

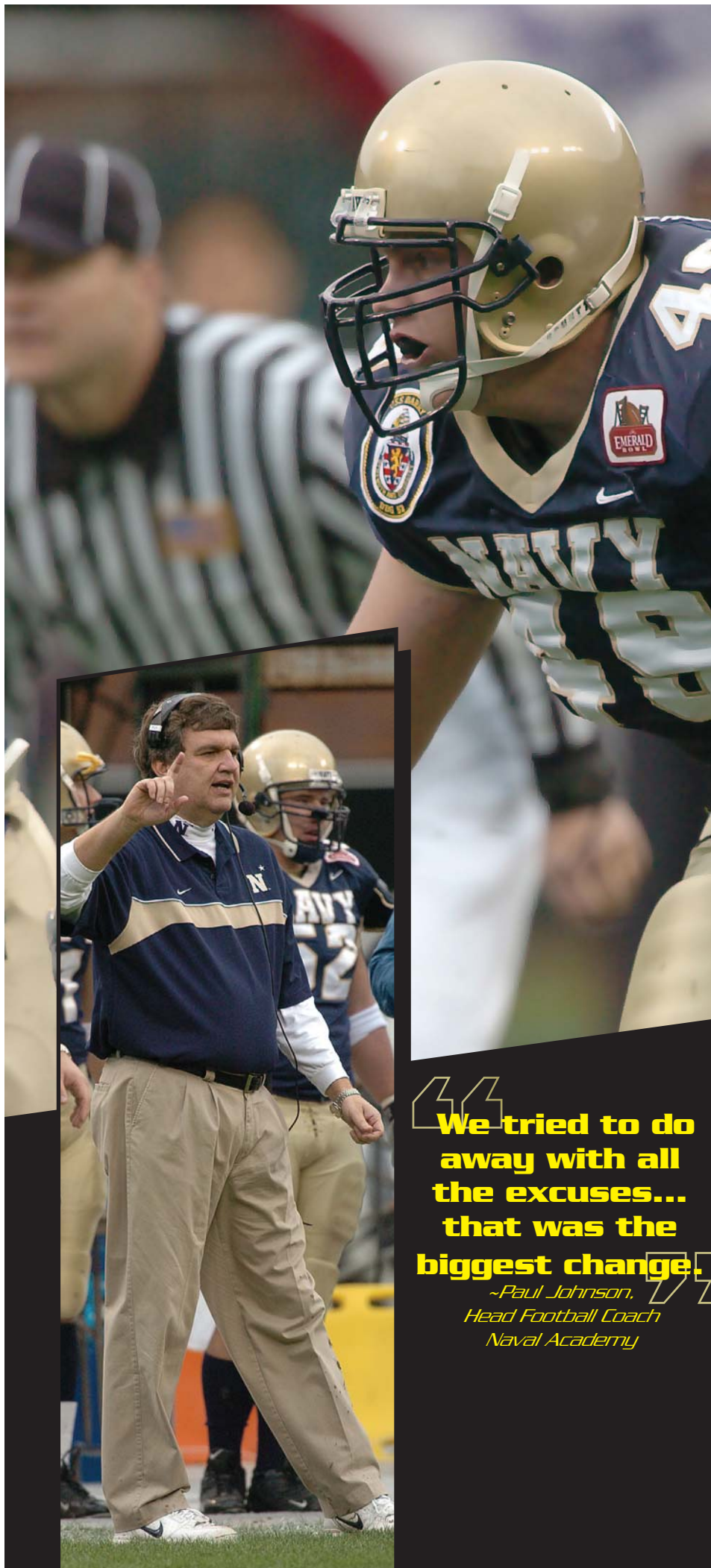
US Naval Academy

Back in Action!

How the midshipmen turned around their program and posted their best record in 99 years

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ith the current military presence in Iraq, the service academies hold a special place in the hearts of college football fans. All the academy students will be serving our country upon graduation, and many of the athletes among them have former teammates who have lost their lives to protect our freedoms. With such commitment, plus rigorous entrance requirements that eliminate most top athletes from playing at these schools, it's a special achievement when any of these schools win. And when the Naval Academy has an exceptional football season, there is a swell of pride among the players and their fans that cannot be matched.



“**We tried to do away with all the excuses... that was the biggest change.**”

*~Paul Johnson,
Head Football Coach
Naval Academy*

The 2004 football season was indeed magic for the Naval Academy. In the regular season they finished 9-2, the most wins since 1963, earning them an invitation to the Emerald Bowl. Included in that record were victories over the Air Force Academy and West Point, an achievement that enabled them to fulfill their number-one goal: The Commander in Chief's Trophy and a visit with the president at the White House.

There's more.

At the Emerald Bowl they faced New Mexico, a team that was on a five-game winning streak and which had finished second in the Mountain West conference to undefeated Utah. The discipline of the midshipmen was exemplified by a goal-line stand on the 1-yard line in the third quarter that was immediately followed by a 94-yard, 26-play scoring drive that consumed 14:26 minutes. The Navy won that game 34-19, which gave them their first 10-win season since 1905.

There's more.

In 2003 Navy won eight games. You'd have to go back 95 years to find a two-year span in which they had won at least 17 games. The midshipmen also finished the season ranked 24th in the nation, the first time they had cracked the top 25 since 1979. It's no wonder that head coach Paul Johnson won the Bobby Dodd Coach of the Year award in 2003.

Oh, and there's one more record to be proud of: Navy shattered their season total attendance record last year by almost 20,000 fans.

The Paul Johnson Effect

Paul Johnson had his work cut out for him when he took over as head football coach in 2002. For the previous two years the team's record had been 1-20, the worst two-year record in the 122-year history of Navy football. And the previous two decades hadn't been much better, because from 1984 to 1999 their record was 45-131 (for a .256 winning percentage) and they had three seasons with two or fewer wins. In fact, if you exclude the 2003-2004 seasons, since 1987 Navy had only two years where they posted winning records. It doesn't get much worse than that.

The big prize:
The Commander-in-Chief's Trophy



Prior to joining the Naval Academy's coaching staff, Johnson had won two straight 1-AA National Championships and five straight Southern Conference Championships at Georgia Southern. When Johnson took over the Georgia Southern program in 1997, the team was coming off a 4-7 record from the previous year; that first year with Johnson, Georgia Southern finished at 10-3, their best record since 1989. With such success, why would Coach Johnson want to take over one of the worst college programs in the country?

"It was a challenge, and honestly we had probably accomplished what we could accomplish at Georgia Southern," says Johnson. We went 62-10 in five years, won a couple of national championships, and got beat in the finals and played in the semi-finals and quarter finals the other two years. After achieving that, I was intrigued with Navy, and was ready to take on the challenge."

Coach Johnson, you have set a high standard. You and your team achieved one of the most dramatic turn-arounds in NCAA Football history.

~President George W. Bush

When he took over the Navy program, Johnson's first order of business was to instill a better work ethic and attitude. "We tried to do away with all the excuses — you can come up with a million reasons why you can't do something," says Johnson. "That was the biggest change — the expectation level and the work ethic."

In the area of strength and conditioning, Johnson believes the midshipmen are in good hands under the leadership of Mike Brass. "Mike was our strength coach at Georgia Southern and he does a great job. I pretty much let him run the strength program because he understands what we're looking for in a football player. We're not into the big-bulk guys; we're more into running and speed and quickness, and he sets his program up that way."

Although the realities of Iraq and potential future conflicts are a part of military service today, Johnson says his



players try not to let it distract them from their studies and athletics. "If you were in their position, I don't know that you could ever really leave it behind, because they have friends and former teammates in Iraq and we pray for them. But when we go to football practice, it's about football."

The Taste of Victory

Johnson's first season with Navy was a disappointment, as the team managed only two wins, but one of those was a 58-12 blowout over Army, the second largest margin of victory over the Black Knights in school history. "We got better as the year went along," says Johnson. "We lost to Wake Forest, which was a bowl team, in the last minute, and we were up eight points on Notre Dame with six minutes to go in the game and we lost. And on the last game we beat Army really bad, and we just took that and built on it."

The following year was a different story, as the team won eight games and a trip to the EVI.net Houston Bowl. They also posted victories over Air Force and Army, earning them the Commander-in-Chief's Trophy and a trip to the White House for the award's presentation.

At the White House ceremony on April 19, President George W. Bush made the following comments: "Coach Johnson, you have set a high standard. You and your team have achieved one of the most dramatic turn-arounds in NCAA football history." When asked how important the Commander-in-Chief's Trophy is to the midshipmen, Johnson replied, "Take your biggest rivalry and multiply it times 10, and you have a pretty good idea. It's the number-one goal of the academies, and it gives you bragging rights for the year."

With eight wins and a bowl game after three seasons with just three victories, you might think that the midshipmen might relax a bit in the off-season. It wasn't going to happen under Johnson's watch. "We talked to our players about how it can be much harder to maintain than it is to get to a certain level. And we talked about how everybody would say that the season was a fluke, an anomaly. We talked about that a lot."



Next year will be another great challenge for Johnson, as the midshipmen will lose 18 starters and 36 letter winners. "We don't have a very big senior class this year. That's a concern because this class was caught in a transition because the younger guys had never lost, so they don't know what it feels like. I'm hoping that we can instill the same kind of work ethic and chemistry that you have to have at an academy because you're not going to "out-athlete" anyone."

The Naval Academy is one of only four college teams not to be in a conference, a position that Johnson says enables them to play teams from several conferences. "We've got the constants: We're always going to play Army, Air Force and Notre Dame — after that, we try to play a national schedule. This year we'll play a couple of ACC teams; we'll play Maryland and Duke; Stanford out of the Pac Ten; and Rutgers out of the Big East."

One of the biggest challenges at any service academy is recruiting, as the entrance requirements are high and there's little chance of playing in the NFL after graduation. But Johnson believes the Naval Academy is a great place to attend. "It's a prestigious institution and is one of only three schools in the country that I know of that guarantees you a job when you graduate. The Naval Academy not only offers you a great education, it gives you a chance to make choices that can help you be successful in life."

And sometimes, as in 2004, you even get a chance to play great football!



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