

'Blakelock football has changed a lot'

Tigers beat Reding for senior tier 2 championship, erasing memories of winless seasons

By Herb Garbutt
Burlington Post staff

As Chandler Bradshaw and his teammates celebrated on the field at Nelson Stadium Wednesday afternoon, he was approached by a coach from the University of Guelph.

Just a few years ago, a university coach scouting a Blakelock game would have been unthinkable.

"When we came in in Grade 9, we were regarded as one of the worst teams," said Bradshaw, a defensive standout for the Tigers.

At the time, the Tigers' senior football team was in the midst of a streak that saw it go 1-21 between 2009 and 2011, including a 17-game losing streak. Those days suddenly seem far away in the rearview mirror. Over the past two seasons, Blakelock has been the best team in Division 2, going 15-2. One of those losses was in last year's final, a narrow 17-14 defeat at the hands of Christ the King.

Wednesday, the Tigers completed their resurgence by winning the school's first senior football title since it captured the tier 2 title in 2004 with a 14-7 victory over the Bishop Reding Royals. The turnaround started with Blakelock's junior team, which won back-to-back titles before having its run for three straight derailed by Iroquois Ridge earlier Wednesday. The core of those first junior championship teams now make up Blakelock's senior squad.

In addition to coaching and commitment by players, Bradshaw said a big factor in the turnaround has been the players' ability to work together.

"It's a mix of great athletes and a huge camaraderie. We trust one another and every-

one knows where everyone is going to be."

Brandon Tyrell, who scored both Blakelock TDs, has had much success on the track. He finished fourth in the 100-metres at the provincial high school championships in the spring, but he said there was no comparison to the feeling of Wednesday's win.

"Track, you do it as an individual," he said "Football feels like you win it as a whole unit. It's so much better. You have more people to celebrate with."

"It's been a long time coming," said Blakelock coach Jason Kana. "We've been improving for three years. We won back-to-back junior titles and the school is building on that. It's a great group of kids that we have. The kids worked hard for this."

On paper, Wednesday's game looked like a mismatch. Blakelock was 7-0, sporting the league's best offence and defence, while Bishop Reding finished fifth with a 4-3 mark.

The Royals were on a roll, though, having won six straight since starting the year 1-3. That included two dramatic playoff upsets — a triple overtime victory over Oakville Trafalgar and a semifinal triumph over White Oaks on a field goal in the final minute.

The Tigers looked to end Reding's Cinderella run early, scoring on their second drive of the game when Tyrell caught a five-yard pass from quarterback Ben Bernier. After being hemmed in its own end for much of the first half, Reding took advantage of an interception, scoring one play later to tie the game 7-7 with 2:47 to play in the opening half.

"That first half was way too close for my liking," said Tyrell, who finished the day



Jason Laskis hoists Brandon Dale in the air as they celebrate with their T.A. Blakelock Tiger teammates following their 14-7 win over the Bishop Reding Royals. After losing in last year's final, Blakelock went undefeated this season.

| photo by Riziero Vertolli — Oakville Beaver

with four catches for 56 yards, plus another 27 on the ground.

If the first half was too close, the third quarter didn't provide much relief. Blakelock showed a balanced attack in finishing the day with 301 yards in total offence. On the ground, Rich Panten (59 yards) and Malcolm Forde (55) proved to be reliable moving the chains and Tanner Barwell (six catches for 73 yards) was a trusty target for Bernier.

But the Tigers had trouble finishing.

Twice, Blakelock moved the ball inside the Reding 20-yard line but the Royals got through the line to put pressure on kicker

Luca McLean both times. His first attempt rattled off the upright while Reding blocked the second.

Tyrell would finally give them some breathing room early in the final quarter, punching the ball in from a yard out. Still, it looked like Reding might have some magic left. The Royals recovered a pair of Blakelock fumbles in the final minutes but both times the Tiger defence held Reding at bay.

The turnovers may have been just the opening Tiger opponents needed in the past, but as Tyrell said, "Blakelock football has changed a lot."

Iroquois Ridge shuts down unbeaten Tigers to claim junior tier 2 football

By Herb Garbutt
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Most observers would have regarded it as a trick play. But when you run it semi-regularly and the other team knows it's coming, it's hard to consider it a gimmick. At some point, it just becomes a well-executed play.

That's what the Iroquois Ridge Trailblazers delivered in Wednes-

day's Halton junior tier 2 football final. A successful onside kick to open the second half set up the only scoring drive of the game in Iroquois Ridge's 6-1 victory over the previously undefeated T.A. Blakelock Tigers.

Iroquois Ridge coach Mike Luyks said the Trailblazers had attempted an onside kick in pretty much every game this season, with much success. So

trailing 1-0 at halftime — Blakelock picked up a single point off a missed field goal at the end of the first quarter — and with both teams struggling to mount much offensively, Luyks looked to give his team a boost, and a shorter field.

Nick Casola, who handles the kicking duties in addition to playing running back, looked for every advantage he could.

"It's tough when the other team is lining up for it, but we practice it a lot so we were well prepared for it," he said. "The sun was in their eyes, though, so I just tried to get it up as high as I could and Grant (Vassos) ended up coming up with it."

Taking over at their own 50, Casola, who finished the day with 99 rushing yards, and Vassos, who had 39, moved the ball deep into

Blakelock territory, Alec James handed off to Casola at the Tigers' two-yard line. The ball was knocked loose, though, falling to the turf in the end zone where Michael Booth pounced on it for the touchdown.

From there, Iroquois Ridge put its fate in the hands of its defence and its ability to shut down the only team to score more than 10

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