

INSIDE: TIME WELL-INVESTED BY TEAM, COMMUNITY | MCDONALD PLAYS WITH MOTHER IN FRONT OF HIS MIND | TEAM CAPTAINS SHARE THEIR MEMORIES

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CHARDON HILLTOPPERS

Back-to-back Division III football state champions



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STATE FOOTBALL CHAMPIONS 2021



Chardon 2021 results

WEEK 1	WEEK 2	WEEK 3	WEEK 4	WEEK 5	WEEK 6	WEEK 7	WEEK 8
Aug. 20 Glenville 14 Chardon 28	Aug. 28 Chardon 42 Akron Buchtel 0	Sept. 3 Ursuline 27 Chardon 36	Sept. 10 Riverside 7 Chardon 28	Sept. 17 Chardon 41 Mayfield 7	Sept. 24 Kenston 0 Chardon 49	Oct. 1 Chardon 21 New Philadelphia 0	Oct. 8 Madison 0 Chardon 48
WEEK 9	WEEK 10	WEEK 11	WEEK 12	WEEK 13	WEEK 14	WEEK 15	WEEK 16
Oct. 15 Chardon 59 South 13	Oct. 22 North 0 Chardon 38	First round Oct. 29 Akron East 7 Chardon 38	Regional quarter Nov. 5 Streetsboro 7 Chardon 63	Regional semifinal Nov. 12 Canfield 14 Chardon 27	Regional final Nov. 19 Dover 3 Chardon 31	Statate semifinal Nov. 26 West Holmes 7 Chardon 41	State final Dec. 3 Chardon 21 Hamilton Badin 14

Chardon statistics

TEAM YARDAGE

Team	Rush	Pass	Total
Chardon	4,402	820	5,222
Opponent	1,226	1,631	2,857

RUSHING

Name	Att	Yards	TDs
Alex Henry	226	1,326	20
Sean Carr	188	1,166	26
Daniel Pettyjohn	95	561	2
Andrew Bruce	29	386	5
Trey Liebhardt	20	206	1
Zoran Vujaklija	29	198	6
Ryan Petersen	34	180	2
Zach Fay	18	146	1

PASSING

Name	Comp-Att	Yards	TDs	Int
Alex Henry	40-89	820	9	6

RECEIVING

Name	Rec.	Yards	TDs
Nathanael Sulka	14	328	5
Sean Carr	9	68	0
Trey Liebhardt	6	164	3
Alex McDonald	6	138	1

KICKING

Name	ExPt	FG Total
Nathan Tagar	74	7 95

SCORING

Name	TDs	2Pt Total
Sean Carr	28	1 170
Alex Henry	20	0 120
Zoran Vujaklija	6	1 38
Andrew Bruce	5	0 30
Nathanael Sulka	5	0 30
Trey Liebhardt	4	0 24

TACKLES

Name	Solo	Assist	Total
Christian Hall	48	53	101
Brody Dotson	72	26	98
Heath Fetchik	64	31	95
Nathanael Sulka	60	33	93
Rocco Perrico	50	24	74
Alex Kiskey	43	23	66
Michael Washington	23	31	54
Leo Colombi	30	20	50
Cooper Felger	20	30	50
Trey Liebhardt	30	4	34
Alex McDonald	19	14	33
Andrew Bruce	24	8	32

TACKLES FOR LOSS

Name	TFLs
Alex Kiskey	32.5
Brody Dotson	16.5
Christian Hall	15
Cooper Felger	14.5
Heath Fetchik	13.5
Rocco Perrico	13
Alex McDonald	12.5

SACKS

Name	Sacks
Alex Kiskey	12
Alex McDonald	6.5
Heath Fetchik	6
Michael Washington	6
Cooper Felger	5
Christian Hall	4

PBUS

Name	PBUS
Trey Liebhardt	18
Leo Colombi	15
Nathanael Sulka	14
Andrew Bruce	11

INTERCEPTIONS

Name	Int.
Leo Colombi	7
Christian Hall	3
Trey Liebhardt	3
Nathanael Sulka	2
Andrew Bruce	2
Heath Fetchik	2
Ryan Peterson	2

PUNTING

Name	Punt	Avg
Alex McDonald	22	32.6
Nathan Tager	9	33.2

WRC STANDINGS

Team	Overall
Chardon	16-0 6-0
Kenston	11-2 5-1
Riverside	7-5 4-2
South	8-4 3-3
Mayfield	2-8 2-4
North	4-7 2-5
Madison	1-9 0-6

OPINION



TIM PHILLIS — FOR THE NEWS-HERALD

Chardon takes the field before the Division III state final against Hamilton Badin on Dec. 3 in Canton.

Time well-spent, well-invested this season

The music in the home locker room at Twinsburg Tiger Stadium came to a hush as Chardon football coach Mitch Hewitt stepped in front of 75 hungry Hilltoppers to address them before



John Kampf

taking the field for a Division III state semifinal on Nov. 26.

The leader of the program thanked the team for the best Thanksgiving the town has experienced in some time, one which included an early morning practice at Memorial Field.

Then he hit a topic that transcends football.

It's a topic — a theme — that embodies the journey that Hilltoppers went on en route to becoming the 2021 Division III state champions.

The element ... the importance ... of time.

"Blood is thicker than water, right? That's what family is," Hewitt said. "I say time is thicker than blood."

He repeated the words, only louder.

"TIME is thicker than BLOOD," he barked. "It's the time we spend together, fellas. It's our greatest resource against any football team, the

time we've spent together.

"Time is the greatest resource you'll ever give someone. Let's go spend it together for 48 minutes."

Of course, the locker room erupted in bedlam, and the Hilltoppers went out and molly-whopped West Holmes, 41-7, in that state semifinal.

A week later, the Hilltoppers put the finishing touches on their 16-0 season with a 21-14 win over Hamilton Badin to notch its second straight state championship.

But the words Hewitt spoke that night in Twinsburg continue to echo throughout the Chardon community as the days and weeks separate them from their recent state title.

The time the Chardon football team spent together this past offseason, through August's training came and throughout the season paved the way for the state championship.

In doing so, the Hilltoppers gave the community the time of their lives.

Consider what the 2021 Chardon football team gave the school district and their fans this season:

- They gave them 16 straight weekends of entertainment, which might have cost six or eight bucks at the gate, but were worth ever so much more than that when you consider A) What a night on the town costs with



PAUL DICICCO — FOR THE NEWS-HERALD

Fans root on Chardon during the state final.

dinner and entertainment, and B) the nights at Memorial Field were spent watching the youth — the future of the community — shine.

▪ They gave them community pride. Granted, Chardon has a lot to be proud of anyway outside the realm of athletics. But when your school, town and community boasts top-ranked Division III team in Ohio, it's cause to puff out one's chest when the name "Chardon" is uttered, giving reason to boast, "Yeah, that's where I'm from."

▪ They gave hope to anyone who has ever been counted out. Listen, when 26 seniors graduated last spring, the 2021 team was considered an afterthought. This year's Hilltoppers showed outside opinions are about as

valuable as the stuff people sprinkle on their gardens.

▪ And they gave them their time. Their effort. Their hearts.

In turn, the community gave them theirs.

It didn't matter how hot the day was, such as that brutally hot and humid day when the Hilltoppers and their throng of supporters went to Akron for a Saturday afternoon together.

The team and fans were there — together.

If it was a snowy, miserable mess, like it was in Girard for the regional final against Canfield or in Twinsburg for the regional final against West Holmes, the Hilltoppers and their fans were inseparable.

One glance at the visitors side of the bleachers at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium on Dec. 3

suggests whoever the last person out of Chardon that afternoon locked the doors and cut the lights. Everyone was there for the grand spectacle of another state championship.

And when everyone was tired from the drive to Canton, plus the cold game, the Hilltoppers returned home to fans jamming the Chardon Square to welcome home their heroes.

Undoubtedly, when the town holds an appreciation parade for the football team Dec. 12, the same warm reception can be expected.

This much is true — the members of the 2021 Chardon football team invested their time and effort into each other and into their dream. In turn, their community returned the favor.

The message Mitch Hewitt relayed to his team prior to the state semifinal didn't just hit home that night, it drove home a major underlying theme to his program's championship season. And also provided a reminder of what's most important.

Time truly is the greatest resource you'll ever give someone.

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HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

All-Ohioan plays with mother in the front of his mind

Amy McDonald has battled Huntington's disease for nine years

By John Kampf

JKampf@news-herald.com

The postgame celebration at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium was in full swing, but Alex McDonald had someplace else he'd rather be.

McDonald and the Chardon Hilltoppers had just put the finishing touches on a 21-14 win over Hamilton Badin in the Division III state championship game. The Hilltoppers' second straight state championship and their unprecedented 16-0 record meant the on-field party wasn't going to end anytime soon.

But McDonald ducked away, scaled a nearby fence and climbed into the stands into the welcome arms of his father, Alex.

Then he turned to his mother, who had a firm grip on a railing, and took her in his arms.

"We love you. We're so proud of you," said Amy McDonald, her hushed words pushing through her son's bushy red hair.

Those eight words meant more to McDonald than anyone will ever know. Just the SOUND of them meant the world to him.

That's because he knows someday, he won't be able to hear them.

And the thought of that rips the heart out of his very chest.

For nine years now, Amy McDonald has battled Huntington's disease, a rare, inherited disease that causes the progressive breakdown (degeneration) of nerve cells in the brain. The disease has a broad impact on a person's functional abilities and usually results in movement, thinking (cognitive) and psychiatric disorders — including, but not limited to, loss of speech.

There is no cure.

McDonald, a high-energy, two-sport star has the world in the palm of his hand. He is a two-way starter for the Hilltoppers' football team as a tight end and defensive end, earning All-Ohio honors twice. He's a state-caliber wrestler for his school as well. And he's earned a football scholarship to Youngstown State University.

But he'd make a trade if he had the power to do so.

"I'd give it all up, one hundred percent," he said. "One THOUSAND percent. I'd give it up just so my mom can go back to how she was before this disease and be OK."

Huntington's disease has been part of Amy's life forever. Her father had it and passed away. She's had aunts, uncles and cousins have it and die from it.

"It's a (crappy) disease, that's what it is," said Alex the father.

For a while, Amy thought — or hoped — she had



Alex McDonald hugs his mother, Amy, after Chardon won the Division III state championship last weekend.

JERI LYNN PILARCYK — FOR THE NEWS-HERALD

evaded the grips of Huntington's. But in 2012, the family got the diagnosis through a test they had done.

"It's not the news we wanted. But it's the answer we got," her husband said.

To her credit, Amy has missed nothing of her children's activities — not her son's wrestling matches nor his football games, nor anything in which daughter Madeline took part.

"She never leaves my mind," young Alex said. "I do everything for her. she lives vicariously through me. She keeps me motivated."

"He's wonderful," Amy said, her words quiet and a little garbled because of Huntington's. "It brings tears to my eyes."

But nothing will stop her from being there.

And don't think about putting her in a wheelchair.

"Have you ever known a redhead?" Alex the father said with a hearty laugh. "They're as stubborn as they come. You'd be in for a fight if you think she's getting in a wheelchair."

Earlier this year, the McDonalds walked arm in arm across the field at Chardon's Memorial Field for senior night. It's a ceremony some might take for granted, but not the senior leader for the Hilltoppers.

While he's not a big fan of peripheral events that take the focus off the game at hand, the special moment was not lost on him this time around.

The scary part is that, because of the hereditary nature of Huntington's disease, both Alex and his sister Madeline are predisposed to be carriers. There is a 50-50 chance that the children of Alex and Amy

could also someday be diagnosed with the crippling disease.

It doesn't change the inspiration for his mother, nor does it change the way he lives. But it is in the back of his mind.

"I'm inspired by my mom every day," he said. "I get up every day and see (the disease's effects) happening. I just wish I could help. I wish I could change the outcome."

"Will I get the test? Yeah, when I'm older. Probably at the same as she was when she took it. She was 43. I'll wait."

His father agreed with the choice.

"I always told my kids, once you're 18, it's your choice," he said. "Something like that can loom over your head. Every decision you make is based on that. So just go and live your life."

His son — his namesake — has done just that.

He just wrapped up a senior season in which had 33 tackles, 12.5 tackles for loss and 6 ½ sacks for the proud Chardon defense. He also was a punishing run-blocker for a Hilltoppers offense that ran for more than 4,000 yards this season.

Next week, he will embark on a senior year of wrestling and make a push for a berth in the Division I state wrestling tournament.

"I'm inspired by watching him play football and wrestle," Amy said. "Yes, I always worry about him."

Alex McDonald knows the scary reality that Huntington's disease will continue to affect his mother. He also knows that there's a 50 percent chance that someday the disease could also come calling for him.

That's why no one has ever seen him slack off in



Alex McDonald with his mother Amy earlier this season.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MCDONALD FAMILY



Alex McDonald hoists the state championship trophy amidst his Chardon teammates.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MCDONALD FAMILY



Alex McDonald warms up before the state final Dec. 3.

PAUL DICICCO — FOR THE NEWS-HERALD

practice — whether it's doing pushups with teammates on the beach at Mentor Headlands or during sprints on 100-degree days in the summer. That's why

his engine runs so hot each and every play on the football field or on the wrestling mat.

Time, he has learned, is ever so precious.

"My mom inspires me to be the best person I can be every day," Alex said, his voice cracking a little with emotion. "To do everything ... with no regrets."

Congratulations Chardon Hilltoppers!

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HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

From the 'goat patch' to Canton

Hewitt discusses high points, memories of the Chardon's state championship season

By John Kampf

JKampf@news-herald.com

The Chardon football team had a plan all along.

So did their coach, Mitch Hewitt.

Motivated all off-season by naysayers, including former teammates who were insistent that the Hilltoppers were going to take a step back after winning the 2020 Division III championship, the 2021 Hilltoppers were on a mission.

Their coach wasn't about to let them forget.

Leaving WAY early for an Oct. 1 game at New Philadelphia, Hewitt scheduled the Chardon squad to stop in Canton to tour the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Right next door to Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium, where everyone wearing Chardon red and black knew that's where they wanted to be two months later.

The reason for Hewitt's pit-stop prior to playing a game later that Friday night?

"It's the whole underlying them of speaking it into being," Hewitt told The News-Herald this week. "Ultimately that was the goal of ours. That's why we stopped there, because that's where the championship game was going to be played.

"The amount of negativity kids can produce in their own heads is amazing. I don't know if everyone knows that. But if you speak positivity, speak goals into being, speak of blessings, that can make a difference. It doesn't always work, but then again you have NO shot if you think you're going to stink or not achieve.

"There was a reason we made a stop that day, to

speak our goal into being."

Come Dec. 3, the Hilltoppers were back at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium. They made their goal a reality with a 21-14 win over Hamilton Badin in the state championship game, sealing back-to-back undefeated championship seasons and extending their current winning streak to a state-best 28 games.

Hewitt touched on a number of topics, memories and thoughts on parts of the championship season. Here are his his thoughts on each point that stood out in his mind that made the 2021 season so memorable and special.

THE OFFSEASON STRENGTH TRAINING STARTING OFF-CAMPUS BECAUSE OF COVID-19 PROTOCOLS

Hewitt: "Again, it's my opinion that the worst thing COVID has done outside of the disease itself is the division it's created. By not being able to work out at the school, some were trying to pay for gym memberships, some worked out at home. You miss out on building with your teammates, the teamwork. It creates a division that can be hard to overcome. It was May before we got back. There's no place like home. It's like one of our playoff shirts has a picture of a garage door on the front of it. It's our weight room garage door. It looks kind of like an album cover. That garage door is the entrance to championships. The only place you can maybe have a shot at one."

WELCOMING BACK FANS AND SPECIFICALLY THE CHARDON CRAZIES (AFTER NOT HAVING FULL CAPACITY CROWDS

IN 2020)

Hewitt: "It makes me feel sad what the 2020 team missed. We were blessed just to have a season last year, even though in theory we could have or should have had fans last year because you can argue cases are worse now than they were last year. It's unfortunate grandparents, aunts and uncles couldn't attend last year. That's why this Sunday when we have our parade, we'll include the class of 2020 as well."

PLAYING THE HOME OPENER AT RIVERSIDE BECAUSE OF FIELD CONSTRUCTION AT CHARDON

Hewitt: "Words can't describe it. It was very gracious of Riverside to allow us to use their facilities. But being the home team in the visiting locker room is a little strange."

PRACTICING ALL SUMMER ON THE OLD FIELD WHILE THE FIELD WAS BEING WORKED ON

Hewitt: "We affectionately call that the 'goat patch.' That's the field between the stadium and the school. Small. No goalposts. Sure, that created a little edge for our players. Whenever you can deny your kids something that, if they work hard enough they can get back, it keeps them hungry. We were able to use practicing on the goat patch as motivation."

THE PREGAME JOINT PRAYER WITH GLENVILLE AND THE 'ONE BLOOD' THEME

Hewitt: "That's something Coach Ginn and I talked about all summer, getting together at midfield with our teams together in prayer. Again, it speaks to the division created in America being largely gaslit by media and social media. When you get down to it, we're all pretty much

the same and pretty decent human beings. Their pastor prayed over it. The one thing he spoke of is us all being of 'one blood.' It was pretty special."

HOME FIELD BEING FINISHED THREE HOURS BEFORE OUR WEEK 3 GAME WITH YOUNGSTOWN URSULINE

Hewitt: "When school let out, there were still machines out there and they were moving stuff around. We were pretty confident but you never know for sure if you're going to be playing at home or getting on a bus to play at West Geauga. We were assured it'd be ready. So we went with that. But I don't think anybody believed it until we got the word. We won that game (and Ursuline went on to be the Division IV state runner-up), but I think playing at home played a huge part in the outcome. We always say, 'Defend the hill.' Do we still play that well or win that game if it's played in Chesterland? I don't know if we have that same edge."

PLAYING IN 103-DEGREE HEAT AT AKRON BUCHTEL IN WEEK 2

Hewitt: "That's the hottest game I've ever been part of, and I've been part of a lot of games. On the road, Saturday afternoon, 100-plus degrees. And that was a team that just beat Mayfield. Yeah, I wore black that game. That's just part of it all. If your players are wearing 15 pounds of pads and jersey, the least I can do is wear black and embrace the uncomfortable."

COACH BILL OVERTON AND COACH JON PAGLIO GETTING TRAMPLED IN PRACTICE

Hewitt: "That happens I guess when you don't get enough separation between drills. You get taken down by friendly fire. They were



TIM PHILLIS — FOR THE NEWS-HERALD

Chardon coach Mitch Hewitt, during the state final Dec. 3 in Canton.

downfield going through a walkthrough with linemen, and our scout team ran a pass route and ran right into them. Fortunately, Coach Pags took the brunt and Coach O, our nearly 70-year-old O-line coach, wasn't hurt."

THE JV TEAM LIFTING DURING HALFTIME OF THE CANFIELD AND WEST HOLMES PLAYOFF GAMES

Hewitt: "We have a rule you're not allowed to sit down in the weight room. It was weird walking in and having the JV players standing around at half-time. I was like, 'No, no, no, this isn't right. This is a chance to get better.' So they took off their pads and got a lift in. They embraced it. It's probably because they were frozen to death, but they embraced it."

PLAYING IN A 26-DEGREE SNOW GAME IN THE FINAL FOUR

Hewitt: "Oh, we loved that. We got more snow there (in Twinsburg) than we got in Chardon. It was awesome. We're the snow-

belt capital, so playing in snow that night adds to the ambiance of it. That's what you envision when you think about playing in late November in a playoff game in Ohio. That's what separates the Ohio State and Michigan game in the weather and the Alabama-Georgia game in a dome. There's just something great about it.

THANKSGIVING DAY PRACTICE, THE FIRST SINCE 1998

Hewitt: "We had a great practice. But more than that, a great fundraiser for military families. It was great to see so many alumni there, kids I haven't seen in years. It made it exactly what a holiday is designed to do even more special. To be grateful and blessed."

WRAPPING IT UP WITH A 16-0 SEASON AND 28-STRAIGHT WINS, AND A STATE TITLE

Hewitt: "I think we had a lot of goals when we took over 11 years ago. That's one I'd be lying if I said it was on the radar. I'm not worried about streaks. I think there's value in them, but it won't be a focus next season. We won't do that. Someone said we've got the 10th-longest one in the nation now? Ah — great. I don't want to sound ungrateful. It's nice. But the streak isn't a focus of ours.

ON RETURNING TO CHARDON AFTER THE CHAMPIONSHIP GAME TO A THROG OF SUPPORTERS

Hewitt: "It's further proof we've got a great community that supports us and we're blessed to be where we're from. It's not like this everywhere. It can be easy for a fanbase to take things for granted. The friendship, the love, the bond here ... you've got to be constantly grateful for things like that."



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HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

Captains recount memories of run to title

By John Kampf
jkampf@news-herald.com

The 2021 football season was a special one for many, especially the Division III state champion Chardon Hilltoppers.

With a 21-14 win over Hamilton Badin in the championship game on Dec. 3 at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium in Canton, Chardon wrapped up the first 16-0 season in Ohio high school football history.

But the journey toward that end goal started months before. There were trials, tribulations and hurdles to overcome, but the Hilltoppers climbed that mountain together. In doing so, they stockpiled memories that will last a lifetime.

Here, the six captains from this year's team — Sean Carr, Alex Henry, Alex McDonald, Simon Rodriguez, Nathanael Sulka and Zoran Vujaklija — give their thoughts and memories of the special, unparalleled 2021 championship season.

Nathanael Sulka

Senior captain, defensive back/split end
The 2021 football season was an incredible, yet such a short experience.

Since the summer we all felt a lot of doubt coming from the outside and did not have a lot of believers. We had a lot of position battles and it took a while to get everything together. A lot of things came together to make it an incredible season.

It was such a big question mark going up against a great Glenville team early in the season after we lost 17-18 starters. We played a very tough schedule, which is even tougher with a team that had very very little varsity experience.

We had three sophomores start, which is the most sophomores that have started in my four years here at Chardon. They all did an excellent job and are all here and are going to continue to be incredible players.

For us to be good as a team, we didn't need to do anything special. We played sound defense, giving up like nine points a game, and we played really good run defense.

Offensively, we averaged around 5-6 yards a carry and rarely turned the ball over, maybe one time in the postseason. We just played solid offense with no turnovers and were able to stop the run really well.

We were basically trying to avoid living in the shadow of the 2020 team and doing our own thing. Which until we lose, every team is going to have that feel and be chasing greatness.

My favorite memory of the season is when Leo Colombi — one of our sophomores — got his pick-six against Buchtel. Leo was someone I never talked to until this year and he kind of became like a little brother to me and he was able to learn things from me and get better throughout the year.

When he got that pick, I



Chardon captains Alex Henry (6) and Sean Carr (41) helped lead the Hilltoppers to the Division III state championship

ran so fast to meet him in the end zone. I was so excited for him.

Another one of my favorite moments was Sean Carr scoring the game-winning touchdown in the state game. That kid got us that far and just the amount of work he puts in and how much he cares, he deserved that moment so much. I was so happy he was the one that scored it.

Another favorite memory for me is during the end of the regular season, I texted Coach Landies and asked him if he had ever coached a Thanksgiving practice. He said he has not and it was a goal of his. So I told him we would get him one. After the Dover game, that put us in the final four and guaranteed Thanksgiving practice.

I saw Coach Landies come down from the press box after the game while we were in handshake lines and I ran over to him and gave him a big hug and said "I told you we'd get you that practice!" It was a sweet moment, I'm going to remember that forever.

Finally what I'm going to take from this season is how love, determination, and spoken confidence can get you anywhere. One big thing we always did was proclaim that we would be state champs. We always said it and we all believed it. Before our playoff games we broke it down after stretching by yelling "1-2-3 ... State Champs." We all believed and proclaimed it.

It was such an amazing season and it went by so fast — which is disappointing — but I am blessed I was able to be a part of it and make history going back-to-back and being the first 16-0 team. Also just proving everyone wrong and creat-

ing our own legacy and not living in the 2020 team's shadow.

I got to be a huge part in both the 2020 and 2021 state championship runs. Such an amazing feeling.

The things I would do to be able to start all over in that 2020 season and do both seasons again.

Zoran Vujaklija

Senior captain, quarterback/safety
I want to start this off saying it was an incredible season.

While the season started about 22 weeks ago with two-a-days and with scrimmages, in reality, the season started way back in January. COVID-19 was still running strong and the team ended up lifting at a local gym instead of being at our school's weight room.

The lifts were full of high energy and very high hopes. Coming all the way back from the state game of 2020, the thought for the team was simply you won't be good. We were told countless times that there was no way that we would be able to have a winning season let alone the ability to go back to back.

The team rallied. The team knew the doubt so many people had and did not listen to it. When we went into 7-on-7s and scrimmages and seeing the success we were having, everyone was getting really brought into it.

When we went into the Glenville game, the fan base had not bought into it yet. But the team was ready to prove people wrong. We won that game, 28-14.

Most people would say that the moment they believed was after our Week 3 victory over future state runner-up Ursuline.

I distinctly remember being told in the offseason that we needed to win at least one or two of our first three games. The thought of going 3-0 through those games was unimaginable.

We then went on winning and further eliminating the doubt from our fanbase and the entire state.

We went into the playoffs the No. 1 seed and were ready to finish the run. With every win came more confidence and we earned more and more time together as a team.

Going into the championship game, the final high school game for us seniors, to say that we were motivated would've been an understatement. We went further, played more games and won more games than any other class in the history of Chardon. We had the opportunity to win the most games in a single season ever in Ohio.

The Hilltoppers were one win away from being outright and fully champions once again. The state game was a rollercoaster and a defensive battle that ended the way all of us seniors had dreamed for it to end.

The team and I wouldn't have been able to make it as far as we did without the extra work my dad (strength coach Rob Vujaklija) did for us. From having guys over to eat, watching film with them and then all the way to wearing badass masks on Fridays. He has been more than just a coach for me and all of the other kids on the team. He is a true blessing to Chardon and I am truly blessed to have him as my dad.

I could not possibly be happier and more grateful than I am for everyone who was there during the process and am thankful



SUBMITTED

Senior Nathanael Sulka



SUBMITTED

Chardon running back Sean Carr



SUBMITTED

Senior lineman Simon Rodriguez



PHOTO COURTESY OF ZORAN VUJAKLIJA

Zoran Vujaklija of Chardon gets on the bus with the state championship trophy in Canton.



SUBMITTED

Chardon tight end-defensive end Alex McDonald



SUBMITTED

Chardon quarterback Alex Henry

for all my boys, with whom I got to make a lifetime of memories.

I love these guys and I couldn't have asked for a better season.

Sean Carr

Senior captain, running back
What made this season work?

Well, what I think of immediately is the level of commitment and amount we were willing to sacrifice for this season. We embraced the Chardon culture and that allowed us to work harder than any team in the state.

We were all so close as a team. I've started for three years and this is the closest team I have ever been on. From sophomore year on up to senior year, there are friendships everywhere.

Being doubted also fueled the fire for a lot for us. We were forgotten about and we had something to prove. Coach Hewitt and the other coaches did a great job of getting the best out of all of us. When a coach has your back, it gives you a lot of confidence as a player.

It is hard for me to single out my favorite memories from this season be-

cause there are so many. I will always remember the love shared with my teammates. The brotherhood on this team was real and to be a part of it was special.

I loved getting ready to go to war with my guys. It's such a great feeling to lay it all out there with your friends. I will always remember the celebration in the end zones with my teammates. The best memories came from winning states. The feeling of accomplishment. The after-game hugs with all the people who you love and all the teammates you have shared a brotherhood with.

Seeing the coaches and your community smiling and happy after the state championship game was another great memory.

What I took away from this season is that if you really want something, even if no one thinks you can achieve it, if you work hard and believe in yourself, nothing can stop you.

I am very thankful for everything Chardon has taught me. It has given me the life lessons needed to be successful in my life. I would not trade my experiences here for the world.

CAPTAINS » PAGE 7

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High school football » Chardon 21, Hamilton Badin 14

'Topper title track runs back to back

Reprinted from the Dec. 4 edition

By John Kampf
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CANTON » The legacy is complete.

The Chardon Hilltoppers are repeat state champions and the first team in Ohio high school football history to finish with a 16-0 record.

Sean Carr scored on a short touchdown run with 1:05 remaining, and Heath Fetchik's interception sealed the deal in Chardon's 21-14 win over Hamilton Badin in the Division III state championship game Dec. 3 at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium in Canton.

The win not only makes Chardon the first team in Ohio high school football history to finish 16-0, but it extends the Hilltoppers' winning streak to 28 games and gives them a gold trophy to go with the one they won last year when they finished 12-0.

"A bunch of no-names to start the season," said Coach Mitch Hewitt, who returned only five starters from last year's 12-0 team. "It was question mark, question mark, question mark. And here they are state champions, first team in the history of Ohio high school football to be 16-0 and go back-to-back."

With the game tied at 14 midway through the fourth quarter, a Chardon punt pinned Badin deep in its own territory. A grounding penalty backed the Rams up even further — on their own 3.

A short punt gave Chardon the ball at the Badin 29. Long runs by AJ Bruce and Alex Henry got the Hilltoppers inside the Rams' 5, where Carr took over from there and plowed in two plays later for the score.

"I didn't score last year," said Carr, who was held to 33 yards on 13 carries. "I really wanted to get in this year. To get the game-winner, I can't ask for more than that situation."

Badin (14-1) had 1:05 left on the clock, but not much materialized with that. On the Rams' last-ditch effort play, QB Alex Ritzie was hit by Chardon's Alex McDon-



The Chardon Hilltoppers celebrate winning the Division III state football final against Hamilton Badin on Dec. 3 in Canton.

ald as he threw, allowing Fetchik to intercept.

One kneelown later, and it was party central on the Chardon side of the field.

"It's amazing," said Fetchik, still out of breath from the celebration. "It's crazy to get that pick at the end. I'm just so happy we won."

For the most part, the game was every bit of what it was billed to be — a defensive battle between two teams who prefer to run the ball.

Chardon got a stop on the first series of the game, then cashed in quickly when Alex Henry hit Nathanael Sulka on a 36-yard post play for the score. Sulka, heading to Youngstown State as a linebacker, beat triple coverage for the score.

"Alex just put it where he needed to put it. That's it,"

Sulka said.

Badin evened the score at 7-7 near the end of the first half when Jack Walsh bulled in from the 2.

Hewitt said he challenged his team at the half, as the Hilltoppers had only 33 yards rushing in the first half. The speech worked, as Chardon finished with 192 for the game.

"You will not win a state title with that performance," Hewitt told his team.

Chardon scored on its opening drive of the first half, with Bruce taking a jet-sweep in from 27 yards. The 74-yard drive was only two yards short of the 76 yards total offense the Hilltoppers had in the first half.

But Badin responded in impressive fashion. Carter Russo ran in from six yards

out midway through the third to knot the score at 14.

That's the way it stayed until the key defensive stand by the Hilltoppers in the fourth, setting up Carr's touchdown run and Fetchik's game-clinching interception.

Bruce had 88 yards on seven carries — all in the second half — to lead Chardon. Henry ran for 54 on 19 carries.

"We knew if we worked hard and kept pounding, eventually they couldn't hang with us because they didn't work as hard as us," Carr said. "The work we put in, the culture we have — we knew we were ready for the moment."

Badin's run-oriented offense was limited to 81 yards on 34 carries. They also threw for 62, 33 com-



TIM PHILLIS — FOR THE NEWS-HERALD

Sean Carr is hoisted by Alex McDonald after scoring the eventual game-winning touchdown Dec. 3.

ing on one highlight-reel catch by Braedyn Moore.

Pressure was paramount for Chardon. Brody Dotson led the charge with 12 tackles, 1 ½ sacks and 3 ½ TFLs.

"Our defense has dominated all year," Fetchik said. "They bring it every game. To do it at the end is a testament to what they've done all season."

Walsh carried 27 times for 96 yards to lead the Rams. Ritzie, a sophomore starting in place of senior starter Landyn Vidourek, who broke his hand in a regional final, threw for 62 yards, but was sacked three times for negative-21 yards and was under pressure all night.

"That's a tough spot to that sophomore to be in," Hewitt said. "We thought if we put him a position to have to win it, we liked our odds."

Badin coach Nick Yordy credited the Hilltoppers for their physicality.

"They're a big, physical team. We knew that. You saw that on film," he said. "Everything they do is very physical."

"They hit pretty freaking hard," Badin linebacker Brady Imhoff said.

Hewitt credited his players for the gutsy victory and for playing dinged up, sin-

gling out Sulka (shoulder) and Carr (shoulder) — two of the five returning starters from a year ago.

"This kid started 46 games for us," Hewitt said of Sulka. "His shoulder is shot. It popped out last week. ... There's never a doubt with him. His legacy will be forever told."

As will that of the Hilltoppers, who came into the season underestimated and pigeon-holed as a rebuilding team after the graduation of a huge and decorated senior class.

Even by their coach. "I think even though we set the bar pretty high at Chardon, I set it too low," Hewitt said. "Shame on me for doing that. I won't make that mistake again."

As the Hilltoppers prepared to board their charter busses and head back to Chardon as two-time state champions, Sulka remembered something a former teammate told him last year.

"Last year, Brady Toth told me the best thing you can do when you're a senior is go out with a smile," Sulka said. "Only a real low percentage of people get to that, and we got to go out with a smile."

And a legacy to go with it.

Captains

FROM PAGE 6

Alex McDonald

Senior captain, Tight end/defensive end

My thoughts on the season are incredible. The season couldn't have been any better. I mean, what more could someone want than a state championship in back-to-back years?

I believe what made the season work so well is everyone was motivated by the fact that people doubted our abilities to even have a winning season. It's hard to replace a senior class of 26, but we did it and in my perspective better than we did it last year.

Some of my favorite memories from the season

start way back when we did the beach run and finished it off with the sit-ups and push-ups with the waves crashing down on us. It was loads of fun to be able to do something like that as a team.

The offseason workouts on the beach were rough, but everyone had fun pushing through them. When it got hard I just looked to some of my teammates and started working harder because I didn't want to let them down.

Another one of my favorite memories was when we finally got the chance to play on our new turf. The new turf was so soft it felt like you were playing football on clouds.

Practicing on the "goat patch" helped reinforce our toughness because it

was like a parking lot. The dirt was rock-solid and every time you got tackled or fell over it just made you a tougher person. My teammates and I learned to get over bumps and bruises fast because of the dirt.

The ride back into town after we won the championship was bittersweet. I say that because it was amazing winning a state title for the city and seeing all of our supporters there on the square. The bad part about it was I was done being a Hilltopper. It was the sad realization I'd never put those pads on again or get to represent the name on the side of the helmet.

What I will take from this season is the leadership experience I gained from being a captain and

having to fill the shoes of the leaders before me.

I'll also take with me the thought of never taking anything for granted because it feels like I started playing for Chardon just yesterday and now it's already over.

Simon Rodriguez

Senior captain, Offensive line/defensive line

This past football season was one I will never forget. There was a lot more than just the winning of 16 games, it was the countless hours of extra sweat, offseason work, commitment, and effort of 72 players who completely bought into the fact that we wanted to leave our legacy on the wall.

Every player played each game selflessly, know-

ing that collectively history would be made if we all put our personal goals aside and focused on being the first team in Ohio to go 16-0.

When a team commits itself to everyone's success, the result is an unforgettable season.

The "forgotten class" will never be forgotten.

Alex Henry

Junior captain, quarterback

Personally what I feel like made the 21-22 season go as far as it did was the offseason.

I had friends that play football from other schools talking to me about how we're gonna be just an average team and that we have no chance of doing anything close to what the

2020 team did.

Our whole team embraced all of these comments from even people in our own community and went straight to work. We did SEAL team training in Lake Erie at like 8 in the morning one day. It was crazy but looking back at it, I'll never forget it.

We also didn't have any turf field for the whole offseason and all the way up to Week 3. So we were playing on the field known as the "goat patch" and it's probably only 60 yards of grass field and with about 70-80 kids on the team there's only so many things you can do. But it was pretty sweet looking back on it knowing we grinded just like how the 1994 team did when they won state.

Congratulations **Chardon Hilltoppers!**

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