

The genesis of team

Great football programs are made, not born. It takes a head coach with passion and vision, assistants who can teach and prod and players who buy into the idea they can create something special.

By [John Millea](#), Star Tribune

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In the land of football cupcakes, the Hopkins Royals were big, sweet and covered with gooey frosting. At least, that's how it appeared as the 2006 season moved into its final weeks. The Royals were in trouble. Under third-year coach John DenHartog, the Royals lost five of their first six games, giving them a pastry-fresh record of 2-19 since the midway point in 2004.

But DenHartog saw a turnaround coming. Really, he did.

"The work ethic was always there, and the attitude of the kids never wavered, even when we weren't winning games," he said.

And then things changed. In Week 6, Hopkins played Minnetonka tough in a 35-26 loss, and the regular season ended with victories over Edina and North Branch. As the postseason began, the cupcake had become a big nasty boulder, rolling downhill and picking up steam.

The Royals went 3-0 in the Class 5A, Section 6 playoffs, capturing the section championship and advancing to the state tournament for the first time since 1999. The season finally ended in the state quarterfinals against St. Cloud Tech.

"We knew we had the potential for that to happen," DenHartog said. "We preached that they were good players and good athletes and they could put it together. I think the big key to the turnaround was confidence."

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The Turnaround. It's what every struggling football team dreams about and works toward. Some are simply trying to win one game or put together a modest winning streak. For others, the goal is to take a step beyond a winning record and go deep into the playoffs. And for a fortunate few, the goal is returning to the familiar pinnacle of the Prep Bowl and a state championship.

The Turnaround happens in different ways. In some cases, a new coach takes over and things drastically improve in a matter of two or three years. Sometimes change comes slowly, if at all. And for a few teams, major improvement seems like a dream that never turns to reality.

Some coaches look at all the success their teams have had and wonder, "Why me?"

Dave Dose, who has led Glencoe-Silver Lake to four Prep Bowls and three Class 3A championships since 2000, is one of them.

"I pinch myself and ask, 'Why are we so blessed with these great kids and great athletes?' I'm not being corny here," said Dose, whose Panthers open defense of their state title Friday at Hutchinson. "We've just had a ton of kids who are so talented and easy to coach."

Other coaches are trying to get their teams off the bottom. One of them is Beau LaBore, who has a 2-18 record in two years at Woodbury. LaBore had a summer chat with Rich Kallok, the former head coach at longtime power Cretin-Derham Hall. That conversation shed some light on the challenges all coaches face.

During an NFL-sponsored youth football gathering at the Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, Kallok talked with LaBore about the process of coaching and learning.

"Rich said, 'It took me 15 years as a head coach to put together, to understand, to be completely comfortable with my first two weeks of practice,'" LaBore said. "He said he didn't necessarily know why they did all the things they did until he was there for 15 years. So I thought, 'Wow, I have a ways to go.'"

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These days, every football fan in Minnesota knows about Eden Prairie. The Eagles, the defending champions of Class 5A, also captured big-school titles in 1996, 1997, 2000 and 2002. But things were much different in 1992, when coach Mike Grant left Forest Lake to take over at Eden Prairie.

The Eagles of the early '90s had something in common with Hopkins, pre-2006 turnaround. Eden Prairie had won "maybe five games in five years or something like that," Grant said.

Some people thought he was crazy to take the job. At Forest Lake, where Grant coached for nine years, his 1991 team had reached the state playoffs. But he viewed Eden Prairie as a sleeping giant.

"They were saying, 'You tell us what we need to do to get better. We're going to do what we have to do,' " he said. "At some places they say, 'Average is OK.'"

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