

Chasing an elusive crown

Ending Greater Rome's 10-year state championship drought requires more than being good

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Call it preparation. Call it chemistry. Call it luck.

What it takes to be a high school football state champion seems to come in many forms and, most often, all of them have to be in effect simultaneously.

It has been 10 years since a Greater Rome team has hung a new state football title banner in its halls, the longest period without one since the Georgia High School Association began overseeing state championships in 1947.

Plus, the GHSA has provided a new twist this season with all five of the classifications playing their championship games in the Georgia Dome, which has previously hosted the semifinal round.

With local teams clearly demonstrating talent and the consistent ability to be successful, bringing a state championship back to the area is a fathomable future.

A decade ago, the Darlington Tigers ended the season 15-0, the top team in Region 6-A and the Class A state champions.

Current head coach Tommy Atha was an assistant on that team, which defeated Lincoln County 16-6 in Lincolnton for the title, and remembers the intricacies that made that squad so special.

"One of the biggest things that that group was able to do was create a competitive environment in practice every day," Atha said.

"When the starting offense was on the field, the team that was on defense was very competitive and pushed them every day and the same was true when the starting defense was out there."

That year, Darlington didn't allow any opponent to score more than 21 points, which came in a 24-21 win over Greater Atlanta Christian in week two.

"They were so fundamentally sound," Atha said.

"They stepped with the right foot. They put their hat on the right side.

They ran their feet until the whistle blew."

Their close victory over GAC also provided the Tigers with another tool in their run to a state championship when Darlington held the Spartans scoreless after being first and goal on the one-yard line.

"They learned how to play under pressure and they learned how to respond to adversity early in the season," Atha said.

"I think another thing that is really kind of hard to measure is the buy-in factor," Atha continued.

"That group of young men really bought into what we were doing and what they wanted to accomplish."

The result was a season that has been unmatched by another local team in the nine seasons that have followed it.

"I think one of the biggest things that we had is ... a lot of people like to use the word chemistry, but it's hard to explain what exactly that means sometimes," Atha said.

"But basically that team meshed so well together. They pushed each other hard but they pulled for each other hard as well."

Calhoun head coach Hal Lamb agrees that the way players bond and compliment each other means a lot in the quest for success.

"Yeah, you've got to have talent, and a lot of teams have talent, but the teams that win it all are the ones that have the right chemistry," Lamb said.

In 2005, the Yellow Jackets took their season all the way to the Class AA state championship game and lost to Charlton County 27-21, making them the closest Greater Rome squad to break the drought since Darlington's run.

"The difference between the 2005 team and some of our other teams is those kids really gelled together," Lamb said. "They believed in one another. They cared about one another. They loved one another and they did things together."

Factors that can be controlled and nurtured aside, when it comes to going undefeated for 15 games there is always a certain luck involved.

'Usually there at the end there's four or five teams capable of winning it, but it just boils down to a break here or a break there.'

Sid Fritts
Rome High head coach



File photo / Rome News-Tribune

Calhoun High was the last Greater Rome prep football team to hit the field for a state championship game when the Yellow Jackets eventually lost to Charlton County in the 2005 title clash.

Atha said he saw the effects of luck and circumstances during their state title season.

"Sometimes, during that year, we liked to feel that we worked hard enough to create our own luck but we also benefited from some untimely turnovers in a couple of games," he said. "But we capitalized on them."

"I've said it for years and years," Rome High head coach Sid Fritts said, "usually there at the end there's four or five teams who are probably capable of winning it, but it just boils down to a break here or a break there."

The Wolves have been one of those select groups in Class AAAA for a better part of their existence since the merger of East and West Rome in 1992.

Rome's story is mostly centered on postseasons that end at quarterfinals. The Wolves have been to the Elite Eight six times since 1997 and have never made it to the semifinals.

"Once you're in the playoffs, every little mistake is magnified, every play can be the play," Fritts said.

"But it's that one play and you never know when that play will surface. It can happen in the first quarter or it can happen right at the end of the half and unfortunately, at times, it can happen on the last play of the game."

Calhoun experienced one of those scenarios in its 2005 state championship game when they let visiting Charlton County score on a long pass at the end of the second quarter and then turned the ball over on their opponent's 10-yard line late in the third, which led to the winning touchdown.

"We were a bounce or two away from being state champions in 2005 but the ball just didn't go our way," Lamb said. "I think back on that game a lot and just wish that we had it to do over."

"You don't know if you're ever going to get back to that point or not in your coaching career."

Of course, at the beginning of every season, certain things have to be established in order to seriously contend for a title.

"Once you get the kids believing, that is so big ... especially in high school sports," Atha said.

"(Winning a state championship)

STATE PREP FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIPS WON IN GREATER ROME

Greater Rome's state high school football champions (records kept by the Georgia High School Association since 1947):

- 1950 Rockmart (A)
- 1952 Calhoun (C)
- 1953 Model (B)
- 1954 Model (B)
- 1957 Trion (B)
- 1961 Coosa (C)
- 1963 Cedartown (AA)
- 1965 West Rome (AA)
- 1969 Coosa (A)
- 1974 Trion (B)
- 1977 East Rome (A)
- 1978 East Rome (AA)
- 1979 Model (AA)
- 1982 West Rome (AA)
- 1983 West Rome (AA)
- 1984 West Rome (AA)
- 1985 West Rome (AA)
- 1990 Pepperell (AA)
- 1998 Darlington (A)

is something that's really a very important goal but there's a bunch of other goals you've got to get before you get to that one," Pepperell coach Jeff Shiflett said.

The Dragons captured the Class AA crown in 1990, the last title in a run of local state championship teams that stretches to East Rome's back-to-back titles in 1977 and 1978.

Model then won the Class AA crown in 1979 followed by the dominance of West Rome in Class AA from 1982-1985.

Last season, Shiflett's first as a head coach, Pepperell started out 0-2 and then took off on a run that gave them the No. 2 seed from Region 7-AA and saw them make it to the quarterfinals.

"You have to take it in an order," Shiflett said. "Our first goal is to make the playoffs. There's not a lot you can do (about winning a state championship) without making the playoffs."

"Once you get to the playoffs,

you've got to take it one game at a time."

"It is a long way away but each year, everybody sets out with the optimism of having a chance," Fritts said. "Everybody starts off with that as their goal."

Fritts said he's seen time and again that if a team can make it to the playoffs, they can give themselves a chance to run the gambit the rest of the way.

That happened in 1992 when Thomas County Central, who began the season with a 1-5 record, finished with a nine game winning streak that ended with a 14-13 win over Peach County and the Class AAA state title.

"You've got to jockey yourself into position to get into the playoffs," Fritts said. "Once in the playoffs, everybody starts out on equal ground."

Now with state finals being played in the Georgia Dome instead of one of the participating team's home field, the days of small towns filling the nearby high school stadium to capacity to witness a title tilt could be extinct.

Atha remembers playing in the Dome in the 1998 semifinals in the Tigers' win over Taylor County and then the championship game over Lincoln County in Lincolnton, a town known for its football tradition.

He calls both of them "incredible experiences" but considers the spot where the games are played a moot point.

"If you're fortunate enough to make it that far, you'll be so excited ... I don't really care," Atha said.

"You get to game 14 and 15, man, you can play it in a parking lot. It's just a rare opportunity and it's going to be exciting whether you play it in the Dome or at home and home or wherever."

In recent years, there have been a few teams separate themselves from the pack as far as being a perennial favorite when the absolute last game of the high school football season comes around.

No program in Greater Rome has joined their ranks — yet.

"Sure the Bufords and the Charlton Counties are pretty much there every year," Lamb said, "but for everybody else, it takes a little bit of luck, the chemistry has to be right and the stars have got to fall in the right place."



File photo / Rome News-Tribune

Darlington head coach Tommy Atha, who led the Tigers to the second round of the 2007 playoffs, was an assistant on the school's 1998 Class A state championship team.

NAIA title game on Shorter's home turf

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When it comes to high school football title bouts, the Georgia Dome will be the place for all of the action this December.

But there is only one place in the state where a national college football championship will be on the line this season — Rome, Ga.

In January, the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) chose Shorter College and Rome to host the 2008 and 2009 National Football Championship games.

Since then, Barron Stadium, the home of both the Shorter Hawks and the Rome Wolves,

has received a facelift and is set to be added to the short list of this season's college football championship venues.

"We have a lot of pride that the NAIA would have enough confidence and be impressed when they came to Rome," Shorter football head coach Phil Jones said about title game to be held Saturday, Dec. 20.

"It's exciting to know that the same organization our football team is in is hosting its nation-



When: Saturday, Dec. 20
Where: Barron Stadium

al championship in our home."

The Hawks, who will field a

team for just the fourth season this year, have a drive to accomplish that with a number of unique factors already in play.

Shorter will have its largest and most experienced senior class this season with Mid-South All-Conference selections aplenty and players returning at nearly every position on the field.

The end result could be a sea of blue and white in the stands on Dec. 20.

"We'll fight for every opportunity we have to make that happen," Jones said. "And (the players) are excited about it. They talk about it and I think it's good for Shorter and our program that we're a part of that."



File photo / Rome News-Tribune

Shorter head coach Phil Jones and the Hawks have the opportunity to play for the NAIA championship at home at Barron Stadium.