

A Chronicle of Hilltopper Football

Since 1919, Hilltopper Football has grown to become one of the most recognized programs in America. This is the result of the commitment made by dedicated coaches, devoted families, committed players and faithful followers. Created among them throughout this journey is an unbreakable bond that passes the traditions to each next generation.

The mission of the program is to serve as an educational instrument through which young men experience lessons of spirituality, sacrifice, brotherhood, perseverance and a belief in both humanity and in one's self. It represents a small part of the educational experience of the spiritual commitment the Sisters of St. Francis, the Christian Brothers and the Carmelites have made to bring the presence of our Lord into the lives of families of the Joliet and Will County area. What has changed little over this measurement of time is the share of common experience, and absolute recognition that each of us is present for service to each other for an unspecified segment of time.

This trip from 1918 through today can go no further without extending a most special thanks to Ron Lawnzack (JCHS '56). In the mid-1970s, Ron undertook a three (3) year mission he referred to as a "Labor of Love." During this mission Ron scrubbed every available source of information including but not limited to, microfilmed news accounts, yearbooks and personal interviews conducted by Ron, to chronicle the history of Hilltopper Football. Ron's selfless endeavor resulted in an incredible body of work that was published in 1980 as the *DeLaSalle-Joliet Catholic High School Football Fact Book*. A great deal of Ron's work has been used as the foundation of this piece. Through the effort and sound memory of many Hilltoppers of yesteryear, the availability of information via archives and the Internet, this piece builds upon Ron's masterful work. It adds additional accounts of the past and of Hilltopper history that has transpired since the 1980 release of Ron's work. Again special thanks go to Ron and to the countless supporters who assisted Ron's mission which luckily captured these special accounts before too many of the men in Hilltopper history left us. Ron remains the official statistician of Hilltopper Football today and is responsible for the Record Book available through Joliet Catholic Academy.

The School History

George Cardinal Mundelein wanted to establish a Catholic High School for boys to serve the catholic population in the growing town of Joliet. The Christian Brothers answered the call and created DeLaSalle High School of Joliet in 1918. The first school year welcomed forty-five (45) students. The location of the school was at the site that previously housed Joliet's first Catholic Church, St. Patrick's and on what is accounted to be the bluff from which explorer Louis Jolliet and Jesuit Missionary Fr. Jacques Marquette first laid their eyes on the Des Plaines River valley in 1673.

In 1933 the Christian Brothers concluded that the pressures of the school's growth, the realities of the Great Depression and their Order's 1932 opening of Lewis College just North of Joliet, combined to make it no longer feasible for them to run the High School.

Cardinal George Mundelein invited the Carmelite Fathers of Mount Carmel High School to take over the growing Catholic High School for boys in Joliet. The Cardinal recommend splitting the staff at Mount Carmel into two groups whereby ½ were to remain at Mount Carmel and the other ½ were to go to Joliet. When the Carmelites declined the invitation, the Cardinal came back with an alternative: Take over the school in Joliet or lose permission for the Carmelite Order to operate within the Archdiocese of Chicago, hence, lose Mount Carmel. Fr. Arthur Snaman, O. Carm packed his bags and headed to Joliet that night.

In August of 1933 the Carmelites purchased the school and in a tribute to the people of Joliet, renamed the school Joliet Catholic High School. During the DeLaSalle years the school colors were Purple and Gold, the team had no official nickname, but was sometimes referred to as the

“Irish.” Following their arrival, the athletic teams adopted the Brown and White colors of the Carmelite Order and at that time also took on the nickname “Hilltoppers” to represent the location of the school and officially recognize a moniker that had been associated with the school’s teams through the years.

The Christian Brothers had developed strong ties to the Joliet community. The drivers for and about the change were not openly shared with the community, which resulted in an initial suspicion of the Carmelites because many believed that they had driven the Christian Brothers away.

The mistrust ended quickly as the Carmelites fanned out around town and began saying Masses at the various ethnic Churches within a few mere miles of their new school. To the North, St. John’s served the German community; three blocks further North, St. Mary Nativity served the Croatian community; another three blocks Northwest, Holy Cross served the Polish community. Across the river a few block East of the school was Sacred Heart which served the a mix of Italian and Irish communities; St. Anthony’s downtown served the Italian community; St. Joseph’s downtown served the Slovenian community as did St. Thaddeus a mile East; and a few blocks from St. Thaddeus, St. Cyril served the Russian, Hungarian, Polish and Slovenian communities. A few blocks Southwest was St. Patrick, which served an Irish community. A mile Northwest from the school was multi-ethnic St. Raymond. The Carmelite Order was also given two parishes to administer: multi-ethnic St. Bernard’s Parish and St. Mary’s “Irish” which was downtown, also a few blocks across the river. St. Mary’s soon became known as St. Mary’s Carmelite.

The Carmelites discovered a community in Joliet quite similar to that from where they had come on Chicago’s Southside. Many families throughout Joliet soon considered the Carmelites to be extended family. It was not unusual for families to include Carmelites in Sunday dinners, birthday parties, anniversaries and other family celebrations. The Carmelites truly became an integral part of the fabric of the community in Joliet as they brought the presence of the Lord beyond the altar and into the very lives of those they served. As they took no salary from the school, the Carmelites lived on the money given to them for saying masses, officiating baptisms, weddings and funerals. Even today, Carmelite priests are requested by families throughout Joliet to officiate these blessed sacraments.

The Carmelites ran the school as an all boys school until its 1990 merger with its all girls sister school St. Francis Academy to form Joliet Catholic Academy. The location of the merged school is the former campus of St. Francis Academy.

The Early Years of Football

An unofficial team played some games in 1919. Earl Gilfillan coached the first official team in 1920. Home games were played at the Richards’ Street Field, which was affectionately called the “Rock Garden.” This site, behind Washington Jr. High School, served as the home field for most home games until 1951, when the Hilltoppers began playing home games in Joliet Memorial Stadium. In 1920, the Hilltoppers/Irish played now familiar Chicago Catholic schools St. Patrick, St. Rita and DeLaSalle.

Additionally, the Hilltoppers also played neighboring Lockport Township High School in the 1920 season. They then played the Porters in all but seven (7) seasons between 1920 and 1981. The only years in that period that the two did not play in were 1921, 1935, 1938, 1939, 1948, 1964, and 1965. The forty-eight (48) games between them are the most the Hilltoppers have played against any opponent.

In the spring of 1921, a class of ten (10) students were the first graduates of DeLaSalle. In the Fall of 1921 the Martin Gleason led team joined the Chicago Catholic League. Gleason also served as the Head Coach in 1922. Fred Larson served as Head Coach in 1923. Barney

Grogan was Head Coach in 1924 and led the Hilltoppers to their first winning season by posting a 5-1-1 mark. Francis Dailey was the coach in 1925.

First year Coach John Carroll's undefeated (5-0) 1926 squad established what will remain an unbreakable record and serve as a goal of all Hilltopper teams: They shut out every opponent. Under Carroll's leadership the 1928 Hilltoppers played Mount Carmel and scored a 12-0 victory in the inaugural game of what has become one of the most intense rivalries in the nation.

By accounts written in the Sunday, October 21, 1928 *Joliet Evening Herald News*, "a crowd of 1,600 persons, fully 200 of whom were followers of the Chicago team, witnessed the conflict which was a series of thrills from the start to the final toot of the referee's whistle." The article went on to give passionate detail of how amidst fumbles, interceptions, holding and slugging, this rivalry was born at a pitch on Joliet's southeast side. In a November 14, 1994 issue of *Sports Illustrated*, in which writer John Walters covered the nation's best High School Football rivalries in the article *Unrivaled Rivalries*, Joliet Catholic versus Mount Carmel was one of eleven cited. Of note reads the sentence: "This series was suspended for eight years in the 1980s after a fight nearly erupted between the schools' priests." The thirty-eight (38) games played against Mount Carmel ranks second only to Lockport in the number of games played against an opponent.

In 1934 Carroll's final squad lost to St. Hedewige of South Bend in a game played in Notre Dame Stadium. Carroll remained Head Coach through the 1934 season and posted a 22-39-1 record.

Fr. Gilbert Burns replaced Carroll and served until 1941. A 6-0 loss to rival Mount Carmel stood between Burns' 1939 Hilltoppers and an undefeated season. That single loss also prevented the Hilltoppers from appearing in the Chicago Prep Bowl, which at that time was one of the nation's most prestigious athletic events, on any level. The Prep Bowl of that era consistently drew over 100,000 spectators to Chicago's Soldier Field to watch the Catholic League Champ take on the Champion of the Chicago Public League.

Owen McCarthy, Thomas Dowd and C.H. Parcels each coached one season during the World War II years of the early to mid-1940s. Stan Sosnouski and Bob White both served as Head Coach for two seasons a piece in the mid-to-late 1940's. The 1940s were dark years for Hilltopper Football.

The early years of Hilltopper Football were sometimes difficult for the new and growing school. Throughout these years, the Hilltoppers were known for their aggressive, hard-nosed play. The annual bragging rights battle with Lockport was often the season highlight. The program produced just seven (7) winning seasons between 1920 and 1949 ('24, '26, '27, '33, '36, '37 & '39). The Hilltoppers joined the IHSA in 1948 and ended their association with the Chicago Catholic League. The Chicago Catholic League operated independently from the IHSA until voting in January 1973 to join the IHSA, effective June 1974. The Hilltoppers played as an Independent until joining the Suburban Catholic Conference in 1960. 1948 was also the year that the Catholic Church created the Diocese of Joliet and ordained Martin Dewey McNamara as its first Bishop.

When Winning Became Tradition

The fortunes of Hilltopper football changed dramatically in 1950. Starting with the 1950 season, the Hilltoppers went on to post eight straight winning seasons. The Hilltoppers had only one losing season in the next fifty-five (55) years. Since 1950 and heading into the 2009 season, the Hilltoppers have a 510-163-10 record for a .789 winning percentage. The all-time program record is 584-275-23 in 882 games for a .680 winning percentage.

As the 1950s began, JCHS began a hiring string of three straight coaches who each had a dramatic impact on the winning tradition of Hilltopper Football: Gene Dwyer, Phil Cantwell and Ernie Zaleski.

In 1950 Dwyer took over as the Hilltopper Head Coach. In addition to being a star End at St. Ambrose College, Dwyer was drafted in the 1948 Pro Draft by the Chicago Cardinals. Dwyer had served as the Line Coach for Bob White's 1949 Hilltopper squad.

According to *Herald News* accounts, Dwyer set out to establish an entire program and in so doing, had his Frosh-Soph team practice with the Varsity for the first two weeks of the 1950 season. His objective was to have all players in the program understand the same plays. This consistency throughout the program was viewed to be a tool used to better prepare his younger players for the Varsity level whether as a call-up that year, or in future years.

The new coach with a new approach fueled optimism and excitement. A story in the Tuesday August 15, 1950 *Herald News* announced that *"Athletic Director Fr. De Sales Snyder enlisted the help of 15 alumni and friends to set out on an aggressive season ticket campaign for the 1950 season."* The season's schedule was dubbed as *"one of the toughest Catholic High had faced in years"* as the Hilltoppers would be playing three teams that they had never played before: Rock Island Allmen, West Chicago and Thornton Fractional of Calumet City. The *Herald News* projected that *"the season outcome was doubtful; the inevitable lack of experience will overshadow and threaten the Catholic High gridders throughout the season"* the paper quoted Dwyer.

Of equal excitement that preseason was a groundswell of support from the people of Joliet for a first ever match up between the Hilltoppers and the Joliet Township Steelmen. The September 13, 1950 *Herald News* account of the September 12, 1950 Joliet Township High School Board of Education meeting chronicled the discussion about the feasibility of allowing JT to compete with the Hilltoppers. *"Two board members are on record stating that they had received many questions asking why the two schools were not competing."* According to the *Herald News* account, the JT Superintendent explained that the competition between the two schools was being approached gradually. *"For years they have met on the Golf Course and with JCHS in the IHSA, the schools had crossed bats on the baseball diamond and were pitted against each other on the Tennis Court. By starting with the minor sports we hope to work into the major ones and gradually get the community adjusted to such competition."* The *Herald News* article also reported that the Board agreed that there would be one major problem: *"Spectator Participation."* A Board member stated, *"Before any such major games were scheduled it would be with the understanding that any undue enthusiasm on the part of the spectators would result in a cancellation of any future contests."* After much discussion the JT Board of Education *"went on record as sanctioning competition between the two schools."* A proposed 1950 game between the two schools did not materialize. The Hilltoppers played the 1950s as an Independent and requiring travel to Indiana and Iowa to secure games.

JCHS had planned to play its 1950 home games at Lewis College but when it was determined that lighting costs would be too expensive, the Richards' Street Field was then used. Because of a scheduling conflict with the Richards' Street Field, the 1950 game versus Lockport at Lockport was actually a Hilltopper home game. Dwyer's team established a ground game much stronger than Hilltopper teams of the past. His squad improved each week and posted an impressive 8-2 record. Only a season opening 7-6 loss at Rock Island Allmen and a late season 12-7 home loss to Argo stood between the Hilltoppers and an undefeated season. 1950 was Dwyer's first and only year as Head Coach.

Cantwell replaced Dwyer in 1951. Cantwell came to JCHS from Notre Dame where he played and coached under the legendary Frank Leahy. Before an estimated 8,000 spectators, Cantwell's Hilltopper team opened the new Joliet Memorial Stadium; the home of the Hilltoppers ever since. This game holds a special place in the annals of football in the city of Joliet. The *Herald News'* September 15, 1952 accounted that *"the West stands alone, holding some 5,000 persons, seated more persons than any group that ever witnessed a game in Joliet before."* On the field in the inaugural Memorial Stadium game, the Hilltoppers trailed Rock Island Allmen

Catholic High School 7-6 late in the 4th Quarter, when the Hilltopper Defense forced and recovered a fumble near mid-field. The Hilltoppers mounted a TD drive in the closing minutes giving them a 12-7 victory on this memorable evening. Of note is that 1951 was the first game of the JT series. A driving rain kept the Memorial Stadium witnessing crowd to just over 4,000 people, who saw the Steelmen slip to a 12-0 win. The Hilltoppers fumbled the wet ball away six times in a game that produced just 126 yards of total offense by both squads, with JT outgaining the Hilltoppers with 65 yards to 61. The 1951 Hilltoppers squad logged its second straight winning season with a 7-2 record.

The 1952 squad made it three straight winning seasons by posting a 6-3 mark. In the second year of the JT contest, the Hilltoppers outgained the Steelmen by 63 yards, but for the second straight season suffered a heartbreaking loss. JT scored the winning TD on a 17-yard run with under two minutes left to snatch a 21-18 victory before more than 8,000 week #2 spectators at Memorial Stadium. The Homecoming game against Lockport was one of the season's highlights as the Hilltoppers bowled over for the winning TD in the closing seconds to earn a 13-12 victory. The Saturday October 27, 1952 *Herald News* noted that this game also saw the debut of the very first Hilltopper cheerleading squad, citing that it was made up of girls from St. Francis Academy and the then all-girls Providence High School. Young ladies from the two schools also served as members of the Homecoming Court.

With winning becoming the fabric of Hilltopper football, Cantwell's 1953 team posted the Hilltoppers' first undefeated season since 1926. The 1953 season saw the Hilltoppers post their first ever victory over defending Big-8 Champion Joliet Township High School. In this contest 21-19 victory, the Hilltoppers out-gained the Steelmen by 102 yards. After the 1953 victory, the Hilltoppers went on to establish a 44-8-2 record against JT schools. The 1953 Hilltoppers also notched a 33-7 victory at Lockport. On the season, opponents were outscored 230-50 as the Hilltoppers held four of their eight opponents scoreless. In his three years as head coach ('51-'53), Cantwell's teams compiled a 20-5 record and paved the way for the next half-century of Hilltopper football. During this era, the Hilltoppers practiced at Garnsey Park; old timers recount how curious followers would line the sidewalk along the Raynor Avenue Park to witness Hilltopper practice sessions.

Cantwell left "the Hill" and became the program architect and Head Coach of Bishop Amat Memorial High School in suburban Los Angeles. Cantwell led Bishop Amat to a CIF (California Interscholastic Federation) Sectional Championship in 1961, in only the school's fifth year of existence. In the State of California, Sectional Championships are the state's highest title. Today Bishop Amat is generally regarded as one of the top echelon programs in the nation. History has shown how truly instrumental Cantwell was in developing two of the nation's most successful High School Football programs. The Bishop Amat rivalry with Santa Fe Springs St. Paul was one of the other ten rivalries in the nation cited in the previously mentioned *Sports Illustrated* article.

Winning Continues

As the drive to win firmly entrenched in the Hilltopper spirit, the Carmelites of JCHS returned to Notre Dame to search for their next coach. The effort found another disciple of the great Frank Leahy. Ernie Zaleski picked up where Cantwell left off and guided the Hilltoppers to winning seasons through his final year in 1958.

The Zaleski led Hilltoppers posted a 24-13-4 record over five seasons. Like Cantwell, Zaleski kept innovation a staple of Hilltopper football and his teams became known for their ability to effectively move the ball through the air. Zaleski's teams went 4-0-1 versus JT and 4-1 versus Lockport, firmly establishing the Hilltoppers as the area's team to beat.

The Hilltoppers were now winning consistently and a man who spent the 1950's in roles as the Hilltopper Frosh-Soph coach, an Assistant Coach at Lewis College and a Varsity Assistant at JCHS was waiting in the wings to become the head coach for the next 27 seasons.

The Quest for Excellence

Through his accomplished multi-sport coaching career, Gordon Gillespie has had a profound impact on many with whom he has associated. The list of his former players and former assistant coaches who have gone on to coaching success at all levels in several sports is both lengthy and impressive. The list of men to whom his inspiration has driven into other successful endeavors in life is limitless. His impact on the Joliet community and High School Football in Illinois cannot be overstated.

There is no praise more genuine than that of a rival. In the October 3, 2003 edition of the *Northwest Indiana Times* on the eve of the game between the Spartans and the Hilltoppers, 27-year veteran Marian Catholic Head Coach Dave Mattio recalled that Gordie Gillespie was the man who drew others' admiration. *"I was a brash punk kid when I took the program over (in 1976), and I didn't know my fanny from a hole in the ground,"* Mattio said. *"I saw this guy on the other sideline, and I viewed his success as a stumbling block to what we wanted to accomplish. But he was more like a mentor to me, by example and demeanor, than anybody I can recall. I enjoyed the toughness his kids played with and his innovations."*

Gillespie's mastery is legendary. Many believe that Gillespie did not coach, but rather taught. In this spirit of reference, like any great teacher, he was an outstanding and committed student of his subject. He studied the greatest and most innovative coaches of the day and of the past. He then took the best of what he had learned from his study and combined it with what he had learned personally playing for, and coaching with, other coaching legends. He had the vision and acumen to combine strategy, preparation, constant innovation and motivation. By hitting this remarkable balance, Gillespie achieved an unparalleled level of success. The coaching profession has many individuals who have mastered one or two of these key ingredients, but a very few have successfully combined them all.

Gillespie and his staff also stressed that his players display dignity, character and sportsmanship. Recognizing that they were leading average 16, 17 & 18 year old boys, Gillespie demanded a commitment to excellence from his assistants. They strived to put players in the best possible position to succeed. His vision and optimism instilled a positive outlook, which is critical to success in any endeavor. Gillespie brought out the best in his assistants and players through encouragement, discipline, unyielding preparation and exhausting repetition. Practice sessions were structured to assure each aspect of the game received proper attention and the allotment of time devoted to each was scheduled down to the minute. Through this, Gillespie subtly communicated to his assistants and players that he was in control of the situation. This sense of confidence spread among them no matter how dire circumstances might be. They always believed their leader had a solution. The result was a spirit of teamwork and unconditional commitment. Gillespie demanded just one simple thing from his players: All out, every play.

His sense for the need for constant innovation allowed him to operate on a plane that appeared to be one step ahead of the game. His game planning was thorough and always included elements of calculated risk. His preparation put pressure on opposing teams requiring them to prepare as tirelessly as he had prepared his coaches and his players.

His running and passing game both evolved through the years. Many long time observers recall how the traditional Power-I Offense became a Power-I/T-formation with motion and later evolved into the Double-Wing. What was remarkable to many was that these changes occurred in the flow of the program and did not represent dramatic changes, simply modifications and constant improvements. Offensive players recall the time devoted to practicing timing, to ensure assignments were executed perfectly. Every player had a specific and meaningful assignment in each play for which each of his steps was scripted. This was choreographed to include the movement and assignment of the other ten players. The skills of opposing players were taken into account. It was rare for Gillespie's staff to ask the undoable from a player; instead extra

preparation and precise adjustments were made to neutralize the strengths of an opponent. Assignments on the same play often changed weekly and even during games. His teams took downfield blocking to a level that was very rarely seen at the High School level, even today. A perfectly executed play fake carried as much importance as the play's spring block. The players and coaches learned that their success was dependant on others. In this lesson of teamwork eleven were truly one. The Hilltoppers have never worn "stars" on their helmets to signify individual achievements and have never had players' names on their jerseys.

Defensively his teams were positioned to stop the run and designed to keep blockers away from the Hilltoppers' best athletes and thereby maximizing those players' abilities to make high impact plays. The defensive philosophy of forcing an opponent to win by completing low percentage passes was another calculated risk that his staff and teams worked diligently to master. As the passing game began to progress at the High School level, Gillespie encouraged his defensive coaches to adopt a defensive scheme that put overwhelming pressure on a passer, challenging the opponent's player to make quick and difficult decisions.

The Gordie Gillespie Era

The development of the Interstate Highway system brought positive changes to the Joliet area. The nation's major East-West Interstate (I-80) started in New York City and extended to San Francisco. It would connect with a major North-South Interstate (I-55) in Joliet. As a result, the area experienced a tremendous industrial expansion and subsequent population boom. The school's enrolment had reached an all-time high of over 900 boys in the early 1960s.

After suffering through a losing record in his first season (2-6-1), Gillespie's Hilltoppers ran off 26 straight winning seasons while the coach compiled a 222-54-7 career record which ranks as one of the highest winning percentages in the history of Illinois High School Football. When long time Chicago Prep Sports writer Taylor Bell selected the *Chicago Sun Times* Illinois High School Football Team of the Century, he chose Gillespie as its Head Coach.

In 1960 the Hilltoppers joined the Suburban Catholic Conference. Conference play, for the first time in twelve (12) years, had the Hilltoppers now playing consistent state rated power Notre Dame of Niles. The Hilltoppers and Dons first faced off in 1957. The Hilltoppers won the 1957 and 1958 contests. Notre Dame first defeated the Hilltoppers in 1959 and the Dons went on to win four-of-ten SCC titles in the 1960s. Old rival Marmion of Aurora was also a conference foe. The Hilltoppers had gone 6-4-1 in eleven (11) games against Marmion played between 1933 and 1959. As SCC foes, the two schools continued to play very competitive games and often played the role of spoiler in each other's seasons. In 1961, the Carmelites opened Carmel High School for boys in Mundelein. The Corsairs of Carmel entered the Suburban Catholic Conference in 1966 and were quickly a formidable foe, finishing in the top third of the conference standings in their first two seasons as another rivalry among the Carmelite Order schools was born. During the 1960s, the Hilltoppers practiced on the field behind Farragut School at Wilcox and Glenwood Avenue.

Gillespie's teams of the early 1960s were teams with powerful ground games and finished in the top half of the Suburban Catholic Conference their first four (4) years in the league finishing 3rd in 1960, 2nd in 1961 and 1962, and 3rd again in 1964. As the early 1960s progressed, Gillespie began to utilize the passing game more aggressively. When his program and personnel developed to where he believed passing could be an effective and reliable part of his offense, he made a dramatic shift. In 1965 the Hilltoppers increased the frequency of the pass by over 60% from the previous season.

In 1965 the Hilltoppers started the season winning seven straight games. In week # 8 they entered the 4th Quarter of the game at Notre Dame trailing 10-0. They rallied to score 19 points for the 19-10 win. The victory was followed by an 18-13 win over Marmion and a season ending 20-7 victory over cross town rival Joliet Township, which had gone 31-3-2 from 1960 through the

1963 season. The Hilltoppers finished at 10-0 and won their first ever Conference Title. During that season, only Marmion scored more than one touchdown. The 10-0 record was also their first unbeaten season in twelve (12) years and was the first of six (6) undefeated seasons under Gillespie's leadership. The Hilltoppers continued to compete with Lockport and JT as non-conference opponents. In this period only two things mattered: Being a Conference Champion and defeating your area rivals.

Due to the growth in the area, two new Joliet Township High Schools were opened in 1964 -- JT West and JT East. Each of the three JT High Schools had enrollments of around 2,000 students. The Hilltoppers began competing with the two new Joliet Township schools on the Football field in 1966. The Hilltoppers then rotated their available non-conference date among the original JT (now called JT Central) and the two new schools.

In 1966, a lone 20-0 loss to local rival Lockport (who finished 8-1) in week # 2 was the only thing that prevented the Hilltoppers from back-to-back perfect seasons as they ended with an 8-1 record. The season's highlights were the 19-7 season opening defeat of JT West in the inaugural game between the two and the 33-0 week # 5 win at rival Marmion. The Hilltoppers shared the conference title with Niles Notre Dame, as the two schools did not play in 1966 and both ended their seasons with 7-0 conference records.

The 1967 squad defeated JT West in the second straight opener 25-6, and then rolled through the season to finish with a perfect 9-0 record. The 20-14 week # 2 victory over Lockport and the 20-19 win versus Wheaton St. Francis were the only games in which opponents got within three scores of the Hilltoppers. The season ended with a third straight SCC Crown and the program's fourth undefeated season.

The Hilltoppers 27-1 record during that three (3) year run was the best window of success the Hilltopper program had ever known and occurred before the IHSA State Playoff system. Gillespie and many others believed these teams were State Championship caliber. Their success became the standard by which all future Hilltopper teams would be measured. The Hilltopper passing game had developed and was effectively used like no other time before. Its proficiency and productivity would not be eclipsed until the 1980s. Most importantly it gave the program a very successful reference point from which to build future offensive strategy.

The Marmion rivalry grew more intense when alum (JCHS '56), former quarterback and former Hilltopper Assistant Coach Matt Laurich took the Head Coaching job at Marmion. Laurich's 1968 Cadets fell behind the Hilltoppers 32-0 at Halftime and roared back to score 34 unanswered points to defeat the Hilltoppers 34-32. The Hilltoppers entered that game 5-1 and had been 32-2 over the previous thirty-four (34) games. Stung by the loss, the Hilltoppers fell the following week to Wheaton St. Francis before bouncing back to defeat Benet in the season's finale, to end at 6-3.

The 1969 season could best be described as a subpar year for the Hilltoppers as the season tally ended at 4-4-1. Wins were logged over Elgin St. Edward, Marmion, Wheaton St. Francis and Benet. Elmhurst Immaculate Conception tied the Hilltoppers 8-8. Conference losses were to Niles Notre Dame and Montini of Lombard. Closer to home, the Hilltoppers dropped non-conference games 13-6 to JT West and a 28-20 to Lockport. The win by JT West marked the Tigers first ever victory over the Hilltoppers and the Lockport triumph was only their fourth in the past 25 years of the nearly annual non-conference contest. In later years, the Illinois High School Football Coaches Association recognized the contributions of JT West' Ray Klootwyk and Lockport's Bill Zimmer by inducting both into its Hall Fame. Klootwyk in 1988 and Zimmer in 1986.

The Illini-8 Years

After the 1969 season, the Hilltoppers left the Suburban Catholic Conference and joined the Illini-8 Conference. In addition to the three (3) Joliet Schools, Lockport, Lockport West (now

Romeoville), Marian Catholic (which had opened in 1958 and began playing Varsity Football in 1960) and Argo of Summit (who the Hilltoppers had played four times in the late 1940s and early 1950s) would be Illini-8 conference opponents. Now playing in conference games against long time local rivals, the opportunity arose to schedule new opponents for non-conference games. Throughout Gillespie's coaching career, regardless of sport, his philosophy relative to competition was simple: Challenge yourself by playing the best competition you could schedule. It was the only way to know how his team measured up as the State Playoffs did not begin until 1974. Gillespie scheduled non-conference games with what were regarded as the best Football programs from some of the largest schools in the state: East Leyden coached by the legendary Jack Leese, with an enrollment of 3,000; Lyons Township with 5,000 students and Downers Grove South with an enrollment of 2,900. Gillespie's Hilltoppers went 2-2 versus Downers Grove South, 1-1 versus Lyons Township and lost their only meeting with East Leyden.

As the Hilltoppers prepared for playing against local schools in conference competition for the first time ever, excitement over the 1970 football season captured the minds of many in the greater Joliet area. The popular opinion openly shared outside of the Hilltopper community was that the week-in-week-out grind of playing squads from the larger, Public High Schools of the area would take its toll and be too much for the Hilltoppers to handle. During this era, the Junior High Schools within the Joliet Public School System (Gompers, Washington, Hufford, and later Dirksen) had Tackle Football as part of their athletic programs. If one were to consider those as feeder programs to the Joliet Township High Schools, the equivalent for the Hilltoppers was the Flag Football league run by the CYO. Regardless, the Hilltoppers looked forward to the opportunity to show how they measured up.

With the state playoff system not yet established, the High School Football season did not begin until mid-September. In the September 18, 1970 Joliet Herald News season kickoff preview, Gillespie responded to a question about if his team was up to the challenges of the new conference by stating "I know all of I-8 coaches, and they are all outstanding coaches. However, we also feel Catholic High doesn't have to take a back seat to anyone and that's the way we are coming in. We are not going to predict anyone else is going to win the I-8 this year because we feel we are going to win it. Those are our hopes and aspirations for 1970."

Gillespie also shared that the Hilltoppers would have a potent, balanced Offense from the beginning, but would need the Defense to evolve throughout the year if they were to achieve their goals. After an opening game to loss Downers Grove South and a week two loss to old Suburban Catholic Conference foe Holy Cross, the Hilltoppers entered Illini-8 Conference play at 0-2. At home for their first ever Illini-8 contest, the Hilltoppers defeated a solid, Mel Deskin coached, Lockport West squad by a score of 16-8. Next up was the Preseason pick to capture the 1970 title and two-time defending Illini-8 Conference Champion, Joliet West. Klootwyk's Tiger program had earned statewide acclaim in 1968 and in 1969 by going 16-1-1 over the span. The game was played at Joliet Memorial Stadium in an event fondly remembered by many in the Joliet area: The Joliet Sports Spectacular. Fans were treated to a double-header where the Hilltoppers battled JT West and the Steelmen of JT Central took on the Kingsmen of JT East. Presale tickets were made available and reserved seating in the 50-yardline area fetched \$10.00 per ticket. The 1970 season was the second year of the event and each year its crowds filled Joliet Memorial Stadium. On the field, the Hilltoppers and Tigers squared off in a tight battle that saw the JT West score 8 points in the 2nd Quarter to lead 8-0 at the Half. The Hilltoppers, the away team in the contest, scored two touchdowns and two 2-point conversions in the 3rd Quarter while holding the Tigers scoreless, to lead 16-8 entering the 4th Quarter. In the last seconds of the game, the Tigers scored a TD and were successful on their 2-point conversion to tie the game at 16-16. The formula for overtime had not yet been implemented and the much-anticipated game ended in a tie.

With the Hilltoppers sitting at 1-2-1, next up was Agro. The Argonauts served as just what the Hilltoppers needed for a week # 5 opponent. The 46-6 Hilltopper victory was followed by a 44-8 romp over Marian Catholic in Chicago Heights. After a 38-14 win over JT East, the Hilltoppers

now faced Lockport in what would amount to the game for the Illini-8 Conference Championship. On their first possession, the Porters displayed their big play potential, but did not cross the goal line. Early in the 2nd Quarter, the Hilltoppers drove and scored on a 1-yard TD run. The 2-point conversion failed and the Hilltoppers went into the Half leading 6-0. The Hilltoppers tightened defensively and on the night, limited the explosive Porters to just 129 yards while piling up 308 yards of their own. The Hilltoppers added two 4th Quarter TDs and one 2-point conversion to close the scoring and post a 20-0 victory. The season's finale was played against JT Central the following week. In what was another away game played at Joliet Memorial Stadium, the Hilltoppers piled up twenty-two (22) 1st Downs while holding JT Central to just five (5) 1st Downs and 165 yards. The final was 26-16 and the Hilltoppers were Illini-8 Champions for the first time. A popular slogan of "First time in, First time win" was attached to the 1970 squad.

During their twelve (12) year participation in the Illini-8, the Hilltoppers posted a 75-7-2 record for a .915 winning percentage. In just two of those years, the Hilltoppers did not end their season as Illini-8 Conference Champions.

Some thirty (35) years later, when a Chicago television station was in Joliet during the preseason to cover the nationally ranked and Illinois' top rated Hilltoppers, the then 79 year-old Gillespie was asked his opinion on whether or not the Hilltoppers could compete with the schools in the larger classes. Gillespie answered the question by referencing what the opinion of people was back in 1970 by saying "I don't care what classification they put us in ... it won't make any difference.... When we were going into the Illini-8 they told us 'you are really going to get your comeuppance now'." After reciting the impressive Hilltopper record over the course of Illini-8 years, he added "Catholic High is going to win no matter what division you play them in. Will they win them all? I can't say that. They are as good as anyone. I don't care what the enrollment figures are, only eleven play out there on D, and only eleven on O, and we can play with anybody. I felt the same way when I was coaching back in the 70s and in the 60s. We were never afraid of anybody because of the type of individual. Joliet is a special place, Joliet kids are special. They are afraid of nothing and so I think that they are ready and prepared to play anybody."

In the 1960s, Professional and Major College programs had moved to the two-platoon system. Gillespie quickly followed this trend and by the 1970s, had become one of the first coaches in Illinois to employ a two-platoon system at the High School level. He rarely deviated from this and only with a few exceptional players did he. By the mid-1970s the team actually traveled to away games on designated buses: One for Offense, one for Defense.

The teams of the early 1970s were strong defensively and explosive offensively logging a 29-6-2 record from 1970-1973. The 1972 squad's 12-6 loss at Mundelein Carmel was the only blemish and the only game the Hilltoppers allowed a team to score twice. Along their march to an 8-1 record, they shut out five (5) opponents and allowed the remaining three (3) to score just once. The 1973 team squad went 9-1, losing only to Romeoville by a 16-6 score. Romeoville and Downers Grove South were the only teams to score twice as the team shut out four (4) opponents and held four (4) others to just one score. The Hilltoppers did not lose a home game from 1971 until the 1979 season.

As the 1970s progressed, Bolingbrook entered the Illini-8 (making a nine team conference with an eight team name) and the Hilltoppers had just one available non-conference opening (week # 8) in 1975 and 1976. The Hilltoppers played 3,200 student Aurora West in those years and won both games.

Argo left the Illini-8 before the 1977 season, giving the Hilltoppers two non-conference games. With the West Aurora series ending, in 1976, Richards and West Chicago were scheduled as the Hilltoppers non-conference opponents for the 1977 and 1978 seasons. The Hilltoppers went 2-0 versus both Richards and West Chicago. The 1978 victory was over the Richards team that finished the year as Class 5A semifinalists. West Chicago had won the inaugural Class 3A State Title in 1974. In keeping with his play the best available opponent philosophy, Gillespie closed

out the 1970s by scheduling Chicago Catholic League power St. Laurence and old Hilltopper rival Mount Carmel. Throughout the 1970s the enrollment at JCHS was in the range of 700-750 boys.

The State Playoffs Are Born

The belief that luck is what occurs when preparation meets opportunity was certainly reinforced at Joliet Catholic High School when the Illinois High School Association (IHSA) concluded that in 1974, the time had arrived to stage a playoff system for Football to crown State Champions. Like any great leader, Gillespie had a clear and concise mission statement: We have one goal and that is to win a State Championship. That became the mission in 1974 and remains the same simple mission today.

The IHSA constructed its playoff system to have five classes of qualifiers, categorized by enrollment (5A-1A). Each of these five (5) classes was to have just sixteen (16) schools participate in a single elimination tournament, for an 80 team total. The IHSA invited all conference champions to participate. After all of the state's Conference Champions were accounted for, the IHSA had a few openings remaining. The IHSA then looked at conference co-champions to fill those spots. If the co-champion had a 9-0 or 8-1 record, they would be considered for the few "at large" berths that were spread among the five classes. This structure placed a premium on every regular season game. Through 1995, the first game of the playoffs was played on the Wednesday after the end of the regular season and the Round #2 games were played on the Saturday three days later. This was changed in an effort to reduce injuries.

Locally many believed that Gillespie had developed one of the best programs in the state, yet his teams received only marginal mention when the purported experts discussed High School football in Illinois. That was about to change. Dramatically.

The 1974 Hilltoppers began the season with losses to Lyons Township and East Leyden. JT West upended the Hilltoppers in week # 3. It marked one of only two Tiger victories in the bitter local rivalry. The Hilltoppers rebounded and ran the table on the remaining Illini-8 opponents, including a 22-16 overtime victory over the Bob Voss coached Marian Catholic Spartans at Bloom High School in Chicago Heights in what many long time observers have called the hardest hitting Hilltopper game in history. Regrettably, several players from both teams were taken away by ambulance. JT West lost two times along their Illini-8 route so the conference season ended with the Hilltoppers atop the conference with 6-1 conference record. The Hilltoppers represented the Illini-8 in the State of Illinois' very first post-season playoffs. The Hilltoppers won the Wednesday afternoon game, before falling in the Round #2 28-20 on a very windy November Saturday in Barrington. Gillespie would have to wait one more year.

State Championship Football

The 1975 Hilltoppers returned an experienced squad, as a large number of under-classmen had seen significant time in the 1974 season. Equipped with what Gillespie later claimed to be his best squad ever, the Hilltoppers marched through the regular season. The closest an opponent got to the Hilltoppers was the 20-0 score of the West Aurora game. The Hilltoppers also avenged the previous season's loss to JT West by accumulating 24 First Downs and 438 yards of offense in defeating the Tigers 40-6.

The Hilltoppers entered the playoffs at 9-0 and rolled in the Wednesday afternoon game. It is rare for a season to pass without having a tight game, and in 1975, that game was Hillcrest. Two of the top rated teams in the state faced off at Joliet Memorial Stadium. In addition to 10,000 fans on hand to watch, reporters from the big three Chicago Papers – Tribune, Sun Times and Daily News – were present; that was a first. Leading 20-14 late in the game, the Hilltoppers found themselves deep in their own territory. In a stunning move, Gillespie elected to take an intentional safety. The two points surrendered proved to be the right decision after the Hilltoppers boomed a free kick from the 20-yard line and the Hilltopper Defense held on for the 20-16 victory.

A few days later the Hilltopper community was in shock. On November 10, 1975, the same day the Edmund Fitzgerald sank in Lake Superior, longtime JCHS geometry teacher, former Athletic Director and all-time biggest Hilltopper fan, Fr. Edwin McGowan suffered a heart attack and passed away. Fr. Edwin had grown to be widely known and loved within the Joliet community. Carmelites from across the country assembled in Joliet for the wake and funeral. For his funeral, the entire student body of 750 boys marched from JCHS across the river to join the assembly of Carmelites, McGowan family members and hundreds of people from the Joliet Community in an incredibly packed St. Mary's Carmelite church for the mass that celebrated the life of a man who spent his life serving the people of Joliet in the name of Christ. Since his departure, each year the Hilltopper Alumni Association awards the Fr. "Paddy" McGowan Athletic Award to an alumnus who has excelled in athletics.

Before another 10,000-spectator crowd and the same Chicago newspaper contingent as the previous week, the heavy-hearted and determined Hilltoppers hosted Naperville Central in Semi-Finals. The 20-8 score suggested a closer game than actually was as the Hilltoppers held substantial advantage in First Downs (22 to 4) and Total Yardage (350 to 32). A Hilltopper team that averaged 64 yards of penalties on the season was flagged for just 28 yards that day. The win secured a spot in the 4A Championship game at Illinois State University's Hancock Stadium. All boys Springfield Griffin Catholic High School was the opponent. The Hilltoppers played a near perfect game on a sunny Saturday before Thanksgiving and scored a 34-14 victory. The game's broadcast on television, when just 5 VHF and 3 UHF channels existed, exposed the state to the Hilltoppers' innovative style of play which utilized shifts and motion in a manner that was rarely used by High School teams of that era. Fittingly, 1975 was the year that the Victory Light became part of the uniform replacing the "C" on the sides of the helmets. .

The victory resulted in the town fathers of Joliet heaping honors on the boys. The Hilltoppers were truly the toast of the town. During the post victory "Welcome Home" ceremony, Principal Rev. Robert Colaresi announced that the school's Victory Light would stay lighted for 7 nights. The Victory Light was first turned on 1933 to celebrate the school's 3rd National Catholic High School Basketball Championship, enabling people from miles around to see a light on the hill that overlooked the 40,000-person town of Joliet. The Victory Light went on to become a tradition and was lighted after every Hilltopper Victory in a major sport until the 1990 merger. While reminiscing about all of the championships previously won by city organizations in music and athletic competitions, the City of Joliet then proudly dubbed itself the City of Champions. This achievement was also a very special source of pride throughout the Carmelite Order.

The 1976 season rolled along in a similar fashion to 1975 until a 14-8 scare at Romeoville. With one of the most productive ground games in Hilltopper history leading the way, the Hilltoppers looked poised to make a run at repeating as Champions. Then on a rainy Saturday afternoon in Chicago Heights, Marian handed the Hilltoppers a 16-6 defeat in week # 7. With the playoffs now just a slim hope, the players were told before their week # 8 West Aurora game, "Now you are playing for pride." The Hilltoppers responded with a 26-8 win and the following week closed out the regular season with a 22-6 victory over Lockport. The team left the Memorial Stadium field after the Lockport victory at 8-1, believing they would be watching the playoffs.

They awoke Saturday morning and learned that JT Central had defeated Marian the night before. This left three (3) teams in a three-way tie for the conference title with identical 7-1 conference records. The Hilltoppers and JT Central had 8-1 season records, while Marian's stood at 7-2. The Illini-8 had to determine a conference representative and submit the name to the IHSA as the Conference Champion. Officials of the Illini-8 met on Saturday. By the IHSA formula, the Hilltoppers and JT Central would get bids. The Hilltoppers were designated the conference representative and JT Central (Coached by JCHS '53 Alum George Legan) was given an "at large" bid. Marian Catholic was out.

The Hilltoppers opened with a 28-14 victory in the rematch with Hillcrest and a Round #2 win over Lake Park. The Semi-Finals had #1 ranked Rockford Boylan traveling to Joliet. In 1974, Boylan Conference rival Rockford East convincingly won the 4A Title. Boylan was the 1975 Class 5A Runner-Up having lost a heart-breaking 14-7 title game to top ranked Deerfield. After the first two years of the Playoffs, common belief was that the Rockford area produced the State's best football. Another 10,000 spectators and the now familiar press core was on hand. In one of the most thrilling games ever played in Joliet, the Hilltoppers marched 82 yards to score a TD and a dramatic two-point conversion in the final minutes of the game to secure an 8-7 win. They were on their way back to Illinois State University to defend the title. In freezing rain on a frozen AstroTurf field and on televisions throughout the state, the Hilltoppers scored with two minutes left and defeated Danville 16-8 to become Class 4A State Champions for the second year in a row.

The importance of the first two championships in the annals of Hilltopper Football is immeasurable. Without a single championship, the thought of defending a title is a moot point. Without a two straight, a three-peat is also moot. Hilltopper Football had made a mark.

The 1977 team scored on a blocked punt to defeat Richards in week # 1, crushed West Chicago 44-8 in week # 2 and then ran the table on the Illini-8. The only conference team to score was Romeoville, who scored 6 points. With a balanced offense that caught fire behind a large line and skilled depth in the backfield, the regular season ended with the Hilltoppers outscoring opponents 278-22. The team was primed for the playoffs scoring 118 points while yielding just 24 points over four playoff games. The team finished 13-0 defeating LaSalle-Peru 30-6 in the 4A Championship game, becoming the first program in the state of Illinois history to win three straight state football titles. Decatur St. Teresa had won back-to-back Class 2A State Championships in 1974 and 1975.

The 1978 squad is remembered as the team that went through the playoffs without giving up a single point. Lost in that look-back is how the team leveraged the experience gained in the 1977 season by the then Juniors, and how deep the team was on both sides of the ball. Only rival Marian Catholic played the Hilltoppers closely in the 14-6 week # 4 Hilltopper victory. An emotional 28-0 week # 6 victory at Lockport highlighted the regular season. Lockport had one of the most talented teams in their history and believed that they were positioned to knock-off the Hilltoppers. With the long rivalry and a handful of Lockport residents on the Hilltopper team, the build up was the biggest local game in years. The Hilltoppers remained focused throughout the week and come game time, mixed timely passing with a sound running game while the Defense held the Porters to under 100 yards of offense.

The postseason saw the Hilltoppers shutout West Chicago during the Wednesday afternoon game in Joliet and Rich Central on the road three days later. On turf befitting Augusta, the Hilltoppers posted a Semi-Final shutout victory at Lake Forest High School. The season ended with the Hilltoppers again defeating LaSalle-Peru 25-0, for their fourth straight Class 4A State Championship. On the season the team outscored opponents 387-38. The Hilltoppers finished rated #2 in the Chicago papers behind 13-0 5A Champion St. Rita. It was the highest ranking a Hilltopper team had ever been given. From week # 8 in 1976 through the 1978 season the Hilltoppers had compiled a 32 game winning streak, which at the time was the fifth longest in state history.

1979 was the year the Hilltoppers began competing against Chicago Catholic League opponents for the first time since 1947. At the time, the Chicago Catholic League was widely regarded as the toughest High School Football conference in the nation. The Hilltoppers lost to a Mike O'Neill coached and eventual 1979 5A Runner Up, St. Laurence in week # 1. Old rival Mount Carmel defeated the Hilltoppers 24-16 in week # 2. The Hilltoppers bounced back in week # 3 defeating JT West 42-8 and won five more conference games. A 19-6 loss to Lockport in week # 7 left the Hilltoppers with a 6-3 record and tied with the Porters as Illini-8 co-champions with both having 6-1 conference records. With Lockport having won the head-to-head match, the Porters went into the 16-team 4A Playoffs as the Illini-8 representative. The two non-conference losses prohibited

the Hilltoppers from receiving an "at large" playoff berth. The team was invited to participate in the Prep Bowl Playoffs, won the Catholic playoff bracket and in a blizzard, lost to Public League Champion Julian an overtime game at Soldier Field.

The 1980 squad went 5-4 and did not make the playoffs. Injuries and many underclassmen playing for the first time combined to take their toll. Losses were to St. Laurence, Lockport, eventual 1980 5A State Champion Mount Carmel, and 4A Semi-Finalist 11-1 Marian Catholic. 1980 was also the year that the IHSA Playoffs expanded to six classes.

A Fitting End to Illini-8 Football

The 1981 season goes down as one of the most memorable journeys in the history of the program. Before the season began it was announced that the 1981 season would be the last for the Illini-8 Conference. The School Board of Joliet Township High School had closed JT East, Romeoville had left the Illini-8 for the SICA, joining Argo (who had left the Illini-8 for the SICA before the 1977 season) and to where the remaining Public Schools of the Illini-8 would go at season's end. As a result, the Hilltoppers had to schedule four (4) non-conference games.

The Hilltoppers opened the season with wins over St. Laurence and defending 5A Champion Mount Carmel. Week # 3 was a victory over Chicago Public League Champion Julian. A trip to Milwaukee and a victory over eventual 1981 Wisconsin State Champion Thomas More followed. The Hilltoppers finished the regular season going 5-0 against the remaining Illini-8 teams and not allowing any of them to score more than once. And so ended the Illini-8 era and with it, the apparent end of rivalries, of which some that had developed into genuinely sportsman like encounters and some that had frankly grown bitter.

The playoffs rolled along with the Hilltoppers handily defeating all opponents. Before 20,000 spectators and an unprecedented media presence, the Hilltoppers faced off against Deerfield for the 5A State Championship at Northwestern University's Dyche Stadium. Deerfield was undefeated and coached by legendary Paul Adams. This match up pitted two of the most successful coaches of the time as Adams' Deerfield program had built a 12-3 playoff record. His teams won the 5A State Title game in 1975 over Rockford Boylan, and finished as 5A Runner Up in 1977 to Jack Leese's East Leyden squad. Adams' 1979 team lost in the 5A Semi-Finals to eventual Runner Up St. Laurence.

The Hilltoppers entered the 4th Quarter trailing 7-0 and mounted a length of field, 4th Quarter march where off-tackle left and off-tackle right were the only two plays called the entire series. These plays produced over 5 yards per play. After scoring to cut the lead to 7-6, another off-tackle play scored the 2-point conversion and gave the Hilltoppers an 8-7 lead. Deerfield had one late drive that ended when a Field Goal attempt went wide, sealing the victory for Gillespie's squad. The Class 5A Championship was the Hilltoppers fifth in the first eight (8) years of the IHSA Playoffs. It was also the program's eighth undefeated season.

The East Suburban Catholic Conference

For the 1982 season the Hilltoppers joined the East Suburban Conference re-joining old foes, Niles Notre Dame, Mundelein Carmel, Holy Cross and Chicago St. Patrick (who the Hilltoppers first played in 1921). St. Laurence and Mount Carmel remained non-conference opponents.

The 1982-1985 years produced some of the most potent teams in Hilltopper history. Gillespie took the passing game to new heights and achieved proficiency via the air surpassing even the great 1960s powerhouse squads. Though none of the four squads made it to the State Finals, they posted a combined 42-5 mark. In three of those four seasons the Hilltoppers entered their last game of the season undefeated.

1982 opened with victories over St. Laurence 10-7 and a 32-7 road win over Mount Carmel. The ESCC opener was a tight 34-30 squeaker on Chicago's Southside over a very talented Marist air attack. The Hilltoppers then rolled through the remaining conference schedule to capture their first ESCC Championship. Mount Carmel avenged their week # 2 loss by shocking the Hilltoppers with a 28-22 surprise in the Round #2 match up in Joliet, spoiling the Hilltoppers' bid to repeat as Class 5A Champions. This was the game made famous by Mount Carmel removing the shoulder pads and jerseys as time ran out to display T-shirts proclaiming that they had beaten Joliet Catholic. Recall what *Sport Illustrated* captured so well in so few words. Legend is that during the post-game Carmelite reception at the JCHS Priory, what could best be described as an impassioned "in-family" disagreement arose in the parlor. Strong willed Carmelite leaders with deep convictions had differing opinions of where the post-game T-Shirt incident fell within the spirit of sportsmanship. Later, it was agreed that it was best for both institutions to end the early season series. 1982 was also the first year of the *USA Today* National Prep Poll and despite the season ending loss, the Hilltoppers were ranked # 19 nationally in the final *USA Today* poll.

1983 opened with another tight victory over St. Laurence, 12-7. As the series had progressed, St. Laurence realized that games between the two teams in Joliet would draw a big gate. With no home field yet built, St. Laurence elected to rent Memorial Stadium to host their home games against the Hilltoppers. This proved a profitable move as 8,000-9,000 turned out each year to witness this season opener pitting two of the most successful programs of the day.

The Hilltoppers replaced Mount Carmel with old foe Marian Catholic. This allowed the Hilltoppers to renew and preserve the rivalry that had begun in 1970 between the two schools that shared a mutual respect. The two schools continued to play as non-conference opponents until Marian was admitted to the ESCC in 1990. When the Illini-8 broke up, Marian was without a conference and the Spartans were forced to play as Independent for eight years.

The Hilltoppers rolled through the ESCC and claimed their second straight conference crown. They then had tight playoff victories at home against Sterling 26-21 and at Peoria Richwoods 28-21. On a cold and rainy November day, an undefeated Hilltopper squad went to Bartonville-Limestone to face a 9-2 host. To this day, old time Hilltopper followers remember that on this day the host team brought an all out, nothing to lose approach to the game. The community had swollen with pride and their players fed off of the excitement. The Hilltoppers caught their best effort and Bartonville-Limestone scored a 31-28 victory. Bartonville finished as 5A Runner Up, losing 21-7 to Glenbard West of Glen Ellyn.

1984 started like 1983 with a tight 8-3 victory over St. Laurence and a 28-14 win over Marian. St. Viator held close before falling 14-0. The Hilltoppers rolled to their fourth straight undefeated regular season and third straight ESCC Championship. The passing game continued to develop, resulting in an opened up running game. The Double Wing offense was here to stay. After two playoff victories, an away loss in the Semi-Finals to Peoria Richwoods prevented the Hilltoppers from returning to a State Championship game. The next week Richwoods won the 5A Title.

1985 began with a 15-14 loss to St. Laurence. From there the Hilltoppers marched to their fourth straight ESCC conference crown. The Offense was clicking, putting up both big scores and big yardage. The season was marked by the Hilltoppers holding four of eight conference opponents scoreless and limiting the other four to just one score each. Two straight playoff victories were followed by a date with undefeated Rich East in Round #3. On a rainy, muddy Saturday afternoon in Park Forest, the 260-95 yard advantage in yardage was not enough. Drive killing turnovers gave the opportunistic Rich East ball club just enough and they held on for a 14-8 win.

Gillespie left the Joliet Catholic program after the 1985 season to construct the brand new football program at the College of St. Francis in Joliet. In the mid-1970s he had moved to St. Francis from Lewis University to build the St. Francis baseball program. St. Francis had recently gone co-ed after being an all girls' college since its 1920 opening. In addition to the many lives he touched, and lessons he taught to so many, Gillespie left the Hilltopper program and community

with an understanding of excellence. His leadership demonstrated to players, parents, coaches, teachers and administrators what focused work and commitment can yield. His impact is immeasurable. Gillespie left the football program with one more gift and it remains a constant and very simply stated goal: To win the next State Championship.

In 2000, several former coaches and supporters joined the large turnout of members from the 1970s State Championship teams to celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the School's first football State Championship. Though these men had spread around the world, they returned home as successful leaders of families, accomplished professionals in the fields of law, education, business, finance, science, medicine and construction. Several among them were also civic leaders and elected officials. After the team captains recounted stories of days gone by through which life long lessons were learned, it was Gillespie's turn to speak. He shared his timely wit with the group one more time and then sincerely expressed how deeply he appreciated the opportunity to coach these men when they were merely boys. He concluded with one lesson to his students, "When I look at you, I know that everyone one of you fellas that played for Joliet Catholic High School were gentlemen then and you are gentlemen now." Once again, everyone there knew what it meant to be a Hilltopper.

Change, Challenges and Expectations

The early 1980s success of the Hilltoppers occurred as the 1980s recession hit the Joliet area particularly hard. Industry and retail establishments were closing. Business was leaving the area and unemployment rates in the area were 25 percent. In 1982, growth was at a standstill as the City of Joliet issued only sixteen (16) building permits for single-family houses. During these very difficult years, the success attained and the never quit effort put forth by the Hilltoppers inspired many in the area. Gillespie's accomplishments during this period were remarkable and the accomplishments of his successors were astonishing.

JCHS alum Jim Boyter was named as successor to Gillespie. Though these were very big shoes to fill, Boyter was familiar with the program and players as he was on the Hilltopper staff when Gillespie's move to the College of St. Francis was announced. Boyter brought an undying love for the game and a high level of enthusiasm.

Boyter faced a challenging initial campaign as the depth was sparse and many untested Juniors took the field to start 1986. The opening game was a baptism by fire for the first-time Head Coach and an inexperienced squad as the season opened with a heartbreaking loss to St. Laurence. The Vikings scored 12 points in the 4th Quarter to log a 24-18 victory. Old rival Marian Catholic defeated the Hilltoppers in week # 2. Boyter's team regained its composure and rebounded to win six of seven ESCC games losing only to St. Patrick. It was the Hilltoppers' first ever ESCC loss. The teams shared the ESCC crown as both finished with 6-1 conference records. After a playoff victory, Marian Catholic was back for a Round #2 playoff game and took another game from the Hilltoppers on their way to the 5A Semi-Finals. The season record was 7-4; however the Junior class and the new coaching staff gained a great deal of experience. 1986 was also the year that the IHSA expanded the number of playoff qualifiers from 16 to 32 teams per class and added another playoff round.

In 1987, the season opened with the Hilltoppers defeating St. Laurence. After a weird series of events late in the game, Marian Catholic eked out a 15-14 victory. A close win over Carmel and a 13-6 loss to St. Patrick had the Hilltoppers at 2-2 for the second straight year. The early season struggles paid off as the team jelled and ran off five straight conference victories finishing the conference at 6-1. They again shared the ESCC championship with St. Patrick.

With their mettle tested early in the year, the Hilltoppers then blew through the 5A playoffs outscoring their first three opponents 91-21. They then faced a very strong Peoria Richwoods team for the 5A Championship. Richwoods had bounced the Hilltoppers from the playoffs in 1984. After giving up 13 points in the 1st Quarter, the Hilltoppers rallied to score 7 points in the

3rd Quarter and scored on a TD pass to tie the game with 2 minutes remaining. The successful PAT and defensive stand gave the Hilltoppers a 14-13 victory and the championship with a season record of 12-2. Richwoods was a state power having compiled a 70-6 record from 1983-1989. Richwoods won the 5A Championships in both 1985 and 1988.

The Hilltoppers followed up the 1987 5A Championship season with a tough 1988. Just as in the previous two seasons, non-conference foe Marian Catholic and ESCC member St. Patrick handed the Hilltoppers regular season defeats. In week # 8 Marist defeated the Hilltoppers for the first time ever. Strangely, the ESCC season ended with four (4) teams tied for the conference title with 5-2 conference marks. The Hilltoppers won their Round #1 playoff game before losing to a Wheaton Central/South team that was on the rise. The season ended at 7-4. Under Boyter's three-year leadership the Hilltoppers posted a 26-10 record and won a Class 5A State Championship.

The Stone Age

Bob Stone, who had first come to Joliet Catholic from Wilmington High school in the early 1980s as a lower level coach under Gillespie, had been serving as the Varsity Offensive Line coach when Boyter resigned as Head Coach after the 1988 season. Stone was named as his replacement in what would be the Hilltoppers' last season as Joliet Catholic High School. The economic realities of the 1980s recession and its impact on the Joliet area had taken its toll and Joliet Catholic High School was not immune from its devastation. In 1989 the enrollment had dipped to the low 500s and the survival of the 71 year-old institution was in question.

Regardless, the Stone inspired Hilltoppers took the field in 1989 with a strong desire to carry on the traditions they had grown to embrace. An opening win over St. Laurence and a spirited win over Marian Catholic (after four consecutive losses to the Spartans) had the Hilltoppers at 2-0 for the first time since 1984. The Hilltoppers only blemish on the ESCC season was a 7-6 loss in Niles to a strong Notre Dame team, that year's 5A Runner Up to Mount Carmel. The ESCC season ended with the Hilltoppers alone atop the conference with a 6-1 conference record. The Hilltoppers defeated Oswego in the Wednesday afternoon Round #1 playoff game.

For Saturday afternoon's opponent, the Hilltoppers then faced neighboring Providence for the first time in history. JCHS graduate ('62) Matt Senffner, who had led the Celtics to a 4A Title in 1987 and to Round #3 of the 1988 4A Playoffs --- where they lost to eventual State Champion Richards --- coached Providence. In the early 1960s, Senffner joined Hilltopper alums Tom Dedin (JCHS '58) and Pat Sullivan (JCHS '61) in developing the Celtics boys' athletic programs following Providence's transformation from an all girls to a co-ed institution. Senffner was the only Providence Football Head Coach from the program's inception through his early 2006 retirement. Both teams were 9-1 and the Hilltoppers outlasted the Celtics 15-0 in New Lenox. Next up was a Saturday evening home game against the defending State Champion Richards. The Bulldogs proved too strong as the Hilltoppers went down to defeat 34-12. Richards went on to win the 4A Championship and was the # 12 team in the final *USA Today* national poll. Stone's first year was an impressive 10-2 season.

In early 1990 it was announced that Joliet Catholic High School would be merging with St. Francis Academy. Economics and the community's desire to maintain a Catholic High School in the City of Joliet made this merger of institutions the only viable option. For decades the two schools served as sister schools. Families sent the daughters to SFA and their sons to JCHS. The two school communities were nearly one everywhere except the classroom and even there certain classes were co-educational. The two institutions had been partners in community events and fundraising campaigns for years. Many well-intentioned opinions, both internal and external to the existing school communities were shared about how the make-up, mission and identity of the "new school" should be crafted. When the conclusion was drawn to "start a new" and establish new traditions, many in both communities were perplexed. Upon announcement that the new school colors would be Blue and Silver and the nickname of "Royals" would be adopted

the Hilltoppers spoke up. The students of JCHS staged a sit-in in protest which resulted in further consideration, from which came a new decision to keep the former school nicknames, Hilltoppers for the boys and Angels for the girls and to combine existing school colors.

Stone's team entered the 1990 season representing a new school community, with the school in a new location and a great deal of change and misunderstanding in the air. Stone and his staff did an outstanding job of keeping the team focused and ran through the regular season undefeated, with the 16-6 victory over old rival and newly added to the ESCC, Marian Catholic as the regular season's closest game. The Hilltoppers avenged the previous season's loss to Notre Dame posting a 49-21 victory and captured another ESCC Championship.

The playoffs opened with unusual anticipation. The Hilltoppers Round #1 foe was Morris. Morris coach Dan Darlington had developed a strong program leading the Redskins to two State Championships and two Runner Up finishes, the most recent of which happened the season before in an overtime loss to powerful Richards. Morris had earned respect and entered the game at Joliet Memorial Stadium as the top rated team in every poll in Illinois and the # 4 ranked team in the *USA Today* national poll. With so many changes in the past six months, the Hilltopper team was searching for answers. Stone's pre-game decision to forego warm ups and simply have his team pace their own sideline for their warm ups sent a message to his team and the Hilltopper faithful that he knew his team was ready to defend what it considered its honor. The Hilltoppers took the field and pounded the ball up and down the field accumulating 22 first downs in a 36-10 victory. The school may have moved, but old-time Hilltopper Football had not gone away.

The Hilltoppers moved through the playoffs and into the 4A Championship game. Behind the Hilltoppers, championship opponent Geneseo had established the next most successful program in the history of the IHSA Playoffs. Before leaving to become the Head Coach at Augustana College, Bob Reade logged a 147-19-4 record in seventeen (17) years at Geneseo. Reade's squads won three-straight 3A Championships in 1976, 1977 and 1978. In sixteen (16) years at Augustana, Reade posted a 146-21-1 record and his teams won four straight NCAA Division III National Titles from 1983 through 1986. Reade's successors at Geneseo maintained the program's winning tradition finishing as 4A Runner Up in 1981 and 4A Champion in 1982. Geneseo entered the game with a 33-11 playoff record and a very proud tradition.

The score sea-sawed throughout the game. Geneseo scored late in the game to cut the Hilltopper lead to 21-20. The Geneseo program and coach Vic Boblett earned the everlasting respect of the Hilltopper community when they elected to go for the win via a two-point conversion. The Hilltopper Defense answered with a shirt-grabbing tackle that took the Maple Leaf ball carrier to the ground a foot short of the goal line. The Hilltoppers held on and captured their record seventh State Title and the program's ninth undefeated season.

The Mount Carmel Rivalry is Renewed

The Hilltoppers opened the 1991 season against old rival Mount Carmel, playing the Caravan for the first time in eight (8) years. This Gately Stadium game was the first of thirteen (13) games between the two schools over the next eleven years. Mount Carmel had won three straight State Championships (two in 5A and one in 6A) and had finished the 1990 season ranked # 7 in the final *USA Today* national poll. With just over 8 minutes remaining, the Hilltoppers rallied from a 24-6 deficit to score 18 unanswered points and force overtime. Both teams scored 7 points in the first overtime forcing a second overtime. The Hilltopper Defense held and the Offense punched in a 7 yard run for the victory. Mount Carmel rebounded and won the 1991 Class 5A State Championship.

The big win over Mount Carmel was followed by a tight 28-23 victory over Marian Catholic. The Hilltoppers then ran the table on the ESCC holding five conference opponents to just one score each. They also shut out Notre Dame and Holy Cross to finish the regular season 9-0. After two

playoff wins, the Hilltoppers managed to score a 14-13 win over Bradley-Bourbonnais. They then faced Wheaton Central/South in the Class 5A Semi-Finals. Wheaton had finished the previous year as 5A Runner up to Mount Carmel. Flooding forced the game to be moved from Wheaton's Red Grange Field to the field at Wheaton College. The Tigers shut down the Hilltopper ground game, handing the Hilltoppers a season ending 28-6 loss, ending a 26 game winning streak.

The 1992 season opened with four-time defending State Champion Mount Carmel posting a 27-6 victory over the Hilltoppers in Joliet. The inexperienced Hilltopper team matured as the season progressed as a strong Defense carried the team while the Offense gained experience and confidence with each passing week. The Hilltoppers ended the regular season 8-1, posting four (4) shut outs along the way. After two more shut outs in the first two rounds of the playoffs, the Hilltoppers stopped a very talented Bloomington team in Round #3.

The football gods set up a rematch with Mount Carmel in the Semi-Final game in Joliet. The Memorial Stadium crowd of 10,000 saw the Hilltoppers' stiff Defense bottle up the explosive Mount Carmel Offense. The Caravan was held to 3 points through the first three (3) Quarters. The Hilltoppers scored a TD on a long run early in the 3rd Quarter and took a 7-3 lead. After continuing to get big 3rd Down stops against the Caravan, the Hilltoppers mounted a drive in the 4th Quarter and ran in an 8 yard TD with just under 3 minutes remaining. With the score 13-3, the Mount Carmel Offense struck quickly with a TD and two-point conversion to cut the lead to 13-11. The Hilltoppers were able to cleanly field the ensuing kickoff and run out the clock for the victory. That day the Hilltopper Offense ran the ball on 46 of 49 plays. This win prevented Mount Carmel and coach Frank Lenti from becoming the first team in state history to win five (5) straight state titles. The two Carmelite schools were then tied with each school having won four in a row.

In what was voted to be the most exciting Championship game of the first 25 years of the Playoffs, the Hilltoppers took on Wheaton South. This match up pitted two of the best ground games in the state and after spotting Wheaton 14 1st Quarter points, the Hilltoppers posted 13 points in the 2nd Quarter while holding the Tigers to a 2nd Quarter Field Goal for a 17-13 Wheaton lead at the Half. In the 2nd Half the game sea-sawed and the Hilltoppers took the lead 27-24 after a long TD run and the PAT. Wheaton tied the game with a late 4th Quarter Field Goal to force overtime. Both teams traded Touchdowns and PATs in the first overtime forcing a second overtime. In the second overtime Wheaton stopped the Hilltoppers and scored on a TD run to win this thriller 40-34. This was the first time in eight Championship appearances that Hilltoppers did not win. The team showed as much heart as any championship team, having given it their all. No one could ask for more. Wheaton South was the # 8 team in the final *USA Today* national poll.

In 1993 a teachers' strike hit the Chicago Public Schools and as a result the City's High School Football facilities were closed. This included Gately Stadium, which Mount Carmel rented for Caravan home games. Mount Carmel rented Joliet Memorial Stadium for the week # 1 game.

Mount Carmel played host, wore brown jerseys and used the West sideline and bleachers. The Hilltoppers were dressed in their white uniforms and used the visitors' sideline and bleachers on the East side of the field. The Caravan jumped out to 17-7 Halftime lead. In the 3rd Quarter the Hilltoppers scored on a long TD and cut the lead to 17-13, but missed the PAT. Mount Carmel scored early in the 4th Quarter and converted the PAT to take what looked to be a commanding 24-13 lead. The Hilltoppers scored on a long pass play with under 4 minutes left to cut the lead to 24-19. A two-point conversion attempt failed. The Hilltopper Defense held the Caravan on the next series. Taking possession deep in their own territory with under a minute remaining, the Hilltoppers completed a number passes and then scored on 32-yard pass with just 21 seconds remaining. A successful two-point conversion made the game 27-24. The Hilltopper Defense held to seal the dramatic victory.

The next week defending Class 6A Champion Naperville North, led by Head Coach and JCHS grad Larry McKeon, came to Joliet. McKeon was a star member of the mid-1960s Hilltopper

powerhouse that went 27-1 over three years. After playing at the University of Illinois, McKeon returned to JCHS as teacher and coach. Initially coaching on the lower levels under Gillespie, he moved to a Varsity Assistant during the 1975, 1976 and 1977 State Championship years. McKeon left JCHS in 1978 to become Head Coach at Plainfield High School where he took the Wildcats to the 1981 IHSA Playoffs. A year later, he left Plainfield to become the Head Coach and program architect at Naperville North.

Now in week # 2, early in the game McKeon's team took away any sense of momentum the Hilltoppers may have carried with them from the emotional opening win over Mount Carmel. By utilizing their team speed, precise execution and balanced attack, Naperville North built a 28-0 Halftime lead. The game ended 34-8.

The Hilltoppers of 1993 lost 28-21 in week # 3 to the Marian Catholic. Marian went undefeated, won the Class 4A State Championship and was the # 13 team in the final *USA Today* national poll. The Hilltoppers suffered one more regular season loss, falling at Marist 23-18. For the first time since joining the ESCC in 1982, the Hilltoppers did not finish conference play as Champions or Co-Champions.

The playoff bracket had the Hilltoppers hosting old Illini-8 foe Bolingbrook in Round #1. The Hilltoppers nearly outlasted a remarkably quick Raiders team, but a last second Field Goal attempt sailed wide of the Memorial Stadium upright by a mere 2 inches. This was the first Bolingbrook victory over the Hilltoppers in nine games. The Raiders finished 5A Runner Up to Belvedere. The 6-4 record yielded the fewest number of victories since the Hilltoppers' 5-4 1980 campaign.

The 1994 season started as exciting as the 1993 season as the Hilltoppers hosted Mount Carmel. The Caravan brought a passing attack and celebrated kicking game to Joliet. Mount Carmel opened the scoring with a 33 yard TD pass. The Hilltoppers answered with a sustained drive aided by two long runs, the last being a 33 yard TD run and the 1st quarter ended at 7-7. A Caravan FG and 3 yard Hilltopper TD run at the close of the 1st half had the score at JCA 14- MC 10. The 3rd quarter looked to be scoreless until Mount Carmel kicked FG to close the score to 14-13. The exciting 4th quarter saw the Caravan take the lead on a 19-14 on a 54 yard TD pass. The two point conversion failed. The Hilltoppers went to work and marched downfield, only to have their hopes dashed with 0:34 remaining as the winning TD pass was intercepted by Mount Carmel at the 3 yard line. With the Caravan pinned on their own 3-yard line, it was feared that "taking a knee" could result in a Safety. As a result, Mount Carmel elected to run the ball to kill the clock. The determined Hilltopper Defenders hit hard, stripped the ball and recovered the fumble on the 1-yard line. On the next play the Hilltoppers punched in a one yard TD run to take the lead with 14 seconds left and win this craziest of games in the storied rivalry. In *The Herald News Saturday August 27, 1994* edition, the Hilltopper who recovered the fumble was quoted: "*That's Hilltopper football ... you never say die and something good may happen.*"

A trip to Naperville in week # 2 was reminiscent of the previous year with the host Huskies posting a 35-7 victory. McKeon's squad went on to finish the season as 6A Runner Up with a 12-2 record. The Hilltoppers recovered and went 6-1 in conference play, losing to Marian Catholic for the second year in a row. After handling Lake Zurich in Round #1 of the playoffs, the Hilltoppers fell to Bishop McNamara in Kankakee. It was the first meeting of the schools since 1937 when Bishop McNamara was named Kankakee St. Patrick.

1995 opened with the Hilltoppers first trip Gately Stadium since the 1991 overtime thriller. The Hilltoppers held Mount Carmel to under 100 yards rushing and moved the ball on the ground between the 20s. It was not enough as the Caravan threw effectively for over 200 yards in 11 of 15 passing and posted a 29-7 win. McKeon's Naperville North team posted a 35-14 win in week # 2 and the Hilltoppers entered conference play at 0-2.

The Hilltopper Defense tightened up. The team ran through the conference undefeated. The 16 points scored by St. Viator marked the only conference opponent to score more than once. The ESCC season was not without excitement and no game more so than the come from behind victory over Marian Catholic in Joliet. The Spartans scored in the 2nd Quarter and took a 7-0 lead into the Half. The 2nd Half was a stalemate until the Hilltoppers mounted a 4th Quarter drive and scored on a 15-yard TD run. The Hilltoppers successful two-point conversion put them ahead 8-7 and the Defense came through to deliver victory. The playoffs opened with a 7-6 win at home over the same Carmel team the Hilltoppers had defeated 14-6 on the same field three weeks before. The season ended a week later in Oak Lawn when an undefeated Richards team beat the Hilltoppers 16-7.

The school was working to chart its course for the future through very difficult times. Enrollment had declined each year since the merger and was approaching the 600 student number. The explosion of growth had begun on Joliet's Westside and in Plainfield and the future looked promising. During the 1990s, Fenwick, Loyola Academy and St. Viator also went co-ed.

The schools of the ESCC and the Chicago Catholic League decided to form a Metropolitan Area Super Conference named the Chicago Metro Catholic Conference commonly referred to as the CMC. The plan was to group the twenty-four (24) member schools into four (4) mini-conferences given names of colors -- CMC Blue, CMC White, CMC Green and CMC Red -- of six (6) teams each. Each team would play their five (5) other mini-conference teams as "conference" games and three (3) "crossover games" against teams from the other mini-conferences. The teams were grouped by a combination of proximity, traditional rivalries and strength of program. The model called for reorganization every two years. The two most successful teams of each mini-conference would move up to the next highest division while the weakest performing members of each mini-conference would be moved down a division.

For the 1996 The Hilltoppers and fellow ESCC St. Patrick were put into the Metro White Division along with Providence, DeLaSalle, Bishop McNamara, Fenwick and St. Laurence. Their crossover games were against Benet, St. Francis deSales and Notre Dame. This commitment left the teams with only one non-conference game, in week # 1. The Hilltoppers and Mount Carmel agreed to keep each other and their rivalry alive for the next two years. The CMC commitment required the Hilltoppers to drop their week # 2 Naperville North game.

Undying Spirit

The season opened with 22-7 loss to Mount Carmel in a game dominated by the Caravan. Wins over Benet and DeLaSalle set the stage for the second ever meeting between the Hilltoppers and neighboring Providence. Providence had won two straight State Titles (5A in 1994 and 4A in 1995) and had finished the 1995 season the # 9 team in the final *USA Today* national poll. The Celtics were owners of a 32 game winning streak.

In front of 10,000 spectators at Joliet Memorial Stadium, the Celtics jumped out to a quick 21-0 lead and coasted to a 35-20 victory. A listless victory over St. Francis deSales was followed by a disappointing 6-0 loss to St. Patrick in Chicago. This marked the first time the Hilltoppers had been shutout since a 14-0 loss to Marian Catholic in 1986. It was only the fourth time the Hilltoppers had been shut out since 1966. The team was 3-3 and many wondered where this season would wind up.

With a belief in themselves being nearly all that was left, the Hilltoppers went back to the program's Power-I roots. They then ran off three straight conference games scoring 37, 36 and 46 points. The Hilltoppers entered the playoffs at 6-3 and marched through Chicago Harper 42-0 and East St. Louis 46-8.

In their 27-17 Quarterfinal victory over St. Rita at Cronin Field in Chicago, the Hilltoppers ran the ball on 53 of 54 plays. St. Rita received the opening kickoff and drove to the Hilltopper 2-yard

line. The Hilltopper Defense held and the Mustangs settled for a 20-yard field goal. Early in the 2nd Quarter, the Hilltoppers mounted a 12-play drive capped by a 6-yard TD run that put them up 7-3. St. Rita responded through the air and moved 63-yards on 6 plays to the Hilltopper 1-yard line. The Mustangs punched in the 7th play of the drive on to take the lead 10-7. After recovering a St. Rita fumble at the Mustang 4-yard line, the Hilltoppers scored on a TD run and led 14-10 at the Half. On the day, St. Rita was held to just 53 yards rushing, which forced the Mustangs to attempt 31 passes. St. Rita chose to send 5 receivers out on most routes, the Hilltoppers responded with heavy pressure that battered the tough, unprotected Mustang QB throughout the afternoon. The pressure also drew several holding penalties against the hosts. On the first possession of the 3rd Quarter, the Hilltoppers broke a 78-yard TD run but missed the PAT and the score stood at 20-10. The Hilltoppers opened the 4th Quarter with a 12-yard TD run to extend their lead to 27-10. St. Rita logged its second TD later in the 4th Quarter to close the scoring.

The following Saturday afternoon the Hilltoppers hosted Rockton. 8,500 people were on hand for the Semi-Final match up during which the Hilltoppers picked up 24 1st Downs in the 41-20 victory. A rematch versus Mount Carmel was set for the 5A State Championship game.

The crowd at Illinois State University's Hancock Stadium saw a defensive struggle most of the way. Mount Carmel led 7-6 at Halftime and though the yardage statistics ended near even, Mount Carmel scored 7 points in the 3rd Quarter and put up a 4th Quarter Field Goal to win the State Title 17-6. It was a remarkable run for a Hilltopper team many had given up for dead after week # 6. Mount Carmel was the # 6 team and Providence the # 11 team in the final *USA Today* national poll.

Bob Stone resigned as Hilltopper coach and Athletic Director in early 1997 after accepting the dual role of Athletic Director and Head Football Coach roles at West Chicago High School. Stone left with a record of 80-19 over eight seasons for a .808 winning percentage. It is often said that a team takes on the personality of its coach. That was true during Stone's tenure as his even keel personality was reflected in the calm, determined approach with which his teams carried themselves. Like Stone, his teams did not lose their composure in tight, pressure packed games. Twenty-one (21) of Stone's ninety-nine (99) games as Head Coach were decided by fewer than one score and in those games Stone's Hilltopper squads were an amazing 15-6.

Coach Sharp Returns Home

In early 1997 Joliet Catholic Academy hired former coach Gordie Gillespie as a consultant to assist the Administration in developing a comprehensive model to revamp both the girls and boys Athletic Departments. The horizon showed promise as the number of people under 18 years old living in Joliet had increased by over 10,000 children between 1990 and 2000. According to Census Bureau figures, it grew from 21,153 to 31,287.

There was one man who many in the Joliet Catholic Academy community viewed as the ideal leader to do the job. This man was a JCHS '74 graduate. After college he had returned to JCHS as a teacher and followed Gillespie to the College of St. Francis. He served as Gillespie's Offensive Coordinator until accepting the Head Coaching position at Minooka High School in 1993. In four short years at Minooka, he had revived the program. He took the Indians to the playoffs in his final three seasons. His 1996 squad made it to the 4A Semi-Finals where they lost to undefeated and eventual State Champion Providence.

When Joliet Catholic Academy and his mentor Gillespie asked Dan Sharp to return home to serve as Head Football Coach and Athletic Director, Sharp gave the offer considerable thought. His conclusion was to accept the position and serve where he believed he was supposed to be.

Sharp quickly assessed the program and made a commitment to develop the program from the lower levels up through the Varsity. Low enrollment numbers in the school led to smaller numbers of players. The 1996 Freshmen roster had just 28 players. Like Dwyer in 1950, Sharp

installed the same offensive and defensive schemes on all levels. Sharp also evaluated his younger athletes and moved several into positions that would make the most productive use of their talent and skills. As the years passed and these players progressed to the Varsity, several received scholarships to major programs across the nation. Sharp's commitment to detail, learned at Gillespie's side, was channeled into shoring up the lower levels and in so doing, dramatically changed the course of life for several boys. These players would be instrumental in repositioning the Hilltoppers as a respected statewide power and in leading the program to become considered one of the most prominent in the nation.

Sharp's initial 1997 squad had a rough start. After a 45-0 loss to Mount Carmel in week # 1 the team lost three of their next four. At 1-3, Sharp kept his small roster team focused. They bounced back to win four of their next five, losing only to Fenwick by a 24-15 score. With a 5-4 mark the Hilltoppers were invited to participate in the Prep Bowl playoffs. The Hilltoppers lost a tight 17-14 game to St. Rita and ended the season at 5-5.

Sharp's second squad (1998) had an unusual amount of sophomores playing on the Varsity level. Sharp employed Gillespie's old unspoken but widely known rule: At the Varsity level the best players play. His squad opened with a strong first half against Mount Carmel and held a 10-7 Halftime lead. As the game wore on, the Caravan pulled away and scored two unanswered TDs to win 21-10. This performance instilled a belief in the young team that they could compete with anyone. Mount Carmel went on to an undefeated season and captured the 5A State Championship, earning the Caravan their seventh State Title, tying the Hilltoppers for most State Championships.

The Hilltoppers rolled off two wins and then lost a tight 12-6 game to a McNamara team that went 13-1 and suffered its only loss in the 4A State Championship game. The Hilltoppers finished the regular season at 7-2 and scored a Round #1 playoff victory over Tinley Park. Tinley Park was the first school the Hilltoppers ever played in postseason competition in the Wednesday afternoon opening game of the 1974 playoffs. Next was old rival and sometimes Hilltopper nemesis Marmion. The Hilltoppers had not played Marmion since 1969. To old timers this was 1968 all over again as the Hilltoppers lost 13-7. Sharp's team accepted the invitation to enter the Prep Bowl playoffs and his team won two games to capture the Catholic Playoff Championship. They then played a game against the Public Champion Hubbard at Soldier Field. Though the team lost to Hubbard 28-16 in the Prep Bowl Championship, the postseason experience helped the young Hilltoppers experience a type of playoff run.

An Amazing Run

When the 1999 Hilltoppers took the field for pre-season practice, Sharp believed he may have developed something special. An old familiar face was around in the 1999 season as Gillespie had agreed to return and serve as Sharp's Offensive Coordinator. The Hilltoppers opened the season with a stunning and inspired 10-7 victory over defending 5A Champion Mount Carmel at Gately Stadium. The hard-hitting Hilltoppers held the Caravan to just 5 first downs and 105 total yards. After two convincing wins, the Hilltoppers defeated 1998 4A Runner Up McNamara 25-14. The Hilltoppers rolled through the remaining regular season games. The first two rounds of the playoffs saw big victories over Taylorville and Fox lake Grant as well as a vibrant, rekindled spirit within the Hilltopper community.

Morris was next on the schedule. The Saturday afternoon game at Joliet Memorial Stadium was witnessed by 10,000 spectators who saw the Hilltoppers limit the Redskins to 37 yards on the ground. A 21-yard Field Goal as time expired gave the Hilltoppers a 16-7 lead at the Half. Morris scored in the 4th Quarter to cut tighten the game at 16-14. Morris mounted one last drive and moved to the Hilltopper 10 yard line. On 3rd and Goal from the 10, Morris attempted to beat the Hilltoppers to the corner on a sweep left only to have a LB break through throw the ball carrier for a loss forcing the 4th Down Field Goal attempt to be tried from the left hash mark. Everyone in the crowd heard the kicker's foot hit the ball as dead silence had swept through the stadium as

the ball was snapped. The Hilltopper sidelines and stands erupted with elation as the kick sailed wide and the Hilltopper prevailed. In the following week's Semi-Final game versus Geneseo, the Hilltoppers jumped to a 21-0 1st Quarter lead. The teams exchanged 2nd Quarter TDs and the score stood at 28-7 at the Half. The Maple Leafs scored a 4th Quarter TD to close the gap to 28-14 where it ended with Hilltoppers victorious. In the Championship game in The University of Illinois' Memorial Stadium, the Hilltoppers delivered a convincing, dominating 48-13 Championship victory over Metamora. A few moments after the Hilltoppers accepted the 4A Championship trophy, Mount Carmel walked onto the Stadium's Zupke Field and won the 5A Championship. The week # 1 loss to Hilltoppers was their only blemish. The Hilltoppers were ranked # 10 in the final *USA Today* national poll. The season also marked the Hilltoppers tenth undefeated season.

After a reshuffling of the CMC, the Hilltoppers were scheduled to play Mount Carmel in week # 2 of the 2000 season as a crossover game. This left an open date for week # 1. Despite months of searching and hundreds of calls to teams with week # 1 openings, they were unable to get a game. The Hilltoppers were finally able to schedule an away game against Lawrenceville, IN from suburban Indianapolis. The Hilltoppers had not played in Indiana since their days as an Independent in the 1950s.

After a convincing 47-21 win on the road, the Hilltoppers returned home to host Mount Carmel in week # 2. The Caravan had eyes on avenging their previous season's opening game loss. The Hilltoppers had other plans and jumped to a 22-8 Halftime lead. In the 3rd Quarter the Caravan cut the lead to 22-20. With less than 5 minutes remaining in the game, the Hilltoppers closed out the scoring on an 18-yard TD pass. The Hilltoppers then defeated St. Patrick, Marian Catholic, McNamara, Notre Dame, Benet, Marist and Carmel to close out the regular season undefeated.

After handily defeating Normal Community West and Taylorville, the Hilltoppers hosted a very skilled Springfield Sacred Heart-Griffin. Though the Hilltoppers posted a 52-36 win, Springfield's explosive Offense kept the outcome in doubt until the Hilltoppers scored the final TD of the game with just under 3 minutes remaining. A trip to Pontiac on a blistery cold November day had all the makings of an upset. Old timers reflected back to Bartonville-Limestone in 1983 where the entire town was sky high and their team played a very focused game to defeat the Hilltoppers. Upon driving into Pontiac one noticed that every business and every home was decorated to support their boys. This was obviously not being viewed as just another football game by the town. The Hilltoppers took everything thrown at them. By completing key passes and breaking long runs at critical times to score 14 points in the 4th Quarter, the Hilltoppers escaped with a 28-20 victory.

A rematch with Metamora in the 4A Championship saw the Hilltoppers contain a dangerous and talented team, pulling away in the 4th Quarter to post 27-14 win and claim the Hilltoppers record setting ninth State Title. It was also the program's eleventh undefeated season. The Hilltoppers were ranked # 11th in the final *USA Today* national poll.

The Hilltoppers entered the 2001 season as Illinois' top ranked team and with a *USA Today* Top 10 Preseason national ranking. Just as the year before, the Hilltoppers were unable to schedule a non-conference in-state opponent for their season opener. After months of phone calls around the country and near deals, the Hilltoppers scheduled fellow CMC member DeLaSalle who had also been unable to schedule a non-conference opponent. The Hilltoppers opened the season on a warm Saturday afternoon in the shadows of Comiskey Park and the elevated tracks on Chicago's Southside, and scored a convincing 35-0 victory over the Meteors.

Mount Carmel was the week #2 opponent at an over sold, sold out Gately Stadium. Because of CMC readjusting scheduled for year's end, this would be the last game between the Carmelite schools for the foreseeable future. Many spectators who had tickets were turned away at the gate that day as the stadium was filled to capacity 20 minutes before kickoff. The Caravan jumped out to an early lead and had bottled up the Hilltopper offense. The Caravan's dominance continued and they built 28-0 lead, shocking all in the crowd. After the "Overrated" chants started

from the home bleachers, the Hilltoppers scored 21 unanswered points within a 6 minute span at the end of the 3rd and beginning of the 4th Quarter to cut the lead to 28-21. Half of the crowd became concerned that a sleeping giant had awakened while the other half hoped it had. At this point genuine cheering returned from both sides and the Caravan scored on a TD run to close out the scoring and post a 35-21 win and snap the Hilltoppers' 29 game winning streak. As disappointing as the loss was, the monkey was now off the back.

The Hilltoppers recovered and ran the table for the remaining eight (8) games but not without escaping a Carmel scare in a 28-25 home victory. The Hilltoppers won their first two playoff games by a combined score of 108-7. Then came Riverside-Brookfield.

In what has gone down as one of the most memorable games in the history of Illinois High School Football, the Hilltoppers headed up to "The Zoo" to play against coach Otto Zeeman's Bulldogs. Over the years, Zeeman had developed and perfected a 5-wide Offense in which all eligible receivers were split and the quarterback was the lone man in the backfield aligned in a shotgun formation. The year before, Zeeman had said that he had designed this Offense for the specific purpose of defeating Joliet Catholic. His rationale was that his team would always have difficulty competing against the huge linemen produced by Joliet Catholic. His belief was if he could make the game a match of skill position players, his team would have a fighting chance. He was almost right, but his team fell one yard short.

The Hilltoppers ran up and down the field at will, and strangely enough Zeeman's passing attack did the same. The Hilltoppers ran 85 rushing plays for 538 yards and attempted just one pass. Riverside-Brookfield attempted 50 passes and completed 24 for 575 yards and had no passes intercepted. Riverside-Brookfield's nine rushing attempts yielded 23 yards and were mostly a result of flushing the quarterback with a few attempted quarterback draws. It was as if the 9,000 people who had jammed into the Suburban High School Football Stadium were witnessing two separate events occurring on the same field: In one direction moved an endless parade of concrete trucks and in the other direction a gymnastics display suited for a circus big top and yet somehow the two were interrelated. The game ended with the Hilltoppers batting down a 1-yard pass at the goal line as time expired for a 56-50 win.

The win over Riverside-Brookfield was followed by a Semi-Final home victory in front of 8,500 people over an inspired Rochelle team. The Hilltoppers jumped out to a 16-0 lead in the 1st Quarter and never looked back winning 44-8.

A showdown with Morris for the 4A State Title game awaited. After witnessing the success R-B had versus the Hilltoppers, not being able to establish a consistent ground game in the 1st Quarter and finally having a strong wind at their back, Morris surprised the U of I crowd and jumped into the Lonesome Polecat formation early in the 2nd Quarter. The Hilltoppers had last faced this formation when defeating Danville in the 1976 Title Game. The move allowed Morris to leverage the element of surprise as the Hilltoppers had not prepared to defend this type of offense. The Hilltoppers responded to the challenge by playing bend-don't-break defense. Though Morris ran twice as many offensive plays, the Hilltoppers prevailed and won the 5A Championship 27-20. 2001 was also the year that the IHSA expanded the playoffs to eight classes (8A-1A). *USA Today* ranked the 13-1 Hilltoppers # 15 nationally in their final poll. This was the Hilltoppers' third straight Top 25 finish in the paper's national poll.

2002 opened with great promise and great challenge. What had become an off-season ritual of searching the Midwest for a non-conference opponent took a particularly interesting twist. A few teams pulled out of the CMC and Weber High School closed. The impact on the Hilltoppers was that they found themselves with a week # 5 opening. By week # 5 most teams were battling within their conferences and traveling to an out of state game had the IHSA 600 mile limit which restricted possibilities. Rockhurst, the all boys' Catholic school of 1,400 in Kansas City was familiar with traveling throughout the country to find competition. They had an opening in week # 5 and agreed to play the Hilltoppers in Joliet.

The Hilltoppers opened 2002 by defeating Fenwick, Loyola and St. Viator. Next up was a home contest against highly ranked and powerful Providence. The hype that surrounded the three previous meetings between the two neighboring schools was there as was the added excitement of the game being an ESPN national telecast. As 10,000+ watched, the Celtics prevail in a hard-hitting tight battle 10-2. The following week Rockhurst took the Memorial Stadium field in no nonsense uniforms with a hard-nosed fundamentally sound approach to the game. After a good battle for first three Quarters, Rockhurst pulled away in the 4th Quarter to post a 28-9 victory.

The Hilltoppers moved ahead from their 3-2 mark, rolled through their remaining regular season games and the Round #1 Playoff game. The Round #2 opponent was Riverside-Brookfield and the Hilltopper Defense stepped up big containing the explosive Zeeman Bulldogs. Offensively the Hilltoppers had an unusual number of drive killing fumbles and allowed Riverside-Brookfield to hang around. When time ran out the Hilltoppers had hung on to score 10-7 victory. Next was a rematch with Providence and the Celtics beat the Hilltoppers in every aspect of the game while the Hilltoppers looked stuck in the mud. Providence won 41-0. Hilltoppers ended the season 9-3. The *USA Today* had the only teams that beat the Hilltoppers ranked in their national Top 25 with Rockhurst # 6 and Providence # 16.

The 2002 season was also the end of the CMC experiment. The nearly constant changes resulted in scheduling games nearly impossible. The Hilltoppers would return to the ESCC which would now have ten (10) member schools and conference play would consist of a nine (9) game schedule with no non-conference games. The leadership of the 2003 team used the lessons learned in the 2002 season as motivation to return to the top.

Returning To The Top

The success R-B had in moving the ball during their 56-50 loss to the Hilltoppers in 2001 inspired several ESCC coaches. The Hilltoppers were now facing several spread offenses throughout the course of the season. Benet and Notre Dame used this approach to throw two scares at the Hilltoppers. The Hilltoppers needed a long screen pass late in the game to score and post a 9-6 win over Benet and defeated Notre Dame in a close battle, 28-20. The Hilltoppers went 8-0 in conference play heading into the week # 9 conference show down in Mundelein against an undefeated and explosive Carmel squad. The Hilltoppers entered the showdown using a converted Wingback as their third-string Quarterback and gave Carmel a fight until the Corsairs pulled away in the 2nd Half to post a 41-14 win and claim the ESCC Title.

The playoffs welcomed back the Hilltoppers first string Quarterback who returned from a week # 3 broken leg. They opened the playoffs outscoring their first two opponents 109-14. On tap for Round #3 was Morris. 10,000 people saw the Hilltoppers defeat the Redskins, and their air assault, 14-10. Hilltopper Nation went down the Illinois River and descended upon the community of LaSalle-Peru to watch the Hilltoppers post a 56-7 Semi-Final victory.

The stage was set for a rematch of the 1975 4A Championship game. In 1975, the all boys Springfield Griffin High School Cyclones faced off against the all boys Joliet Catholic High School Hilltoppers. 2003 would have the Cyclones from co-ed Springfield Sacred Heart-Griffin facing the Hilltoppers from co-ed Joliet Catholic Academy. The Hilltoppers shut down the Cyclones ground game early on and jumped to a 10-0 lead after the 1st Quarter. The Hilltoppers opened the lead to 17-0 midway through the 3rd Quarter at which point the Cyclone passing game clicked. The Hilltoppers scored again on a TD pass before Springfield scored twice to cut the lead to 24-21 with 2 ½ minutes left. The Cyclones attempted an onside kick that was successfully fielded by the Hilltoppers at mid-field. The Hilltoppers never gave up the ball, and became 5A State Champions winning their record setting eleventh State Title. A few hours later, and in a convincing manner, Mundelein Carmel won the Class 6A Championship. The final *USA Today* national poll had Mundelein Carmel # 7 and the Hilltoppers # 8 in their Midwest Regional rankings.

Optimism surrounded the 2004 preseason. The Hilltoppers were ranked as a Top 5 team in the *Tribune* and *Sun Times* preseason polls. As the season unfolded, followers observed the fastest Hilltopper team ever fielded. This provided the platform for one of the most balanced running games and proficient passing attacks in the program's history. Leadership and team unity underscored how special this team really was.

With the exception of Carmel and St. Patrick, ESCC opponents all but abandoned the run and became a pass-happy, spread offense conference. The Hilltopper Defense adjusted to post three regular season shutouts. The only times teams scored more than twice all year were when Carmel posted 21 and St. Viator 16 points. The regular season included a 44-14 victory over a highly touted St. Patrick in week # 3 and a down-to-the-wire 21-14 squeaker over old foe Marian Catholic, in which the Spartans appeared to guess correctly at every critical juncture. The regular season ended with the Hilltoppers avenging the previous season's loss to Carmel with a 55-21 victory in Joliet.

The playoffs brought lopsided victories over Crane of the Chicago Public League and R-B. The R-B air-machine fell apart in Joliet as the Hilltoppers scored TDs on five of their first eight plays. A strong South to North wind in their face resulted in RB continually stopping the clock with incomplete passes and the Bulldogs digging themselves a 42-0 1st Quarter hole. The Halftime score was 56-0 as the Hilltoppers scored TDs on every 1st Half possession. The second team carried the 2nd Half and the game ended 69-6. A rebounding Fenwick program brought a hard-hitting Catholic League style of game to Joliet for the Round # 3 match up. The Hilltoppers pulled away in the 2nd Half and won 35-0. A Semi-Final road trip to Jacksonville was next. The Crimson had knocked out nationally ranked Springfield Sacred Heart-Griffin the previous week. The Hilltoppers overcame the Crimson's initial punch and posted a 42-13 victory while earning respect among some Central Illinois fans for their sportsmen like demeanor.

Since the 1990 meeting, the Hilltoppers versus Morris had developed into one of the most intense rivalries in the State. Sentiment was growing among the Public school officials around Illinois that the Private (Catholic) schools had an unfair advantage. Their rationale was the championship success of the Hilltoppers and that of a few other Catholic school programs. It was apparent that after 2004, the IHSA would institute a handicapping formula aimed at Private (Catholic) schools. For Playoff Class placement (8A-1A), the IHSA would likely double the enrollment for Private (Catholic) schools. The "Multiplier" had everyone believing that this would be the last Hilltopper-Morris match up for years to come. A rumor that this might be legendary Morris coach Dan Darlington's last game and the belief among the Morris faithful that this was the best Redskin team ever, added more drama to this seventh game between these rivals who had first played in 1923.

High wind, a 40-degree temperature and constant rain, made for challenging playing conditions in Champaign and set the stage for a defensive struggle. In the 1st Quarter the Hilltoppers lined up to go for it on a 4th and 3 on the Morris 46 yard line, and then quick-kicked, downing the ball at the Morris 2 yard line. This play paid dividends as during the ensuing series, the Hilltopper Defense recovered a Morris fumble in the end zone to take a quick 7-0 lead. As the Quarter wound down, the Hilltoppers added a 42-yard field goal to lead 10-0. After a scoreless 2nd Quarter, the 3rd Quarter saw the Redskins, with the wind at their back for 18 plays, held scoreless despite starting drives at the Hilltopper 20 and 39 yard lines. With 9:13 left in the game, the Hilltoppers took possession at their own 11-yard line. With the game on the line, the team in plain brown jerseys, solid white pants and brown helmets mounted an 11-play, 89-yard drive on the ground by executing power blocking plays, used by the program since the 1960s, to perfection. With 2:52 remaining the Hilltoppers crossed the goal line on an 11 yard TD run. Realizing the game was all but officially over, Morris milked the clock for three plays and punted on 4th down. The Hilltoppers then "took a knee" to run out the clock for a 17-0 victory and claim the program's twelfth State Championship. The Hilltopper Defense limited the high production Morris Offense to 119 total yards.

The Hilltoppers finished atop both the *Tribune* and *Sun Times* polls with a 14-0 record; the program's twelfth undefeated season. The end of year *USA Today* national poll ranked the Hilltoppers # 14. The *USA Today* feat marked the program's fourth Top 25 national finish in the last six (6) years and fifth overall Top 25 national finish.

Anticipation built as the 2005 season approached. Through the summer's 7-on-7 camps and other off-season events, it became apparent that the Hilltoppers would enter the season as Illinois' top team and ranked in most national polls. Through the years, the program had grown accustomed to wearing a bulls-eye. With the hysteria of the IHSA multiplier footnoting any commentary or article written about High School sports in Illinois, the Hilltoppers entered the 2005 season as the most scrutinized team most observers could ever recall. Each development, decision and effort would be dissected by people from near and far.

As the season progressed, the boomerang affect of the bulls-eye syndrome took its toll on six of nine conference opponents: Each of the six followed up their "biggest game of the year" loss by falling to their opponents the following week. Only Carmel and St. Viator dodged the boomerang and Nazareth's season ended in its 43-16 week # 9 loss to the Hilltoppers.

Marist and Benet put forth innovative schemes that kept the Hilltoppers off-balance until the Halftime adjustments took effect. The Hilltoppers then controlled the 2nd Half of each game. The trip to Chicago Heights saw Marian Catholic honor Dave Mattio on his 30th season as the Spartan Head Coach. Gordie Gillespie was invited to introduce Mattio during the pre-game ceremony. The players from both schools surrounded the mid-field event and were given lessons in history and sportsmanship as Gillespie shared his admiration for Mattio and spoke of how the rivalry had developed through the years. The inexperienced Spartans were no match for the Hilltoppers who scored all of their touchdowns in the 57-7 victory on drives of five plays or less. Big wins over Notre Dame and St. Joe's followed.

Like the big game of the 2003 season, a Standing-Room-Only crowd assembled in Mundelein and was treated to watching the Corsairs guess-and-gamble schemes work well as the score stood at 21-21 with 9 seconds left in the 1st Half. Carmel chose to forego a 35-yard Field Goal attempt and go for the end zone. The gamble backfired when a Hilltopper defender hit the Carmel Quarterback in mid-delivery causing the ball to float and softly fall into the hands of a Hilltopper defender who sprinted to the goal line untouched as time expired. Halftime adjustments enabled the Hilltoppers to dominate the 3rd Quarter and put the game away leaving Mundelein with a 56-21 victory. St. Viator brought a Division I air-attack to Joliet and played the Hilltoppers tight before falling 42-28. The next Saturday night at Hanson Stadium, the Hilltoppers dug themselves into a hole before regaining their composure and storming back from a 35-10 Halftime deficit to defeat the Shamrocks of St. Patrick 48-45. The regular season ended in a home win over a measurably improved Nazareth squad. The playoffs opened with a dominating home wins over Rich Central team and Batavia and Round #3 had the Hilltoppers traveling to Morris for the first time since 1924.

When the season began, the IHSA's "Multiplier" formula made it improbable that both schools would land in the same playoff class in 2005. A school funding crisis tore at the community of Morris throughout a tumultuous 2004-2005 school year. Relative to athletics, longtime coach and AD Dan Darlington was not retained for either role and former Assistant Coach George Dergo took over the reigns of the Redskin program. The build up throughout the week was as big as any in recent memory. In a twist of irony, just like 1990, the visiting team would enter the spirited home stadium of an opponent embroiled in institutional turmoil, ranked #4 nationally by *USA Today*. A pre-game moment of silence paid tribute to a recent Morris graduate who lost his life the previous day in the Iraq war.

After absorbing long TD run by the Redskins early in the 1st Quarter, the Hilltoppers took control and jumped in front 14-7. As the end of the Half drew near, the Hilltoppers threatened to take a

commanding lead and drove into the Red Zone. The drive then stalled with just over two minutes remaining and a 32-yard Field Goal attempt was shanked. This missed opportunity was one of three Hilltopper Red Zone trips that yielded zero points. A little more than minute later, Morris tied the game at 14-14 on a 67-yard run. Morris opened the 2nd Half with a two-minute scoring drive to take the lead 21-14. A few minutes later, the Redskins extended their lead to 28-14. The Hilltoppers then marched to score and cut the lead to 28-21. With 5:00 minutes remaining in the game, the Hilltoppers drove to the Morris 8-yard line, only to have the ball intercepted on a 4th and 2 play. After holding the Redskins to a three-and-out series, the final Hilltopper drive moved 64 yards from the Hilltopper 20-yard line to the Morris 16-yard line. The Hilltoppers were positioned with a chance to tie the game but a Morris defender stepped in front of the intended receiver at the goal line and intercepted the pass with 17 seconds left. Sharp later acknowledged that had they scored, they would have gone for the victory via a two-point conversion attempt. As the clock ran out, it appeared that the entire town of Morris stormed the field. The defeated Hilltoppers were respectful opponents and patiently waited to offer their congratulations. Morris rolled on and won the Class 6A State Title, finishing the season ranked #16 in the *USA Today* national poll. The 2005 Hilltoppers were not recognized among the top 25 nationally, but ended up ranked #8 in the Midwest Region of the final *USA Today* poll.

The 2006 season saw the Hilltopper vs. Mount Carmel series renewed after a four (4) year hiatus. Fittingly, the game was played at Chicago's Soldier Field as the first of the triple-header "Pre-Season Prep Bowl Kick-off Classic." The Chicago Park District (stewards of Soldier Field) estimated that over 15,000 people witnessed the renewed rivalry. The brown and white colors of the Carmelites were evident from the moment the teams entered the field for pre-game warm ups. One end saw the Tribune's #2 ranked Mount Carmel attired in brown jerseys with white numbers, brown pants with white leg stripes and white helmets with "MC" in brown on either side. At the opposite end stood the Tribune's #7 ranked Hilltoppers donning their familiar road uniforms of white jerseys with brown numbers, solid white pants and brown helmets with the white Victory Light emblem on each side. Adding more fanfare were widespread reports that many long time Caravan followers believed that the level of talent on the Caravan squad rivaled the best Caravan teams of the late 1940s-early 1950s era.

Though the game was scoreless at halftime, the intensity common in the classic games of the series was present. Missed opportunities plagued both teams, though one could attribute these to the spirited, determined and heads up defensive play of both teams. The 1st quarter saw the Caravan drive to the Hilltopper 10 yard line but stall when they were stuffed on the 4th down play. Later in the quarter a fumble near the Hilltopper goal line left the Caravan empty again. In the 2nd Quarter the Hilltoppers drove to the Mount Carmel 9-yard line only to have the Caravan force and recover a Hilltopper fumble. Mount Carmel continued to move the ball between the 20s but as they entered the Red Zone, the Hilltopper Defense stiffened forcing the Caravan to settle for two missed field goal attempts. Hilltoppers opened the 3rd Quarter by driving into the Caravan Red Zone via an air and ground combination but turned the ball over on downs. As the 3rd quarter wound down, the Hilltoppers put the game's first points on the board with 70 yard TD pass. The PAT failed and the score stood at 6-0. On this afternoon Mt. Camel executed the Caravan's most prolific passing game in over 10 years by completing 12-of-20 for 255 yards. Midway thru the 4th Quarter the Caravan tied the score 6-6 on a 15 yard pass completion along the back line of the end zone. The Hilltoppers blocked the PAT and the score remained 6-6. Near the two-minute mark, Mount Carmel again scored via the air on a 21 yard pass and the PAT made it 13-6. The Hilltopper's hurry-up offense was smothered in the last minute and the Caravan emerged as the victors.

In Week # 2 the Hilltoppers traveled west on I-80, to the scene of the heartbreak from the previous November to face the Morris Redskins. The Hilltoppers coughed up the ball on their first possession and the Redskins capitalized quickly moving 73 yards on 8 plays and scoring on an 11 yard TD pass. The PAT was good for a 7-0 lead. The Hilltoppers then compiled a time consuming 90 yard scoring drive to tie the game at 7-7. The Hilltoppers scored again to take a 14-7 lead into Halftime. Morris opened the 2nd Half by marching down the field and tying the

score at 14-14 and after forcing a Hilltopper punt, drove for another TD and a 21-14 lead. After a few trades of possession, the Hilltoppers then drove and tied the game at 21-21 with just over 3 minutes left in the game. The Redskins then chewed up the clock while marching 64 yards and scored a TD with 20 seconds remaining. It didn't matter that the PAT was missed as the Hilltoppers were unable to score on the games last few plays. Like the previous November, the field was a sea of Redskin supporters within seconds of the final whistle. And for the first time since 1997, the Hilltoppers stood at 0-2.

Yet again, Hansen Stadium delivered misery when a Hilltopper lineman was lost for the season suffering a gruesome leg-break on the game's first play from scrimmage. The Hilltoppers left no doubt that this would not be a repeat of the previous year's 48-45 squeaker against St. Patrick and rolled over the Shamrocks 48-3. After three straight road games to open the 2006 season, the Hilltoppers had their home opener week #4 and soundly defeated Marist 42-7. A 54-12 victory Benet at Benedictine University put the Hilltoppers at 3-2. Marian Catholic came to Joliet the following week, and the Spartans threw their latest scare at the Hilltoppers. A tough defensive stand was needed in the last two minutes to stop Marian's upset bid and preserve a 21-14 victory. The following week the Hilltoppers traveled to Niles. In a pre-game ceremony, Notre Dame High School retired the baseball number of Major League baseball great and former Don two-sport star Greg Luzinski. Luzinski was the star fullback and middle linebacker on Notre Dame's 1966 team that ended the season as the #1 ranked team in Illinois. When play began, the Hilltoppers rolled to a 51-21 victory. The Hilltoppers closed out their home season in week #8 with a 55-0 victory over St. Joe's and then traveled to Mundelein for the second straight year. A combination of untimely fumbles and the surrender of TD runs of 20, 30, 33 and 70 yards by Carmel led to a 37-29 loss. The defeat left the Hilltoppers at 6-3 and resulted in a shared ESCC Championship with St. Viator; a team the Hilltoppers did not face in 2006.

The 6-3 mark also forced a week #1 Class 6A playoff game on the road. The following evening the Hilltoppers learned that for the third time in 12 months, they would return to the war-chants in Morris. The Hilltoppers received the opening kickoff and 10 plays later, had gone 72 yards on the drive, capped by a 21-yard TD run. The PAT was blocked and Hilltoppers led 6-0. In the 2nd Quarter, following the Hilltoppers failed to convert on 4th-and-3 attempt at the Morris 42 yard line, the Redskins mounted a drive highlighted by a 45-yard TD run. The PAT put the Redskins up 7-6. As the 1st Half wound down, the Redskins scored again on a 10 yard TD pass with the PAT giving the Morris a 14-6 lead at the intermission. Early in the 3rd Quarter, the Hilltoppers scored on a 41-yard TD. The two point conversion pass was incomplete so the score stood at 14-12. Morris answered with a time consuming drive that ended with a quarterback-sneak for TD and a successful PAT that made it 21-12. After an exchange of interceptions, the Hilltoppers drove 66 yards and scored on a TD pass to cut the lead to 21-18 with just under 5 minutes left. The PAT was wide. On the ensuing kickoff the Hilltoppers attempted an onside kick, but Morris recovered. The Redskins ran out the clock as the Hilltoppers second straight season ended on the field in Morris. No Redskin fans rushed the field after this contest. The Hilltoppers season ended at 6-4. The next week Morris fell to an undefeated Normal Community squad that went on to capture the Class 6A Championship.

Dedication and Determination

Within a week of the 2006 season ending loss at Morris, the campaign for 2007 began with an incredible offseason commitment. The 2007 Hilltoppers would feature as much speed as any team in the program's history. At the strength and skills events held in late July, the dedication to offseason conditioning was apparent. Team leaders were explicit and consistent in stating their goal of a State Championship in nearly every preseason interview.

For the second straight year, the Hilltopper vs. Mount Carmel opener was held at Soldier Field. The Chicago Tribune's preseason #2 Hilltoppers took on #6 Mount Carmel in a game that produced the intensity, emotion and drama that the series produces. Early in the 2nd Quarter, the Caravan failed to convert on a 4th-and-2 at the Hilltopper 12-yard line. On the next play, the

Hilltoppers misfired as Mount Carmel intercepted the ball near midfield and returned it to the Hilltopper 10 yard line and then scored on a 10-yard TD pass and PAT to take a 7-0 lead. Over the next 7 minutes, the Hilltoppers went 62 yards on 13 plays before scoring on 4 yard TD run with just under 2 minutes left in the Half. The PAT failed. The Caravan returned the ensuing kickoff to their 24-yard line and six plays later, scored on a 3-yard run with just 23 seconds left on the clock. A successful PAT made it 14-6 at the Half. The 3rd Quarter opened with the Hilltoppers going to the run on 17 straight plays that covered 86 yards and consumed over 8 minutes, ending with a 1-yard TD run. The runner slipped while making his cut for the end zone on the two-point conversion attempt, and the score stood at 14-12. The Hilltopper Defense then delivered the first of three 3-and-out series of the 2nd Half. The Hilltoppers mounted a 13-play scoring drive on the ground, capped by a 4-yard run and successful 2-point conversion run to take a 20-14 lead with just over 5 minutes left in the game. The Defense followed with one of its 3-and-out stances, sending numerous Mount Carmel spectators to the exits. The Hilltopper Offense continued to consume time by keeping the ball on the ground. When facing a 4th Down near midfield with just over 2 minutes left, the Hilltoppers elected to punt in hopes of pinning the Caravan deep and force a length of the field drive. In the 2nd Half, the Hilltoppers had held the Caravan to just 16 total yards on 10 plays. When Mount Carmel faced a 2nd-and-10 at their own 20-yard line, what a Chicago Tribune reporter later dubbed as *"The Miracle of Mount Carmel"* occurred. On an option play that was moving left, while being tackled, the Caravan Quarterback pitched the ball side-armed. The ball bounced well behind the pitchman and rolled toward the goal line. A swarm of Hilltoppers pursued the loose ball. The Caravan pitchman beat the Hilltoppers to the bouncing ball at his own 8-yard line. Amidst all of the confusion, the pitchman blindly heaved the ball down field as he was drilled by a Hilltopper Linebacker; later revealing to reporters that he never saw anyone down field. A pair of Mount Carmel players stood alone at the 30-yard line and as one player caught the wounded-duck pass and headed for the end zone, the second peeled back to block the lone pursuing Hilltopper to seal the crazy 80-yard TD. The PAT was good and in a matter of seconds, the Caravan led 21-20 with 1:38 remaining. The Hilltoppers returned the ensuing kick to their 25-yard line and with two timeouts remaining, marched to the Caravan 35-yard line before Mount Carmel halted the last Hilltopper drive and left the field victorious.

As reporters descended to the field and sought post-game comments, the poise of the 2007 Hilltoppers showed as they quickly regained their composure and looked forward. One Hilltopper commented *"This will be a good thing for us in the future. We're going to put this behind us and get ready for Morris."* Upon reflecting on the Hilltoppers' long scoring drives, the *Herald News* quoted a Hilltopper lineman of saying *"We just kept running inside plays and going on quick counts."* That was an approach that would be come bedrock as the season progressed. Mount Carmel rolled through the Chicago Catholic League undefeated and did not lose until the 8A Semi-Finals.

Caught up in the post-game exuberance of his team's 21-18 victory over the Hilltoppers in the 2006 playoffs, while talking to *Herald News* reporters the Morris coach let slip: *"We kind of took them out to the woodshed -- isn't that what they used to say?"* Those words seared throughout the Hilltopper off-season and the team looked at their week #2 contest in Joliet as a game of atonement. In the week #2 contest, Morris scored first and held a 7-0 lead. Seconds later the Hilltoppers responded with a 50 yard TD run. After another TD drive and a Hilltopper interception returned for a TD, the 1st Half at ended at 22-7. Early in the 3rd Quarter Morris closed to within 22-13 on TD pass. The PAT snap was fumbled but the Redskins scrambled to successfully convert the busted play into a 2-point conversion to cut the lead to 22-15. The Hilltoppers then rolled to score 29 unanswered points for a 51-15 final, handing the Redskins their worst defeat since the 1970s. On the night, the Redskins were held to just 29 yards on 27 carries. Morris rebounded and did not lose again until a Metamora field goal in the closing seconds of the Class 5A Championship denied the Redskins their second State Championship in the last three years.

In ESCC play, the Hilltoppers opened at home with St. Patrick. A 43-7 Halftime lead was achieved by mixing a powerful ground game with nearly 200 yards and three (3) TDS through the

air on a perfect 6-for-6 passing. The game ended 56-12. Week # 4 saw Marist hold the Hilltoppers to a three-and-out on their first possession, after which the Hilltoppers scored on eight (8) straight possessions in route to 55-0 victory. Against Benet, the Hilltoppers again mixed an effective passing game with a dominating running attack to build a 27-0 Halftime lead. Half way through the 3rd Quarter, the Hilltoppers saw a running clock and the final was 55-10. Trouble has often followed the Hilltoppers on their trips to Chicago Heights and week #6 of the 2007 season was one of those trips. With Marian's Dave Mattio having coached more games against the Hilltoppers than any other coach, a game plan designed to stymie the intricacies of the Hilltopper offense was in store. By disrupting the timing of the Hilltopper offense at critical times, it appeared that the Spartans were gifted with a sixth-sense. Marian scored early and held a 7-0 lead at Halftime. The Hilltoppers answer was to limit the motion and misdirection, in favor of a more straight ahead, power offense. The result was five (5) TDs in the 2nd Half, as the Defense held Marian scoreless the rest of the night for the 35-7 victory. Week #7 saw the Dons of Notre Dame travel to Joliet and fall 42-13. Next St. Joe's fell 63-7 as the passing game was perfected early and reserves saw a good deal of play. Week #9 staged the battle for the ESCC championship as 8-1 Carmel traveled to Joliet. The Hilltopper Defense bottled up the Corsair Offense while the Offense scored on all but two of its 1st Half possessions to build a 31-0 lead and what was anticipated to be a tight game, saw the Hilltoppers cruise to a 45-8 victory. Carmel would finish its season in the 7A Semi-Finals where it lost 17-7 to eventual 7A State Champion Lake Zurich.

The 6A playoffs started off with a cold rain falling in Joliet and a determined Hilltopper squad ready for Normal West. The hosts scored on seven (7) straight 1st Half possession to build a 42-0 lead at the Half with the final score being 45-8. The skilled, agile spread offense of the Crete-Monee Warriors came to Joliet next. The Hilltoppers scored on the opening drive and rolled to a season-high 589 yards of offense in the 51-26 victory. Though yielding yardage though the air, the night saw the Hilltopper Defense limit the Warriors to just 47 yards on the ground. In Round #3, Rock Island entered a Saturday evening game in Joliet with a 10-1 record that included non-conference victories over Tinley Park Andrew and perennial Chicago Public League power Hubbard. The Rocks only loss was to Western Big-6 rival Moline in a 17-14 contest. Leading the Rocks was Vic Boblett, who last coached against the Hilltoppers in the 1990 Class 4A Championship game as the Head Coach of Geneseo. Boblett's Rocks squad featured fast, durable backs and precise execution of a dangerous belly-option attack. Because of playoff bracketing, this would be the last game at Memorial Stadium for the Hilltopper Seniors. After leading just 12-7 at the Half, the Hilltoppers adjusted schemes and increased intensity to shut down the Rocks and control the ball for most of the 2nd Half to secure a 33-7 victory.

Throughout the years, the Hilltopper program had gone 14-4 Semi-Final State Playoff games. Hilltopper history appeared to matter little as the undefeated Ironmen of Normal Community High exuded confidence and deservedly, were the story. They had a twenty-six (26) game winning streak, built a 38-2 record over the previous three (3) years, had a Class 6A Runner Up finish in 2005 and were the defending 6A State Champions. Veteran coach Hud Venerable's 2007 squad had been ranked #1 in Class 6A throughout the year and was on an impressive playoff run. The Ironmen had dominated their previous three playoff opponents, including a 29-0 win over Providence in New Lenox the previous Saturday. In the first two rounds, Providence had road victories against the highly ranked, two-time defending Class 5A State Champion Springfield SHG and perennial Central Illinois power Bloomington. On an beautiful Indian Summer Saturday afternoon where temperatures climbed above 60 degrees, the Hilltoppers kept their pre-game emotions in check while enduring jeering from the spirited home crowd during their walk from the locker room to the field, the unusually loud, graphic Hip-Hop music blasting over the PA system during warm ups and a fired-up home team introduction ritual. The Hilltoppers simply let their play say it all. The crowd of 6,500+ witnessed one of the more dominating performances in Hilltopper playoff history. The Hilltopper Offense marched to three (3) 1st Quarter TDs as the Ironmen were blown off of the line and had no apparent answer for the huge chunks of yardage each play gained. The Hilltoppers collected a season high (thirty-two) 32 1st downs, ran the ball on 62 of 68 plays during which the third Hilltopper Running Back surpassed the 1,000-yard mark

for the season. Soon after the 2nd Quarter began, Normal completed a 55-yard pass and got on the board a few plays later via 5-yard run. The PAT made it 21-7. After a Hilltopper punt, the Ironmen mounted one of their few drives of the afternoon, only to have it end with Hilltoppers logging one of their five takeaways. The Hilltopper Defense was stifling and the speed it possessed showed more than it had in any previous game. The Hilltoppers took possession after the interception deep in their own territory and executed a nearly perfect two-minute offense. After getting inside of the Normal 5-yard line, throws into the end zone fell incomplete. At the 00:00.4 mark, the Hilltoppers booted a 22-yard field goal to lead 24-7 at intermission. Normal received the 2nd Half kickoff and moved down field, only to have the Hilltopper Defense intercept the ball in their own end zone and returned it to the 15-yard line. Just seven (7) plays and 85 yards later, the Hilltoppers scored a TD and PAT to make it 31-7. After recovering fumble on the ensuing kickoff, the Hilltoppers struck quickly to put the score at 38-7. The final Hilltopper score came at the conclusion of a 12-play, 99-yard drive to extend the lead to 45-7. As the Hilltopper reserves saw 4th Quarter action, the Ironmen scored their second TD of the day and the game ended 45-13.

The Class 6A State Championship game pitted an up-and-coming Lemont Indian program against one of the most explosive Hilltoppers teams in history. The teams' only other meeting occurred in 1925 with a 33-0 Hilltopper victory. The 2007 Indians featured two players who had already made their Division I commitments and a team of very talented Seniors and Juniors surrounding them.

After holding the Indians to a 3-and-out in the first series of the game, the Hilltoppers scored on a QB sneak on the last play of an 8-play, 54 yard drive. After being pinned deep after the ensuing kickoff, Lemont was unable to move the ball and lost a fumble at their own 7-yard line. Two plays later the Hilltoppers punched in a TD and the score was 14-0. On their first play after the kickoff, the Indians connected on a seam route that picked up big yardage after the catch, only to have the Indian receiver stripped from behind by a pursuing Hilltopper Linebacker and the Hilltoppers recovered the ball at their own 8-yard line. The Hilltoppers then moved the ball to their own 43-yard line before punting. Lemont took possession at their own 36-yard line and after gaining 5 yards on their first play, fumbled for the third time in 4 plays. On the fifth straight running play, the Hilltoppers went in from 8-yards out. The PAT made it 21-0 as the 1st Quarter ended. The Hilltoppers next score came as a 29-yard TD run capped a 13-play, 87-yard drive. The score stood at 28-0 at the Halftime. The 3rd Quarter saw the Hilltoppers score on a 47-yard pass to extend the lead to 35-0. Lemont then mounted a drive to the Hilltopper 9-yard line, but turned the ball over on downs as the 4th Down pass attempt was batted away. After a Hilltopper fumble, the Indians mounted a 9-play scoring drive that made the score 35-7 early in the 4th Quarter. The kickoff was returned to the Lemont 23 yard line, where a 1st Down 69 yard Hilltopper run was followed up by an 8-yard TD run to make the score 42-7. The final Hilltopper score came on a 41-yard TD run and the successful PAT made the final 49-7. The Hilltoppers were state champions for a state-record thirteenth time.

The 2007 Hilltoppers broke the state's all-time record for most yardage in a season by posting 6,651 total yards. The 5,033 yards rushing and 1,598 yards passing combined to break previous record by 260 yards. The year end *USA Today* national poll ranked the Hilltoppers # 19, marking the program's sixth *USA Today* Top 25 national finish. The final CBS Sports MaxPreps national power-ranking listed the Hilltoppers at #17. In both national polls, the Hilltoppers were Illinois' highest ranked team.

Since the IHSA Playoffs began in 1974, the Hilltoppers have made a state record fifteen (15) championship appearances. During that span, only three classes of students ('75, '86 & '87) went through their four-year Hilltopper experience without their school's football team competing in a State Championship game. The 2007 Hilltoppers ensured that this experience will be a part of their school community through the Class of 2011.

Yet another colorful and dramatic offseason set the stage for a rather interesting road ahead. After the 2007 Preseason Prep Bowl concluded, pressure mounted on its organizers to make the opportunity to play in Soldier Field available to a third Chicago Public School system team. To make this happen, they requested that the Hilltoppers, a non-Chicago and non-Chicago Catholic League team, be dropped from the event. Mount Carmel was forced to make a choice between continuing its series with Hilltoppers and in so doing, decline the opportunity to play in Soldier Field, or agree to play a CPS team at Soldier Field in place of the Hilltoppers. Mount Carmel weighed the best interests of its school community and team, and understandably chose the Soldier Field experience over the Hilltoppers, leaving the Hilltoppers in search of a week #1 opponent.

In the Summer of 2005, the administration from the Plainfield North High School announced that Dan Darlington, recently retired from Morris, would serve as the first football coach at Plainfield North High School, which was scheduled to open in the Fall of 2005. The model for implementing the athletic program was to have teams compete at the Freshmen and Sophomore levels for the first year and begin Varsity competition in what would be 2006. During the first year, Darlington would coach the Sophomore team and move on to the Varsity level with them in 2006. The relevance to the Hilltoppers was that upon accepting the position, Darlington contacted Dan Sharp about scheduling future games with the Hilltoppers. During the 2005 season, one Hilltopper opponent did not field a Sophomore team. Darlington jumped at the opportunity to have his kids experience a big game atmosphere and brought his Tiger Sophomore team to Joliet Memorial Stadium to fill the vacancy that week. Along with filling that void, an agreement was reached for a home-and-home week # 2 series to begin in 2008. The first game was to be played at Plainfield North and the 2009 contest at Joliet Memorial Stadium. Then just after his team's fourth Varsity game in the 2006 season, the IHSA cited Plainfield North for a wide range of sanctions alleging illegal recruiting and use an ineligible football player. The sanctions prohibited the Tigers from participating in the state playoffs for two years and included the suspension of Darlington as the Tigers coach. Soon after the suspension, Darlington resigned his coaching role. Turnover soon followed in several leadership roles at the school. The bearing on the Hilltoppers was that in 2007, new leadership within Plainfield North inquired about changing the agreement from two-years to one year. When the Hilltopper counter offer of having the 2008 game played at Joliet Memorial Stadium was rejected, the schools agreed to terminate the agreement. The Hilltoppers would now have new opponents in the first two weeks of 2008. .

With the ten (10) team ESCC having adopted a two-year reschedule model, the Hilltoppers were not be scheduled to play Carmel of Mundelein or St. Joe's in 2008 and 2009. Carmel of Mundelein agreed to play the Hilltoppers in a home-and-home non-conference series for week #1, with the first game in Mundelein. After searching for week #2 opponent and nearly having agreements signed, Wheaton-Warrenville South (WWS) could not fill their week #2 opening for 2008 and inquired about a game. The schools agreed to a game, which would be played in Joliet.

2008

There was no preseason hype. There were no rankings. There were just newspaper predictions of the Hilltoppers finishing in the middle of the ESCC. Entering the 2008 season with just four (4) starters, the Hilltoppers began the year using a conservative, far less versatile approach than the 2007 State Championship squad. The way the scheduled played out, six (6) of the Hilltoppers nine (9) opponents qualified for the 2008 state playoffs.

Stuffed on their first possession of the season, the Hilltoppers then shanked a punt, putting Carmel of Mundelein in great field position. On their first play, the Corsairs broke loose for 27-yard TD run. Throughout the game, poor field position and general inexperience on both sides of the ball was easily seen. Add to the mix that Carmel had hired a new Defensive Coordinator who employed new schemes, and the Hilltoppers dug themselves a 17-0 deficit. Fortunes appeared to turn when the Hilltoppers scored on a 67 yard TD pass and then on an 87-yard interception

return, to close the score to 17-12. Both extra point attempts failed. Carmel regrouped and closed out the scoring with a TD run and PAT to seal a 24-12 win.

The road ahead would only get tougher. Midweek thunderstorms had a year long impact. The University of St. Francis played their season opener in a driving rain at Joliet Memorial Stadium on the week's Thursday evening, leaving the field nearly devoid of any grass. Some time overnight, the rain stopped. Throughout the morning fog/cloud cover, the Joliet Park District staff trucked in, and in an effort to make the field playable, liberally spread a sand-based compound. The 2008 season will be fondly remembered as the year of mud. WWS brought the program acknowledged to be the most accomplished Public School program over the previous 20 years to Joliet. Only East St. Louis could rival the on field accomplishments of WWS and was itself, just beginning to re-emerge as a statewide football power. Since the state playoffs began, WSS had won five (5) State Championships and had three (3) Runner Up finishes. One of those five championships was the 1992 Class 5A title game victory over the Hilltoppers, later voted to be the most exciting Championship game of the first 25 years of the IHSA Playoffs. Over the previous three (3) years, coach Ron Muhitch's Tigers had posted a 37-2 record finishing as Class 8A Champions in 2006 and Class 7A Runner Up in 2007. The Tigers entered the game as the state's top ranked 7A team.

The opening WWS drive stalled in Joliet. The Hilltoppers took over and drove to Tiger 16-yardline where on a 4th-and-5, they failed to convert on play action pass. On their next possession the Hilltoppers opened the scoring on a 41-yard TD run, but missed the PAT to lead 6-0. WWS answered on their next drive and scored on a 2-yard TD run with just over 3 minutes remaining in the Half. After a Hilltopper 3-and-out, WSS crisply executed their two-minute offense and scored on Field Goal as time ran out, to lead 10-6 at the Half. The Hilltoppers had a penalty negate a long gain on the opening drive of the 2nd Half, after which the Tigers seemed to have an answer for Hilltopper play. WWS went on to force three 2nd Half turnovers and score 21 points in to win 31-6. In the Saturday September 6, 2008 Joliet Herald News, Sharp commented: "The main thing is we have to stay positive. We're in that situation where, well, we knew the first two would be tough when we looked at in the preseason, and they were."

Conference play opened against 2-0 Nazareth. The Roadrunners finished 2007 at 8-4 and made it into the 3rd Round of the Class 5A playoffs. More rain meant more mud, which played a part in Nazareth fumbling on their first three plays of the game. The Hilltoppers capitalized, built a 28-0 lead and controlled the tempo in the 42-12 victory. Next up was 2-1 St. Viator in Arlington Heights. After the adjusting to the spread offensive and adopting a contain strategy up front, the elusive Lion's Quarterback was kept in check as the Hilltoppers rolled to 42-13 victory. This was the night that both of the Hilltopper lines jelled. The following week brought on 4-0 St. Patrick, at Chicago's "must-be-cursed" Hanson Stadium. The Defense held the Shamrocks to just 107 total yards and after winning 21-0, the Hilltoppers stood at 3-2.

Week # 6 saw 4-1 Marist roll into Joliet for the Homecoming match up. Having defeated Carmel of Mundelein in their conference opener, the 2008 Redhawks would go on to oust highly ranked and defending 8A Champion, Naperville North in the 2nd Round of the Class 8A playoffs, before falling to Mount Carmel in the following round. Marist came into the game very focused on stopping the Hilltopper ground game. To counter, the Hilltoppers took the covers off of the air attack to lead a series of tie consuming scoring drives that kept the talented Marist Spread Offense on the sidelines for much of the night. Three (3) 1st Half scoring drives consumed thirty-seven (37) plays, twenty (20) of the Half's 24 minutes while producing over 200 yards, of which 140 yards were through the air. After leading 22-0 at Halftime, the Hilltoppers opened the 2nd Half with a 12-play, 80-yard scoring to extend the lead to 29-0. Marist put up two 3rd Quarter scores, but could get no closer than the final score of 29-14. The 4-2 Hilltoppers left the field standing alone atop the ESCC standings. Week # 7 saw the Hilltoppers travel Benedictine University for a Saturday night clash with Benet. After surrendering an 11-play, 79-yard scoring drive on the games opening possession, the Hilltopper Defense contained Benet while the Offense rolled. The Hilltoppers exploded on both sides of the ball and scored 35 unanswered

points in a 6-minute stretch of the 3rd Quarter. The next week brought 1-6 Marian Catholic to Joliet. After suffering several key injuries in the early season, the Spartans were suffering through a hard-luck year. Four (4) of their six (6) losses were by fewer than one score. Like most Marian Catholic games, not a single yard came easily. The Hilltoppers led 7-0 at the Half and won the game 16-7. The last ESCC game of the year was against Notre Dame in Niles. This night was also impacted by weather. The Hilltoppers scored the game's first TD in the 2nd Quarter and led 6-0 at Halftime. At the 6:40 mark of the 3rd Quarter, the skies opened in a downpour. A severe weather warning cleared the stadium and halted play for 90-minutes. When play resumed, a soft, soaking rain forced the Hilltoppers to focus on their running game the rest of the way. The Hilltoppers added another TD in the 3rd Quarter won the game 12-0. What occurred next was something that only a twist of fate could deliver. Symbolic of the many challenges endured on their journey, a team that struggled to win just a few games as Freshmen, was soaked to the bone, yet enthusiastically huddled in a puddle of mud. In the cool, damp, late evening air, their collective breath visibly clouded just over their heads as they sang their school's loyalty. With a 7-0 record in conference play, they were the undisputed champions of the ESCC.

Crete-Monee was the opponent for the Round 1 playoff game in Joliet. The Hilltoppers Defense set the tone early as 14 of their first 17 points came off of forced turnovers. The momentum carried over throughout the night as the speed of the Warrior Spread Offense was kept in check. In spite of facing a stacked the line of scrimmage, the Hilltopper Offense rolled and led 23-6 at Halftime. A 4th Quarter TD made the final score 30-6.

Round 2 was the following Saturday afternoon in New Lenox against Providence. The game began with the Celtics executing flawlessly and jumping out to an early 14-0 lead. Untimely errors and a stiff Providence Defense kept the Hilltopper Offense of bottled up. The Halftime adjustments had the Hilltoppers transition to a power game in the 2nd Half. The switch in strategy paid off as they marched 80-yards on 10 plays during their initial 2nd Half possession to close to 14-7. Providence answered that score on the next possession. After a series of big gain plays, the Celtics scored on a 9-yard pass to lead 21-7. After a good kickoff return, the Hilltoppers pounded away at the Celtics Defense and picked up good yardage the first two plays of the series and then surprisingly went over the top scored on a 34-yard TD pass. The PAT kick was wide and it was 21-13. The intensity increased throughout the 4th Quarter. With Providence looking for a few 1st Downs to keep the clock moving, the Hilltoppers forced a fumble after a 3rd Down pass reception and recovered at the Celtic 28-yard line. The Hilltoppers stayed on the ground and converted on 4th-and-1 at the 19-yardline. An 8-yard TD pass on 4th-3, made it 21-19. The Hilltoppers bowled over left tackle for the 2-point conversion to tie the game at 21-21. The Celtics played the next possession safely, wound down the clock and punted away to Hilltoppers with just a few seconds left in regulation. The Hilltoppers elected to time run out and move to Overtime. The all important coin-flip gave the choice to Providence and the Celtics, with one of their best kickers in the program's history, elected to go on Defense first. The Celtics stuffed the Hilltoppers first two plays and the 3rd Down pass fell incomplete. A bobbled snap led to a blocked Hilltopper Field Goal attempt. On the Celtic possession, two running plays to the middle of the field positioned Providence to attempt a Field Goal on 3rd Down. The accomplished Celtic kicker split the uprights to win the game 24-21. The 2008 Hilltopper season ended in New Lenox. The following week the Celtics hosted eventual Class 6A Champion Springfield Sacred Heart-Griffin and fell 24-17.

Today and Tomorrow

Today the academic performance and scholastic recognition of Joliet Catholic Academy are at the highest levels in the schools' histories. The Hilltoppers are alive and well. Their Football program is performing on a level at or above with the very best teams of its programs' history. It appears that future generations will also be given the gift of the opportunity to learn the game of football and through it, life long lessons of how to carry one's self with dignity and humility in the most joyous and the most dire of circumstances. The players will be given the opportunity to measure themselves against not only their opponents on the field, but against the legacy of the

Hilltopper teams of the past. They will also have the opportunity to build on the storied past and to leave the program better than it was when they arrived.

To all present and future Hilltoppers: Be sure to leave the Light on.