

Star-Telegram

Pride, achievement mean as much as a title

By Gary West

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*Fort Worth Hill School plays for its first state football championship today.

Sometimes, amid all the hoopla and fanaticism that can permeate every level of competition, you have to wonder if football, or at least the relentless celebration of the game, represents a perversion of values. But then something happens to remind you what football in its purest form can be and what athletics in general can mean.

Such a happening occurs today at 3 p.m. in Aledo, where Hill School of Fort Worth plays Trinity Christian of Midland for the state football championship in Division I of the Texas Christian Athletic Fellowship. Trinity Christian is the defending champion. Hill School will be playing in its first title game.

And so Friday afternoon, as the players walked off the practice field, an underclassman who was reflecting with understandable pride on the team's accomplishments and about today's game said, "This is the biggest thing that's ever happened to Hill School."

"No," corrected a parent, who happened to be following close behind, "every time a student graduates and goes to college, that's the biggest thing."

Yes, something happens every once in a while to remind you that football in its purest form can make virtues vivid -- virtues such as determination, perseverance and industry. Today's game is such a happening.

"It's the payoff for all the hard work," said Marcos Rodriguez, a senior guard and linebacker, about the championship game. "This is what we've worked toward for four years."

Hill School is for students with learning differences. For some students, dyslexia might juggle numbers or letters like so many bowling pins. For others, an internal alarm clock might ring every few moments. The students are smart, very smart in some cases, but in a traditional setting it can be as if they're working on a Mac computer while the school is using Microsoft.

And so there's Hill School, and other schools like it. And today there's a football game where virtues become vivid.

The success on the football field has become a source of confidence and pride. And that's probably more true here, explained head coach Cody Hanson, than it would be at a school with a winning football tradition.

The Hawks enter today's game with an 8-3 record, their best ever. When Hanson arrived seven years ago, Hill School had won a single game in its two previous seasons.

Star-Telegram

"We improved gradually, to 3-6 and then 4-5," he said, "and just got a little better every year. The main thing was getting a football program in our middle school."

Hill School plays six-man football, which is the wild and woolly variety that has become a Texas tradition. Imported from Nebraska in 1938, the game quickly spread through the plains, according to C. H. Underwood in his *Six-Man Football*, and became an athletic staple, especially in West Texas.

Six-man football is played on a smaller field, 40-by-80 yards, than its 11-man counterpart. And it probably places more emphasis on athleticism and stamina since players generally go both ways, on defense and offense.

Some of the state's best players have come out of the six-man tradition. Ed Sprinkle, who played the six-man variety at Tuscola, Texas, went on to play linebacker, end and guard for the Chicago Bears, where he was known as the "meanest man in football." And, of course, Jack Pardee played at Christoval before going on to become an All-American at Texas A&M and to a lengthy NFL career.

"Most teams spread the field and throw all over the place," Hanson said. But Hill School isn't most teams. The Hawks run. Patrick Pacheco, the starting quarterback, throws more blocks than passes. When they defeated Fort Worth Christian Life 51-6 in the semifinal game, the Hawks didn't throw a single pass, but ran for 400 yards. When they beat Immanuel Christian of El Paso 76-63, the Hawks accumulated 508 yards of offense, 452 of them on the ground.

The Hawks move the ball just as those great Darrell Royal teams at Texas used to, with an offense built on execution and speed, with a dollop of deception.

Knowing they're going to run hasn't enabled anybody to stop them, not for long anyway. When they beat Willow Park Trinity 60-13, the Hawks ran for 524 yards.

With Pacheco and Joel Jackson doing much of the blocking, Quenten Stone leads the team in rushing. In fact, he leads the state in rushing, with more than 2,400 yards and an incredible average of more than 16 yards a carry. Tall, lean and elusive, he runs upright and cuts through defenses like a knife through moist cake. The results have been tasty.

"It's important," said Theresa Kauffman, principal of Hill School's Fort Worth campus, about today's game, while explaining that its importance goes beyond the football field. She teaches some of the football players in a government class, where, she said, they're applying their determination and pride to academics, and with the same sort of results they've had in football.

Without any hoopla or fanaticism, something's happening today in Aledo that just might remind football fans how rewarding the game can be.

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