

The Formula of Success at Southern Columbia

by Bill Mosser

Under the direction of Head Coach Jim Roth, Southern Columbia High School has become one of the most successful programs in the proud history of Pennsylvania high school football. The school, known to the locals as **Southern**, is situated along a winding, two-lane highway between Catawissa and Elysburg in the northern central part of the state. This is Tiger Country.

Across the state, almost -if not all true football fans- know about the success of Southern Columbia and Coach Roth. At the start of the 2009 season everyone associated with the Southern program knew that Roth needed three wins to become the eighth coach in the state to reach three hundred wins. On October 2, 2009 in front of a loyal homecoming crowd and many former players, Southern defeated visiting Warrior Run 42-6, and the journey to three hundred was reached.

The journey to three hundred wins started on August 31, 1984 with a 20-0 win over Jim Thorpe. Along the way, Southern and Coach Roth have known the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. Southern won their first Class A State Championship in 1994. Over the next seven years, Southern went to the state championship game six times only to come home a bridesmaid. Then, from 2002 to 2006, the Tigers won five consecutive titles.

As with any successful program, there was some envy on the part of many coaches and fans who said, "They can't win the big one". After five consecutive state championships, that perception has been put to rest. Everyone realizes what a successful program Coach Roth has built at Southern Columbia. Like watching Tiger Woods win Major Golf Tournaments or Cale Sanderson win four NCAA wrestling titles, people shake their heads and wonder how Roth does it year after year. How do you have twenty-five consecutive winning seasons? What is the secret?

The success Coach Roth has enjoyed has not come against the weak sisters of the poor. This year, Southern has perhaps the most inexperienced team of the Roth Era, but unlike some higher classification teams, he does not schedule down to gain easy wins. This year, there is only one Class A team on the Southern schedule. The rest are AA and AAA teams including both Selinsgrove, ranked third in the state in Class AAA and Montoursville, ranked fifth in the state in Class AA by **Pennsylvania Football News**. Throw in rivals like Mt. Carmel, Shamokin and Bloomsburg, and this inexperienced team is playing a very challenging schedule.

Like any successful coach, Roth knows that to be the best and to help his players improve, you have to play the best. At Southern, the goal is to help each player become the best he can be and the best teammate he can be. If that happens,



then winning takes care of itself. Roth believes in the philosophy of former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden who states, "It is not necessary to always be the best but that you should strive to be the best you can be."

By day, Roth and his assistant coaches help students in the classroom be the best they can be. Around 3:00 P.M. the focus for those players who have met the academic requirements, which at Southern are more rigorous than those established by the PIAA, the educational experience shifts to the practice field named Death Valley. With Daniel Boone as your guide and a good sturdy four wheeler, you might find it.

There are those taxpayers who often question the value of high school sports. How about physical conditioning, teamwork, commitment, respect for coaches, teammates and oneself and a spirit of stick-to-itiveness and determination. These qualities stressed by Coach Roth and all members of his staff have helped Southern football players to do their best long after their playing days are over.

So welcome to Football 101. Instructors: Jim Roth and his assistants. All but two of the assistant coaches have played for Jim Roth, so they know how things are to be done. Roth and his assistants are all good teachers. Any college student who is interested in coaching should intern for a year with Roth and his staff. They will learn that practice begins promptly and that it is very very organized. After stretching exercises each player reports to his position coach. Here is where Roth and his assistants excel. Technique, technique, technique and review, review, review are stressed each day.

All the players participate in the instructional drills. From starters to those on the third team, if that name even exists at Southern, everyone does the same drills. If anyone does not use the proper technique, the position coach stops the drill and patiently explains and demonstrates the proper tech-

nique. This can happen several times a day and to their credit each player tries to do his best. No half-hearted effort is permitted at Southern and the team members expect and encourage each player to do his best. What is the proper footwork for an outside linebacker, how do you position your feet while blocking straight ahead, where do you position your head and hip to get leverage against a heavier opponent, how do you position yourself to tackle a runner coming through the line? What is the proper technique for making an open field tackle? How do you run a proper pass route or defend against a quick inside slant? The knowledge you can gain from watching Roth and his staff in their classroom in Death Valley is priceless. It is a privilege to attend these learning sessions.

Following a recent Penn State game, former All-Pro Jack Ham asked linebacker Sean Lee to explain the proper technique for tackling in the open field. Lee's answer was basically word for word what the Southern coaches tell their players. If it is good enough for Southern, it is good enough for Linebacker U. But it is not just the quality of the instruction or the constant repetition of the drills that will impress you. Rather it is the manner in which it is given.

All instruction is given in a positive manner. Absolutely no one playing for Southern and Jim Roth is going to hear any language that is inappropriate for the classroom or be subjected to verbal abuse. You could invite your mother or Billy Graham to these practices and not be embarrassed. If a coach is upset he may raise the level of his voice but these coaches do not question any players manhood and no one is ignored. Everyone participates in all aspects of the practice. When reviewing plays and formations, the first team offense gets two reps then the second team gets one before the first team come back on the field. On defense the reps are four for the first team and two for the second team. This rotation system is repeated until the session is over.

Southern may be a small Class A school, but Coach Roth has separate offensive and defensive units. He does not, except in unique situations, use players both ways.

The practices for the Jr. High program are like those for the varsity. The same drills, the same attention to technique and the same level of participation. No one stands on the sideline

at Southern practices.

It is now October 12, Columbus Day, and this inexperienced Southern team is 3-3 for the year. Eliminate one major defensive breakdown in each game and the record would be 6-0. But big plays are a part of the game. Many coaches, after losing a game or two because of a major defensive breakdown, would start playing more players both ways. Some coaches play their best eleven both ways and they may be successful for a year or two but in doing so they turn into a character in Shakespeare's Macbeth as they, "Strut and fret their hour upon the stage and then are heard no more." At Southern, it isn't about being a one year wonder: rather it's about building and maintaining a quality program.

Some local schools have their third coach in the last eight years. It seems that many so-called fans want to give a coach three or four years and if their favorite team has not made a trip to Hershey for a state title, then it's time for a new coach.

Most football prognosticators predict that Southern will now finish either 6-4 or 5-5 and they may even miss being in the District playoffs. But Southern fans need not worry because Jim Roth and his staff built, are building and will continue to build a program in which all of the participants can be proud. In spite of some very disheartening defeats, the quality of the instruction and the professional manner in which it is given has not changed in Death Valley.

Jim Roth has always given credit to his assistant coaches, parents, the school administration, the community and the players for the success of the Southern program. There is nothing wrong with the program. Graduation took its toll and at the moment many of the players lack experience.

In summing up Jim Roth, his three hundred wins and the Southern Program, perhaps former Berwick Coach George Curry, the only four hundred game winner in state history, said it best, "It couldn't happen to a more deserving coach; he's good for high school football and he's a credit to the game."

Jim Roth and his assistants are the kind of people any parent would want coaching their sons.