

## 5A State Champions Meridian High School

# Warriors

The coaches and athletes at this school know what it takes to win big

Steve Corner Photography



QB Jake Burroughs

Meridian has been the fastest growing city in Idaho since 1994, and between 1990 and 2000 its population has nearly tripled to 56,000 residents. Prior to their community's growth spurt, the Meridian High School football team hadn't won a state championship in 20 years, but three years ago the team's new football coach put in motion a plan to develop a football team worthy of the popularity of the city.

That coach was Mike Virden, who took over the Warriors' football program in 2003. Coach Virden's first priority was to inspire kids to do more than want to win on the field – they'd have to commit to doing what it takes in the off-season to win. "Before my staff took over, there were only about a dozen kids a day who worked out in the weightroom in the off-season," says Virden. "That first year we had about 50 kids, the following year about 80 kids, and this last summer we had over 100 kids working out." And judging by the weights they lifted, these kids worked out hard.

Take, for example, the power clean exercise. In 2003 there wasn't a single athlete on the team who could lift 250 pounds in this exercise; now there are more than 10 players lifting that amount and two over 300. Then there is a special board Virden set up to recognize athletes who lift the most in the bench, squat, power clean and Hex bar deadlift, combined. The benchmark for the team is 1,200 pounds. That first year Meridian only had a



Meridian High School was the first high school in the city, but the community has grown so rapidly that now the number of high schools has grown to four.

handful of kids who reached that goal; this year Coach Virden must have considered getting a bigger board, as 24 players achieved a 1,200 total, with several over 1,500 pounds!

With unwavering determination Virden and his team steadily built a stunning football program within three years. The first season, 2003, even though they finished at 4-5, in each of the games they lost, they were only behind by a single touchdown in the fourth quarter. Physical strength was the problem. “We had many exciting games and put a lot of points on the board, but we just couldn’t stop our opponents from putting up points too.”

*The Be an 11 Clinic set the foundation of success in teaching the kids that they can work themselves into success if they set goals, commit and make good choices.*

—MIKE VIRDEN

In 2004 the team improved to 6-4, losing to the defending state champions in the playoffs in double overtime. Virden recalls, “The pain those kids felt from that loss vaulted them into the next season – they worked so hard the

following year to get back into the playoffs.” And that hard work paid off. On November 4, 2005, they defeated Capital High School 55-25, and the following week they defeated Lake City 42-21 to bring their record to 10-1. Their final game, the Division 5A State Championships, was scheduled for November 18 against Highland High School.

The game against Highland, which had defeated Centennial 17-12 to earn a match-up against Meridian, appeared to be a mismatch on paper. “The Highland offensive line was gigantic, averaging about 270 pounds – our biggest player on the defensive line was

Coach Virden developed motivational record boards to keep track of the team’s lifting progress.



Game Photos by Steve Conner



225 pounds, and our defensive ends were about 190.” But in this game, it was a case of “The bigger their opponents are, the harder the Warriors play.” Meridian was ready at last, and the Warriors dominated 48-28.

Community support for the team during the season had been tremendous, and the stands were packed with over 12,000 fans cheering on their team. The excitement after the winning game was “astounding,” says Coach Virden. “The mayor made a proclamation to call this Warrior Day, because it had been so long

since these kids even remotely had this kind of success.”

### More Than Muscle

One of the ways Coach Virden helped change his team from an attitude of also-rans to champions was by instilling the values of the Be an 11 program, which he kick-started with a clinic conducted by Dr. Greg Shepard. “The Be an 11 Clinic set the foundation of success in teaching the kids that they can work themselves into success if they set goals, commit and make good



Lifting chains help the Warriors develop explosiveness.





DB A.J. Storms



choices. We ran with that philosophy for the past three years.”

One of the great motivators was lifting chains. “Our kids love the chains,” says Virden. “For one, there’s the sound – when we have 12 stations going with chains, the sound and the energy that it creates gets the kids really excited.” He adds that from a physical standpoint, one of the major benefits is that chains teach them to be more explosive.

Virden uses the BFS program, which he says “works great in a high

school setting.” One of the key concepts he spearheaded is unification, which has served him well as he and his staff teaches classes totaling 400 of the school’s 1850 students. “The year I was hired they converted from sport-specific fitness classes to multi-sport classes, meaning that all our kids were within one class. Our fitness classes are geared towards developing a complete athlete, one who is stronger, quicker, and who can run faster and jump higher.” But there’s more. “There’s a whole lot of character development that goes on

when kids participate in our classes,” says Virden. “When the kids work hard, it makes them feel good about themselves – it raises their self-esteem.”

As the Warriors’ confidence increased in the weightroom, so did their success on the field. Virden agrees that his expectations for his team rose each year as he saw his players steadily building strength in the weightroom and skill on the field. “Our players were willing to pay the price to win the state championship, and that price was hard work.” **BFS**

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