

# Recollections of Penn Freshman Football, 1964

*By Rick Owens, W'68*

It was the Fall of 1964 and the first baby boomers were off to college. At Rittenhouse Lab there gathered 75 new freshman football players to be addressed by their freshman coach, John R. Cervino, and his staff of graduate assistants: Frank Wilson, Barry Dietz, Sieg Molnar and Tom Forrestal, a U.S. Naval Academy graduate who was the 1957 Heisman Trophy runner-up.

Coach Cervino was a feisty little man with eyes that looked right through you. In a high-pitched voice, he stated at the conclusion of his remarks that “this was the finest group of athletes ever gathered at the University of Pennsylvania. Before you graduate you will play the United States Naval Academy.” Forrestal, ever stoic, followed Cervino’s remarks with a calm comment: “And you will get your asses kicked.” At which point Coach Wilson broke out in a loud, extended laugh. As the 75 of us walked out of that room, we wondered what were we in for.

What we were in for was one of the most enjoyable experiences imaginable. But before that, players from Illinois, Florida, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Texas had to be molded into a team before playing a six-game season.

Coach Cervino was one-of-a-kind coach. Every day we went to practice not knowing what he was going to do. He picked on QB Billy Creeden for not being able to call a play. One day he challenged us to a field goal kicking contest -- if you could beat him you could punch him in the mouth. When he asked who wanted to challenge him, no one raised a hand until Dennis Blake yelled, “I will!” His response to Blake: “Get out of here.”

At one of our first practices, Peter Wisniewski, a quarterback from Weehawken, N.J., was calling a play in the huddle. When he yelled “break” at the end, the other players looked at one another and said, “What the hell did he just say?” Even though no one understood his Weehawken accent, “The Wizzer” was a player who could play most every position and play it well.

After a week of practices, the freshman team was called to scrimmage the varsity, prompting Cervino to remark: “Try not to hurt them.” It was only a scrimmage but we came away from it knowing we were a good team.

We opened against the Penn JV. Beat them. Then flew up to Cornell. Beat them. The highlight of that trip was Vince Corbacio “losing” his box lunch on his seatmate, AD Jerry Ford, on the flight home on Mohawk Airlines.

We then trounced Lehigh, vaunted Princeton and Columbia. The Columbia game was memorable for Cervino’s post-game tirade. The score was 29-0 early in the fourth quarter when Cervino freely substituted players, paving the way for Columbia to score 19 points before game’s end. In the locker room following the game, Cervino grabbed his play book, raised his arm to scream at us for giving up 19 points, when all of a sudden his shoulder popped out and he was writhing in pain as he continued his rant. At that point, Larry Kirschner, our stellar right tackle, began laughing at him, causing all of us to join in. Coach had to be taken back into the training room, where team physician Rudy Schmidt popped his shoulder back in. The laughter at Coach Cervino still rings in my ears.

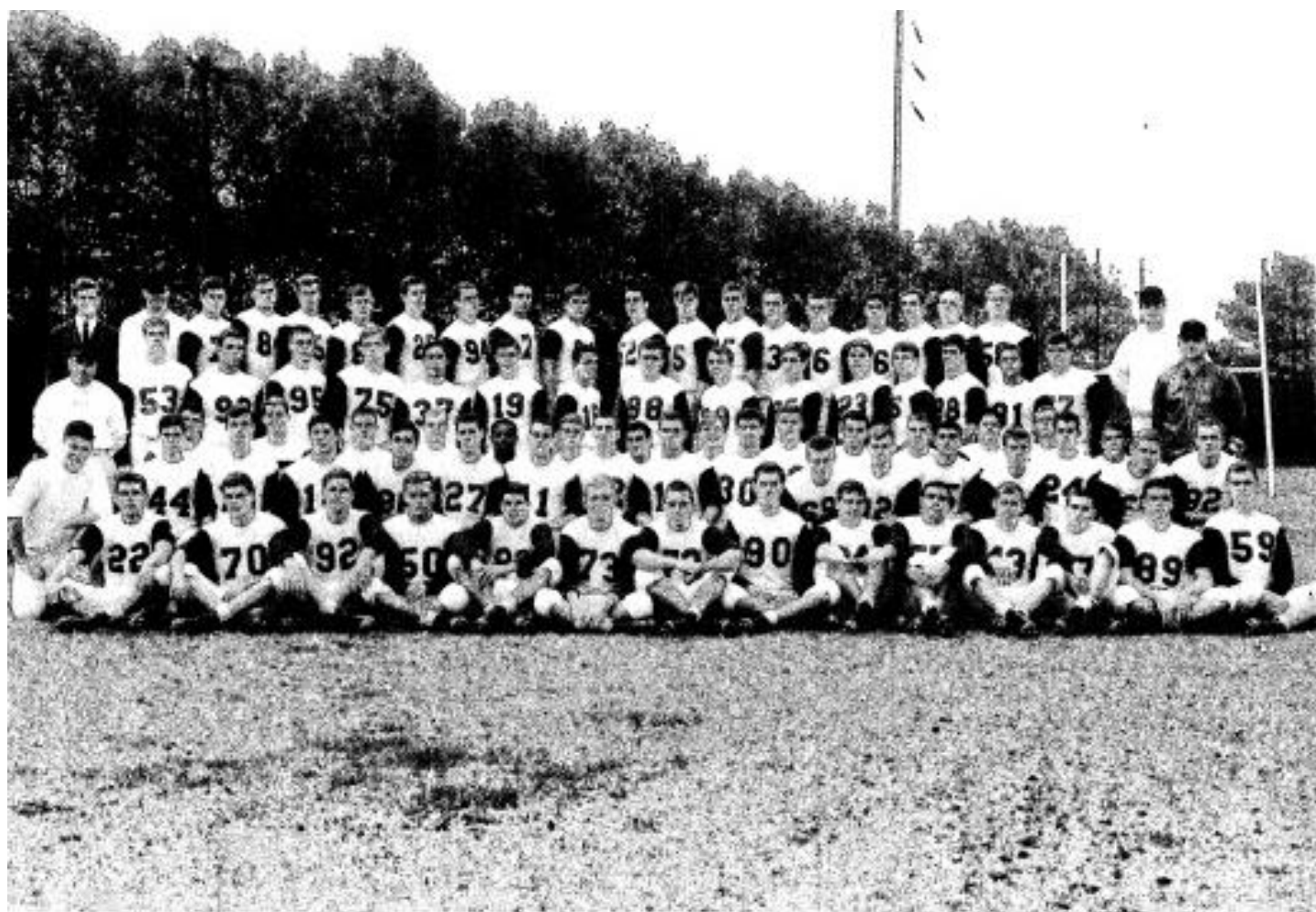
We concluded our season against a Rutgers team that also was undefeated. And the game was played not on Murphy Field, where we normally played

our home games, but on storied Franklin Field. Because the varsity program was undergoing a 1-8 season, our freshman team was looked upon as the future of Penn football, generating incredible interest on campus. Three days before the game, a group of students gathered in the Lower Quad and prepared to paint "GO FROSH BEAT RUTGERS" on the slate roof with the help of a tree limb, some sheets and some white paint. But when they failed to paint the "S" on Rutgers, Dennis Blake's roommate, Ed Manwaring, a non-football player, was selected for the job. The plan involved Larry Kirschner dangling Manwaring by his ankles out the dormer window to paint the final 'S'. Incredibly, the assignment was completed safely, but there was going to be hell to pay. Coach Cervino gathered us before the game on Friday to report that higher-ups at the university wanted to know who was responsible and to condemn us for our freshman antics. But when no one stepped forward to take responsibility, Cervino ended his remarks by saying: "I think it's great!"

We concluded the season at 6-0 by crushing Rutgers, 21-0. We were the first undefeated football team in Penn's history. And to name all the great players on that team would take way too much space here.

Speaking personally, I never played on a team where I had so much fun going to practice, preparing to win and then winning all our games. And what I am most proud of is the inscription on the 1964 Freshman Football Award. Instead of naming an individual recipient, as was traditional, it was given to the "Team." A truly great team.

As we reunite Saturday morning of alumni weekend, no doubt we will recount many stories of our championship year. But the highlight most definitely will be the presence of Coach John Cervino, alive, well and still kicking at 88 years of age.



FIRST ROW (left to right)—Creeden, Blyskal, Karaszkiewicz, Decker, A., Rogers, J., Smith, Gustavson, Glonn, Henderson, Collins, McGill, Owens, Merso, Calomaris. SECOND ROW (left to right)—Coach Wilson, Samuels, Small, Levitt, Saklas, McLaren, DeSela, Miller, Colosi, Wise, Mortensen, Hall, Neutemere, Kostzewski, VanOudenallen, Braderick, Decker, T. THIRD ROW (left to right)—Coach Cervino, Harlowe, McConnell, Frazer, Zielinskie, Williams, Garczynski, Blom, White, Myers, Mandarino, Nager, Erdman, Herrmann, Anthony, Coach Deetz. FOURTH ROW (left to right)—Sigler, Marco, Mitchell, Baled, Henspace, Smigalski, McKee, Hickey, Ambross, Wisniewski, Frick, Martiniwick, Uhlerra, Fischer, Kirchner, Coach Farrestal. FIFTH ROW (left to right)—Mgr. Kelley, Coach Molsar, Sweeney, Rogers, T., Palmer, Stevens, Blake, Merkle, Corbacio, Bickel, Parke, Scovanner, Hasser, Grant, Keyser, Backus, Sullivan, Anderson, Gilbert.