
College Football Historical Society



VOL. XV, NO. III

MAY, 2002

JOHN GAGLIARDI

By Ed Gilleran

Every Saturday afternoon during the college football season the major media spotlight focuses on places like Ann Arbor, South Bend, Lincoln, and the Florida cities of Miami, Gainesville, and Tallahassee. But for many thousands of football fans the games that really matter take place on small college campuses, tucked away in countless remote towns you would have trouble finding without the help of a Rand McNally atlas. Small college football is really quite big.

For example, consider Collegeville, Minnesota, a town about 70 miles from Minneapolis. Every fall Saturday, ten thousand students, alumni, and townspeople crowd into the small campus stadium to watch the hometown heroes from St. John's University (enrollment 1754) founded in 1887, and playing football in the NCAA Division III The Johnnies play teams representing such colleges as St. Olaf, Concordia, Carleton, Bethel, and even St. Cloud State of the NCAA Division II. To be sure, the loyalists of St. John's and the other Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (MIAC) schools are also vitally interested in how the Golden Gophers of the University of Minnesota are faring against the Buckeyes or Badgers at Minneapolis, or maybe against Purdue down in Lafayette, Indiana. But for two hours or so at Collegeville, all eyes are on St. John's and on its legendary football coach, John Gagliardi.

Heading into the 2001 football campaign, Gagliardi, at age 75, was in his 53rd season as a collegiate coach and his 49th at Collegeville. He arrived at St. John's in 1953 after four winning seasons (24-6-1 overall) at Carroll College in Helena, Montana, an NAIA school Carroll's "Fighting Saints" didn't lose a conference game in four seasons under Gagliardi, and claimed the Montana Collegiate Conference championship three times. The MCC (now the Frontier Conference) includes Carroll, Montana Tech, Rocky Mountain College, Western Montana, and Montana State at Havre.

To understand the situation that Gagliardi walked into at St. John's in 1953, you have to know something about the coach he succeeded. John McNally had been a legend at New Richmond High School in Wisconsin, just across the Mississippi River from St. Paul, Minnesota. He was a legend as a player at St. John's in the early 1920s and was signed immediately by the Milwaukee Badgers of the National Football League in 1925. McNally then played for the Duluth Eskimos, Pottsville Maroons, and then from 1929-1933, and again in 1935-1936, for the Green Bay Packers. He also played with the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1934 and then returned to them in 1937-1939 as a player-coach, the final season when they were known as the Pittsburgh Steelers. McNally was enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1963.

For all his talent as a player, McNally did not enjoy the same success as a coach as he had as the "Vagabond Halfback" at Lambeau Field for the Packers. When he departed St. John's after coaching during the seasons of 1950-1952, McNally said, "I don't think anybody can ever have a winning season at St. John's" John Gagliardi was about to prove McNally wrong. Little did the Benedictine Fathers who hired Gagliardi for St. John's realize that as legend Johnny "Blood"

McNally was departing, another future legend would be entering.

Gagliardi surprised the skeptics by winning the MIAC championship in his first season (1953). In subsequent football seasons he has coached three national championship teams at St. John's (1963 NAIA 33-27 over Prairie View, 1965 NAIA 33-0 over Linfield (Ore), and the 1976 NCAA/III 31-28 over Towson State), while the Johnnies have also made the national playoff quarterfinals three times, the semi-finals once, and were the losing finalist in 2000. As a collegiate football coach, Gagliardi's teams have won 24 conference titles and have appeared in 41 post-season games. In the past 39 seasons St. John's has been nationally ranked 37 times among small college teams, and owns a 28-13 post-season record. St. John's has made a habit of beating teams that most observers said they had no business defeating—for example, St. Cloud State, an NCAA Division II school. The Johnnies have beaten St. Cloud 19 times out of 24 games; most of the wins by large margins.

Gagliardi's three national championship seasons featured records of 10-0 (1963), 11-0 (1965), and 10-0-1 in 1976. His first victory as a college coach came in 1949 as Carroll defeated Rocky Mountain College, 38-20. All the other major milestones in Gagliardi's career have come at St. John's, including a 34-6 win over Hamline in 1965 for career victory #100, a 45-32 win over Bethel in 1980 for victory #200, and a 77-12 triumph over Bethel in 1993 for victory #300. Over the seasons of 1962-1964 he guided the Johnnies to a 20-game winning streak, while three consecutive losses is the worst negative streak encountered in over fifty years as a head coach.

Showing that he has not slowed down in producing top-level football teams, in the 2000 season Gagliardi guided St. John's to the NCAA Division III title game where the Johnnies dropped a hard-fought 10-7 decision to Mount Union. Then, in the recent 2001 season he led St. John's to a co-championship in the MIAC,

followed by another trip to the NCAA playoffs where the Johnnies posted wins over St. Norbert's, UW-Stevens Point, and Pacific Lutheran. But once again perennial power Mount Union was waiting in the semi-finals and St. John's suffered a 35-14 defeat.

Gagliardi's record has elevated him into select company among the approximately 25,000 head coaches in the history of college football. Only these seven have won more than 300 games: Eddie Robinson, Grambling-408; Gagliardi, St. John's-388; Joe Paterno, Penn State, Paul (Bear) Bryant, Alabama-323; Glenn (Pop) Warner, Temple-319; Bobby Bowden, Florida State; and Amos Alonzo Stagg, Chicago-314. Gagliardi needs only 21 more wins to take over the top spot, and he ranks first currently among those still coaching.

Asked how he became interested in coaching, Gagliardi recalls that when he was a 16-year-old player at Trinidad Catholic High School in Colorado in 1943, the school's coach was drafted into World War II military service. John took over the coaching reins at Trinidad Catholic and stayed on the job for three more years through 1946. His Trinidad teams won four conference titles. While attending Colorado College, Gagliardi also coached at St. Mary's High School in Colorado

Springs for the seasons of 1947-1948, and upon graduation in 1949 he applied for the head coaching job at Carroll College in Montana. He's been a winning coach ever since. Gagliardi's success at St. John's has understandably caught the eye of several larger schools over the years. He has been offered the opportunity to coach at North Dakota State, the University of San Diego, and in the mid-1970s Ara Parseghian asked John to become an assistant at Notre Dame.

Gagliardi's success is attributable to more than just football strategy and tactics, as he is an astute judge of talent. He creates an environment of fun and high expectations, and he concentrates on methods and practices that truly focus on winning. His approach is one of concentration and flawless execution. His practice regimen focuses on the repetition of fundamentals, and his formula has been described in Sports Illustrated, scores of newspapers, and on network television as 'Winning With Nos.' The "Nos" that Gagliardi subscribes to include No scholarships, No spring practices, No compulsory weight program, No two or three hour practices-90 minutes is enough, and No big staff of assistant coaches. But John, as he likes his student-athletes to call him, does have one "Yes" in his vocabulary. Yes, he would like to win 21 more games.

MORE ON ARMY BOAT TRIP

By Michael J. Sanders

The November 2001 issue of the CFHS Journal carried an article by Jack Clary on the 1944 boat trip that the West Point student body took to attend the Army-Navy football game which was played in Baltimore that season. One of my professors at Kansas State, Dr. James B. Townsend, was a 1945 graduate of West Point, and I wrote him about Mr. Clary's article. My former professor refers to the trip as the 'Baltimore Campaign,' and following is what he wrote:

"I remember the Baltimore Campaign very well. Many of the details in the article "Army Goes To Sea" were unknown to me until reading what you sent me. I was asleep in my bunk (when in the Baltimore port) when someone shook me. It was an underclassman in my company named Murphy. 'Do you have any money?' he asked. 'Yes, about \$3 in my shoe,' I answered. Murphy helped himself and took off. I had no idea of what he had in mind. I went back to sleep and Murphy continued his financial forage. He and his group went over the side of the ship and very nearly were shot by a guard.

"They rented a taxi and set off for the Naval Academy. Murphy's father had been a groundskeeper at the Naval Academy, so Murphy had intimate knowledge of how to get to Bancroft Hall, under fences, in drainage ditches, through sewers, you name it. They painted Tecumseh's statue cadet grey and put a pair of cadet gloves and a cadet overseas cap on the statue. I was told later, by whom I don't recall, that when the Middies got up all the BP's (Barrack Police-civilians paid by the government as janitors) were gathered around the statue, trying to scrub off the paint. Murphy made it back without detection. Details I do not have.

"I don't recall rough seas or sickness. I guess I have an iron stomach. Seasickness I would recall, but my appetite never suffered any neglect. My regret is that I can't remember more of the Baltimore Campaign. I recall Dot Blanchard knocking would-be tacklers left and right. Doc had 28" thighs. No man ever stopped him. An additional bit about the game concerned Joe Stanowicz, our left guard. We had the ball on the Navy two yard line. Joe was no midget; he was the national heavyweight wrestling champ. The story I've heard is Joe said to the Navy man opposite him: 'I ain't telling you what play we're going to call, but Blanchard is going to carry the ball. I don't know what you're going to do, but I'm going to get the hell out of the way.