qualities that exist in education. The values of character development, commitment, dedication, perseverance and goal setting can't come out of classroom academics alone. The pride and togetherness that have come about between schools, taxpayers and business are unequalled in my lifetime."

Finally, when all the nice things had been said, and after the last of the players had shaken my now-sore hand, the parents and well-wishers had left the

once-crowded gym and it was time for me to drive back to Milwaukee, Coach Dennis Moon looked at me and said, "Can you believe this? I didn't think I'd ever see this in my coaching lifetime. I can't thank you and BFS enough."

But no matter what Coach Moon or anyone said at that wonderful reception, the thing I'll remember the most was a hand-scribbled poster that a student had hung on the weightroom door:

"Happy are those who dream dreams and are ready to pay the price. Thank you, Hornets, for paying the price." BFS

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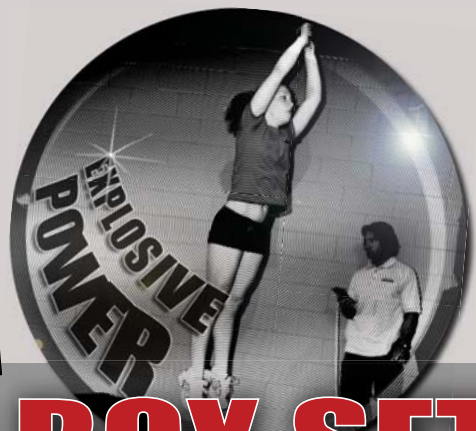
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