

## STILL IN THE GAME

November 13, 2009

The Edison Eagles faced fourth and long, with under a minute to play. On the other sideline, the Hayfield Hawks held their collective breath. The Hawks led by a touchdown, but if the Eagles converted the first down, they'd have a chance to steal the National District title.

But when the quarterback's final pass was overthrown and hit the ground, the Hayfield Hawks had won.

These are the Hawks who hadn't touched district glory in sixteen seasons, the Hawks whose record had been 4-36 the previous four years. *These* Hayfield Hawks were now National District Champions.

As the last seconds ticked away, some leapt to their feet in triumph, some stood in disbelief, and some dropped to their knees and cried.

The tears were for the man who wasn't there to embrace his team or hear the roar of the orange-clad crowd. He couldn't feel the biting fall air and the cascade of icy Gatorade rushing down his unsuspecting back.

On that history-making Friday night, Head Coach Billy Pugh rooted for his team from Mount Vernon Hospital's rehabilitation wing, room 508.

Pugh suffered a stroke eighteen days earlier. His fifth period social studies class watched it happen.

"He was up at the board, holding a Pepsi. His speech became slurred, and it got to the point where we couldn't understand what he was saying. He kept dropping his soda," recounted freshman Amanda Kelly.

"I remember the kids looking like, 'Whatcha doin' coach?' I could see the expressions on their faces. None of us knew what was happening at the time," Pugh said.

A student ran for an administrator, who dialed 911. Within minutes, Pugh was rolled through the halls, and into the gaping doors of an ambulance.

The next day, the post outside Pugh's classroom door was unattended.

Pugh's new room has all the comforts of home, plus a special zipping tent-style bed, which keeps him from getting up and wandering around at night. It is decorated with flowers, cards, posters, and pictures sent by students, players, and peers.

On Veterans' Day afternoon, nurses guide Pugh's wheelchair to physical, speech, and occupational therapy. They're bringing him his meals, delivering every dose of medication, and making sure he doesn't get too excited while reviewing game tape.

"It feels like football practice," Pugh said. "They work me really hard."

His speech is slurred and slow. He can't stand or walk, or move his left arm.

"I don't know what day it happened. I know what today's date is, because I cheat. They write the date in my room. But I know we play football in two days, in the mud."

When the subject is football, Pugh's mind is sharp. He knows every name and number on his own roster, and remembers the key plays of his opponents.

Pugh's wife Nancy said, "It's amazing. I don't know much about all the brain injury things, but when you have a stroke, it's like entire parts of your brain are fried. They're done. You have to form all new connections. But Billy doesn't have to form new connections about football."

"Friday nights are rough," Nancy continued. "He gets agitated, big time. He tries to get out of bed, and always looks for his shoes. Last Friday he asked me where his shoes were. He said it was going to be cold on the sidelines."

Assistant Coach Roy Hill is trying to fill the temporary void on the field. The Hawks are soaring, as Hayfield's administrators like to say, and Hill doesn't want it to stop. Nancy tells the nurses, "When this guy [Hill] comes, I don't care if it's visiting hours or not. Let him in." She says Hill has gone as far as adopting Pugh's peculiar pregame ritual: a change of shoelaces, a trip to Wal-Mart (even if he doesn't need anything), lunch at Chipotle, and back to school to his lucky parking spot.

Four years ago, Hayfield lost half its student body and most of its coaching staff to a newly-built school. Pugh refused to leave his struggling team.

At the time, quarterback Anton McCallum was a freshman Hawk. In three years, his team won just four games.

Not this year.

"Of all my years as a coach, I could tell this team was different," Pugh said. "We could all tell from the first day of practice back in August. The boys knew it too. Things just felt different, felt better."

The day of the stroke, Student Activities Director Steve Kewer told the team Pugh's condition wasn't life threatening, but he wouldn't be back this season.

“I’ve had to really step up and be a leader for my team,” McCallum said. “Coach Pugh and I are really close. It’s hard not having him here to share our successes.”

Though Pugh can’t be on the sidelines to motivate his boys and call every play, Administrative Assistant and Freshman Cheer Coach Theresa Hayman found a way to bring the action to him. With help from the school technology team, Hayman shared the final game of the regular season with Pugh using Skype.

“I could hear Billy coaching from his bedside. He kept yelling for his boys, ‘You can do it, come on, hang on.’”

When the Hawks defeated Edison, Hayman heard Pugh begin to cry.

“The hardest part is sitting in this chair,” Pugh said. “It’s so hard to do something for this long and not be there for my kids.”

PHOTO CAPTION: Looking forward to Hayfield’s first playoff game in sixteen seasons, Head Coach Billy Pugh remains optimistic. “There’s nobody my boys can’t beat,” he said.

