

Sixty years ago the “local” High School Football Team had its first un-defeated – un-tied season. But this “local” high school was not the Bridgewater-Raritan High School that we have today, but the original Somerville High School. In 1953 teenagers from Bridgewater and Raritan, along with teenagers from Hillsborough, Branchburg and Somerville all went to Somerville High School.

High school football was one of the main entertainment mediums of the 1950s. Over a thousand people attended every game. The Thanksgiving Day football game between Somerville and their then rival Bound Brook was the biggest local event of the year drawing over 6000 spectators.

The 1953 Somerville Football Team, whose nickname was the Pioneers, was a team on a mission from the beginning of the season. The year before with a very talented team they plowed over every opponent in their first eight games. An un-defeated season seemed certain, but on Thanksgiving Day in 1952 their dreams of that perfect season were shattered as they were beaten Bound Brook 20-0. When most of the team returned in 1953, they vowed to achieve what they had just missed the year before

The team was coached by head coach Ernie Gardner, backfield coach Albert “Boomy” Malekoff, and Lineman coach Ed Pacillio. They had some star players, but a balance of talent is what made the team special. They seldom routed their opponents as five of their nine wins were by less than 12 points. The backbone of the team was the defense which allowed six touchdowns all season. The offense was led by quarterback Sam Crosby who could run as well as pass. The star player was running back / defensive back Frank Cicero who scored many touchdowns including two while playing defense. Six Somerville players would be named all-county that year.

The equipment they wore back in 1953 was much different than the equipment that players wear today. Helmets were made of leather and did not have a facemask. It would be the next year when the full transition to plastic helmets occurred. (Facemasks would come a couple years later.) Their shoulder pads were leather and much smaller than today's and the padded football leg pants did not have all that much padding. In summary, they were much less protected than today's players.

In September this newspaper was able to bring back ten of the surviving players and one coach from that team to pose for a photo on the original field they once played on. As they arrived and greeted each other it was obvious from the handshakes, hugs, and glowing smiles that this was one special team. After the introductions, this author instructed the men to walk out to the fifty yard line for our photo. In my excitement, I briskly walked out then turned around to address the group and realized that I have walked much faster than they did. With all the football talk I had forgotten that these are now old men. While sixty years ago these guys sprinted like champions across this football field, now on the same field they move very slowly – two of them walk with canes.

The football field they once played on is still used by the high school. It is the same foot print, but it is now a modern artificial turf field that cost over a million dollars. Back in 1953 the field had real grass. At least in the beginning of the season it was grass - as the year went by it become more like dirt – and often mud. But they never complained as playing in mud was what football players did back then.

Some structures at the field are still familiar to the players. They tell me that the “snack shack”, while updated, is still the same one that they had back in 1953. The locker room building, at least the right wing, is their original locker room.

Today’s complex at Somerville High School - with the school building and field - is very impressive. But in 1953 there was one major difference - the high school building itself was not there. The building that served as the high school back then is the building that today is the Middle School – a half mile away. Players walked 10 minutes after school to get to practice.

GAME BY GAME

In the first game of the season, the Somerville Pioneers easily defeated Millburn 33-6. Frank Cicero ran for two touchdowns one of which was an 80 yard run. The defensive got into the scoring when George Esposito ran back a fumble for a touchdown.

The second game of the season saw the only time that they would be losing in the fourth quarter. At the start of the last quarter with the score tied 0-0 Roselle intercepted a screen pass at mid field and ran it back for a touchdown. Soon after the Somerville team caught a break when they recovered a fumble on a punt return at the Roselle 41 yard line. They scored six plays later on a ten yard run by Bob Lusardi. The all-important extra point was made by kicker Bob Ujobagy to give them the lead. Late in the fourth period Roselle was desperately trying to move down field when Frank Cicero intercepted a pass and ran it back 25 yards for a touchdown.

The third game was a romp over Springfield Regional 25-6. Quarterback Sam Crosby would run for two touchdowns. The defensive would add two touchdowns as Frank Cicero ran back a fumble and Stan Wisniewski an interception.

Game four against North Plainfield, the other premiere team in the conference, would be the most important game. The players all recall that game to be the toughest and most memorable game of the season. In the beginning of the game, Frank Cicero intercepted a pass returning it to the North Plainfield 31. A few plays later, Sam Crosby scored a touchdown on a 9 yard run. Bob Ujobagy successfully kicked the extra point. At the time it was just a routine kick that generated a single point -but one that would go down in Somerville football history. North Plainfield would score a touchdown in the second quarter. After the score they elected to run for the extra point. (There was no “two point conversion” back then) They ran left, but the Somerville defense was like a brick wall and North Plainfield got nowhere. That play would solidify Somerville’s undefeated season as for the rest of the game the teams battled intensely, but there was no additional scoring and the game ended a 7-6 victory for Somerville. North Plainfield would not lose any other games that season. Kicker Bob Ujobagy, who only kicked extra points, and was not thought of as the football player type by his classmates or even his teammates, but rather the class clown, would become one of the heroes of the 1953 Somerville football team.

The fifth game was a breeze against St. Peters 40-13. Frank Cicero had two touchdowns including a 78 yard run. In this game coach Gardner was able to give all his players some playing time.

Game six was a come from behind victory against Princeton. Somerville had been losing at halftime as Princeton had run a fumble back for a touchdown. (Sam Crosby blocked the extra point.) At halftime coach Gardner seemed to rally the troops as Somerville drove down the field on its first possession and scored when Sam Crosby ran it in from the 18. Bob Ujobagy again made the critical extra point to put Somerville ahead 7-6. Later Princeton threatened to score, but Anthony Capici made a key interception at the eight yard line to halt the drive. Somerville would later add another touchdown when Bob Lusardi ran it in from the 18.

The seventh game against Highland Park saw the first shut out posted by Somerville. Their opponent had once threatened to score, but Frank Cicero came through with a key interception. This game was scoreless until the fourth quarter when Somerville put together a nine play 51 yard drive with Frank Cicero running the pigskin over the goal line for a touchdown. Later in the game Ron Shickora blocked a punt that resulted in a safety

Game eight against Bernards saw the second consecutive shut out by the Pioneers a 12 -0 win. Both Pioneer touchdowns were on short runs after long drives with Sam Crosby and Bob Lusardi doing the scoring.

The final game was on Thanksgiving Day against Bound Brook. Beforehand everyone remembered that the year before the Somerville Pioneers were in the same position - undefeated with one game to go against Bound Brook. The Pioneers vowed not to suffer the same fate as the year before when they were upset in the final game. Coach Ernie Gardner's pre-game talk was brief; he said "Guys - remember last year". That was all he needed to say as Somerville dominated from the beginning in front of a crowd of over 7000. Early on Henry Menapace recovered a fumble at the Bound Brook 15 and a couple plays later Sam Crosby ran it in for the score. Another first quarter drive resulted in a rare "touchdown pass" - when Crosby hit Bob Lusardi on a 22 yard pass. The Pioneers would coast to a 26-7 win that completed a 9-0 season - the first perfect season in school history. (There were no playoffs in High School football back then.)

It was a memorable season by a great team. The team was elected to The Somerville Athletic Hall of Fame in 1996. As to the reasons for the success - there were many - a great defense, excellent coaching, and a balance of talent. But perhaps star running back Frank Cicero said it best as to why this team was so successful. He said "This group of guys really had a lot of fun together - and that is probably why we did so well." He further commented that the team from the year before had more talent, but that team did not achieve the perfect season that this close knit group did in 1953.

Ironically players from the 1953 team still play a big part in the Somerville High School Football program today. The announcers for the team's games on local cable are Charley Higgins and Peter Vitelli - who both played on the 1953 team. And the video producer is Kenny Cornell - also a member of the 53 team.