

The Trojans of Bacon Swamp

By R. S. Trowbridge '67

Tens of thousands of years will have passed before the Bishop Chatard High School football team emerges triumphantly from Bacon Swamp. But I am getting too far behind myself. Let me start a mere 55 years or so ago, in the fifties, when at the frightened, tender age of seven I saw open caskets for the first time.

My mother insisted that I join her and attend funeral services for the three young school boys who had tragically drowned in Bacon Swamp. What was to me before then only an expansive wooded and waterlogged forest of knarly trees and brush just east of Broad Ripple Village in Indianapolis was to become a life long focal point of learning. I was first to learn of death there and to judge the swamp a foreboding and dangerous place. So was the judgment of an entire community which, still reeling from the sad loss of three of its small boys, resolved after a number of town meetings that the nuisance swamp must be filled. And filled it was, save a small peat bog and lake at the south end. I remember this, because from the vantage point of the fenced playground at the adjacent Christ the King elementary school, the view of dump trucks and dozers inspired us early grade school boys to disregard becoming firemen or priests, aspiring instead to drive dump trucks, big ones, dozers, too. Day after day, with faces pressed against the chain link fence, we gawked at progress. Bacon Swamp would be the receptacle of nearly every used appliance in Indianapolis at the time. Stoves, refrigerators, wringer-wash tubs. There were signs for "Fill Wanted". It was to us a great, exciting undertaking. The commercial peat moss operation way on the south end would be allowed to survive. The city would get to that later. But the remaining north end of Bacon Swamp would be filled. And filled it was.

In modern times of environmental awareness, there could be no such project to fill an ancient, twenty thousand year old, glacially formed wetland already substantially reduced by earlier fill and encroaching development. Bacon Swamp was one of the only surviving pre-historic swamps in North America. No telling what archeologists would have discovered in its depths. Now they would find appliances. There was great history surrounding the lands as well. Bacon Swamp was a part of the great Hiram Bacon dairy farm, a reported important station along the Underground Railroad of the days of slavery. Bacon Swamp was also the site of death, the recipient of a community's wrath and good intentions, and the site of Bishop Chatard High School.

Construction began in 1960. I was in the sixth grade then, and high school construction was of little interest to us Catholic Youth Organization football players at Christ the King who had just the year prior added face bars onto our previously open-faced helmets. We eventually became interested only somewhat because we were forced to stop practicing on the rocky field atop the Bacon Swamp landfill. We were upset about having to find another field on which to practice and held in disdain a future high school to which none of us were interested in attending. Coached at one time or the other by very capable Coaches Marietta and McCurdy, we were winning youth football players destined to attend downtown Cathedral High School, the undisputed sports powerhouse in Indianapolis. Besides, as future members of the perennial champions Cathedral Irish, we could easily carry on the same team name to our awaiting berth with the University of Notre Dame Fighting Irish. Maybe after that, we would be Green Bay Packers. Oh, the thoughts of it all. But I would continue to learn on top of Bacon Swamp.

Two and a half years later, I was to shed some serious tears in the privacy of my room after Dad told me the family could not afford Cathedral. I would have to go to a fledging high school entering only its first varsity sports year. And I would be a freshman in a school without seniors. It was that school in the swamp with a name something like Chatard. But even then, Chatard tuition was the same as the mortgage payment for my parent's post WWII, wood-frame house. I soon calmed down and though I did not then understand money and family finances, I realized the family would be struggling for me to attend Bishop Chatard. Football at Chatard? Well, I would try out and show the youngsters how to hit.

Tryouts were on the adjacent rock field, again the remnant of Bacon Swamp. In the first weeks, trying out as a lineman and linebacker, I was able to progress rapidly through the ranks, ultimately beating out a junior for a possible starting position. In the first series of contact practices, I lost my helmet in an offensive surge, went ahead and blocked down my opponent and split my lip. Yes, though undersized, I was tough and had something to prove and was angry about it all. These guys I tried out against were keeping me from a State championship at Cathedral. But most of any skills I had came from my influential youth coaches, Mr. Marietta and Mr. McCurdy, both with sons now at Chatard. In a matter of days, as I threw myself at football, I realized there was something special about Bacon Swamp. I was becoming a Chatard Trojan.

A few weeks later, the excitement of our first varsity game was only slightly tempered when we opened boxes to find baby blue uniforms with nearly invisible white numbers. How precious we looked! Our fashion statement did not deter us, however, from singing along the way to our first game at a small

farm town outside Indianapolis. “We are the Trojans, the Mighty, Mighty Trojans”, we sang. And we had that old, beat up school bus rocking. It was 1963, our first varsity game. We would make history. And history we made. I think John Brown ran once for 30 yards. That was about the only highlight. I played. We got whipped by a country school on a football field adjacent to a corn field. After the game, Coach Deem reminded us that we better choose our songs more wisely or at least win one before we call ourselves “Mighty.”

That first season we freshmen, sophomores and juniors went 0-8. It was a long time ago, and if my memory is correct, I recall we got crushed by Arsenal Tech about 65 or so to nothing, got beat by Indianapolis Deaf School and did not hear it coming and lost to Crispus Attucks which some may remember was in 1963 still a segregated, all black school. We were less than mighty. But we were learning and growing. We kept at it. We stood tall, remained a team, and remained Trojans above all those appliances. After all, it was our inaugural year. My learning continued with Coach demanding more of me, always more. He took no excuses. At times I knew I let him down. But I was still learning. You won't read much about that inaugural year or find many photographs because Chatard did not yet publish a yearbook. We first needed a graduating senior class and we were a year away from that.

The next year brought new coaches, bigger dreams and more history. There were Coach Purichia, Coach Koers, a new staff, and the burning of baby blue jerseys and score cards of the prior season. Everything about the program was tougher, much tougher. It had to be because we were losers and did not like it. We had seniors and that was exciting. We had new player transfers and a crop of great freshmen eager to play and hit. All starters were returning. Coach brought an advanced offensive and defensive scheme which challenged us and we took it on. We won our first game that second season and I will always remember what Coach Purichia said to us in the team huddle at half time when the first victory was nearly in our grasp. Coach said we were going to earn that victory, that we were going to win because there was “something” about us boys at Chatard, something different. He said there was something different about our school and that difference was going to lead us to victory. And to this day, Coach, I remember the difference.

The saga of history etched upon the remnants of Bacon Swamp was to continue fondly for me throughout the next two years. There were practices at Broad Ripple Park, within sight of my home on north 64th Street. My mother would ride her bike to practice with ice in a bucket for the team. She did this in spite of Coach. One must remember that in those days, there were no water

breaks. It was common thought that a player would physically weaken if he drank water. But practice after practice, my Italian mother who could not drive, rode her bike to practice. Always, in the front basket, a bucket of ice from the home ice box. My mother was unofficially the first Team Mom and was privately rewarded with a four inch plastic trophy from the team. The team had scotch taped a simple tribute onto the base of the cup. She cherished that trophy to her death. I displayed it on her casket. But the Team Mom could also be a pain in the butt. She would often get tired of waiting for me to exit the locker room and leaving her bike outside, would just swing open the door and come on in to find me. Showered and naked teammates would be diving for towels screaming ineffectively in protest for her to stop. Mom would simply and dismissively reply in her Italian accent, "No worry, I ama already know what you boys a looka like naked".

Linebacker drills at Broad Ripple Park were my favorites. One by one, we linebackers would assume a fending stance in the middle of an imaginary box outlined by tackling dummies lying flat on the ground. The linemen would charge and try to knock us out of the box. Coach Koers whispered to me once to drop down onto the ground when junior center Jack Thompson charged at me. Jack tripped over me and dug his face into the ground bringing up in his face mask most of the surrounding turf. We had quite a laugh. Another time, Coach told me junior running back Tim Akin was going to attempt to dive over the goal line as we defenders were practicing our goal line stand. We set it up so I had a clear shot from my linebacker position as Tim dove. It took a half hour to stop his nose bleed and more than a month before he trusted the Coach when called upon as the designated ball carrier. Before then, there was the practice timeout when Mr. Mendez tried to pop a painful boil off of a player's arm and everyone was real close in watching. I yelled "pop" while violently squeezing into the air a stream of white colored lubricant from a squeeze tube I had lifted from the trainer's kit. Everyone ran off grossed out and fearing for their lives. The boil never popped that day.

There were scary times, a near tragedy in particular, which brought us closer together. It was that one afternoon following second practice of blistering hot two-a-days when Danny Veza and I noticed upon leaving the locker room that Dan Ferguson's locker had been untouched after practice. Danny found Dan on the bus, passed out, pale and barely breathing. We ran for Mr. Mendez who called for the ambulance during the pre 911 call days. Response times were much longer back then. We helped break open the lock on the cafeteria ice chest and placed bag after bag of ice around Dan's near lifeless body, now laid out in the shade outside the bus. That night, scared and stunned coaches and players met at the Christ the King Church for a vigil as we awaited Dan's miraculous recovery from heat stroke. We prayed as hard together as we ever played together. Dan thankfully made it, but missed an entire season.

There was the time Beach Grove was in the red zone, about to score. By the way, it was not yet then commonly called the red zone. They ran to the left and our Dave Shiflet ran up and hugged the runner. To the entire Trojan team disgust, Shiflet hugged the runner and passed him by to continue up field. We were mortified at the missed tackle as the Beach Grove runner crossed the goal line to toss the football to the ref. It would have been their winning score. But, the Beach Grove runner could not find the ball. We all looked back at Dave Shiflet sprinting the opposite direction up field. Dave knew where the football was. He had it.

We had extremely effective trap plays then, so effective and potent that the plays made regional news. Also, as pulling guards, Danny and I would lead the sweeps around the end. These were plays previously though too difficult for high school. Progressive Coach Purichia thought otherwise, imparting the playbook with complex plays and effective schemes. Monster right, Monster left were calls of a stunting defense. We were led by strong quarterbacks and an offensive line that to this very day I am braggingly confident blocked like no other team since, including high school, college or pro. A blocking assignment to us was a do or die situation. What we lacked in size, we overachieved in sticking to our blocks. That was Coach's expectation. Oh, we missed some blocks. I know I did. We were not perfect. We lost games. But I remember to this day every missed block. I especially remember the missed downfield block on a sweep where I whimped out still fearful of re-hurting my shoulder, and failed to block the last defender who kept us from scoring. I saw that missed block on 8 mm film. That was the day the coach could run the play instantly backward and forward, backward and forward. Missed block, missed block, missed block. I remember, Coach. I remembered the lesson as I moved on through pain and fear of injury a few years later in the military. I imparted that do not quit attitude to my son in his athletic endeavors. I remember that missed block and treasure Coach's expectations. I recall as well, the times I let the coach or team down and the resulting inner drive to self improve and sometimes failing at that. I learned that manhood stuff on top of Bacon Swamp.

No memory is complete without the visualization of Coach Koers in the school parking lot, t-shirt, gym shorts, long socks, coaches' cleats, blowing a whistle in the middle of a Friday afternoon snow blizzard in November. Certainly, we thought, the coaches would not force us outside that Friday for a pre-game day warm up for the Saturday game. Come on, Coach, it was a blizzard. We indeed did muster outside in the driving snow, under the roar of Coach Koer's standard refrain "It's a great day for football".

Another coaching legend joined us in those years, Coach Dullaghan. We had by that time assembled an awesome staff with an experienced team. By my senior year, I was in my fourth season as a starter, nearly everyone else, two and three year starters. Coach would often brag about our ability for audibles.

Two year starter and center Jack Thompson would instantly analyze and call the opposing defensive set up as we approached the line from the huddle. Apple and Banana were code words for the defensive set up. Audible play changes were frequent and effective. Everything seemed to rapidly develop from there. My senior classmates Daugherty, Markey, Fritz, Curson, Kinghorn, Veza, led the charge joined by a host of experienced, outstanding juniors, sophomores and freshmen, too numerous to mention. Each young athlete was becoming the foundation of a growing legend. And each year, there was no lack of talent coming up from championship quality, freshman teams.

Our victories back in those early years were not as impressive as modern days. Bishop Chatard today fields a ten time State Championship football program still going strong. Today's Trojans are a State power house in multiple sports. All this from a humble beginning. It is a little hard to find, but behind all the multitude of trophies in an ever expanding trophy case, one can still find the small 1965 All-Capital District Conference Trophy, the first trophy awarded to Bishop Chatard. Not as impressive perhaps as ones that read State Champions. But at the time, we thought we were champions. We competed in an era without sports program classes. No 2A, 3A or whatever based upon size. You simply showed up on the field or court and showed your game.

Praying before games? Our game time performances were immeasurably improved after Father Harpenau's "Our Father" in the pre-game huddle followed by his standard and devoutly religious stanza, "...Now go out there and beat those Protestants".

And rivalries? With 110 girls and some 55 boys in my class of 1967, we hopelessly outnumbered boys were quick to blame recently opened and overrated all-male Brebeuf Jesuit for stealing away other boys who would have instead been our classmates in arms against the onslaught of our class's blossoming high school girls. A fierce rivalry was born against the traitorous Jesuit boys. This rivalry became centered on the fields of competitive sports. But public schools were also a source of some rivalry. I recall the time a small band from the freshman football team had planned a rumble at the nearby Glendale Mall against City rival Broad Ripple High. Apparently the battle for the freshman City championship, yet undecided, was getting out of hand. The few freshmen marshaled in the school lobby to finalize plans before walking to the mall and engaging in something stupid. A few of us upper class lettermen got wind of the pending altercation and interceded. We had the freshmen take off their school jackets before they left, promising to watch over the jackets while they went to the mall. An hour and half later, the boys returned having called off the rumble. They had apparently decided it did not make sense to rumble without the jackets. Several days later one of the freshmen team leaders and I had a conversation about the event. I asked if he had learned a lesson from the incident. He said he did, adding that next time, if there ever was a next time, they would not be so stupid as to meet in the school lobby. Always the learning on top of Bacon Swamp.

Much has changed on top of Bacon Swamp the past 50 years since Bishop Chatard opened its doors. And there are years of stories. In addition to these related ramblings of this old football player, there are stories of a baseball team in 1964, perched on a public park wooden bench vying then for a City championship. I recall the games where there were absolutely no fans. And how about the stories of a basketball team losing every single basketball game its first varsity season. Got beat by Indianapolis Cathedral, then one of the State's top ranked teams, something like 125 to 35. Got beat by small farm town teams years before county school consolidations were ever dreamed of. That was real Indiana basketball. Some opponent farm schools had only 9 guys on the team. But those same teams had players so tall we counted each of them as two guys. So, I guess they had eighteen players. I played on the freshman team then, and then a year on JV. Or rather, I was an inept sub planted to cause the opposing high scorer to foul out or get kicked out for fighting me. Took my task so seriously at a home game that after horribly fouling an opposing star player as he drove for the basket, I heard the familiar voice of football Coach Purichia congratulating me as he was collecting tickets at the door for the upcoming varsity game. "That was a good cross body block", he said.

That was an era back then in which we never heard of soccer or lacrosse, let alone be able to spell them. Girls were either cheerleaders or blue clad, dancing Trojettes. No women sports. The facilities were limited. No weight room. We went instead on our own, on an irregular basis via un-air conditioned city bus to parishioner's Fred Hoffmeister's Studio in downtown Indianapolis on the top floor of an old, open window, condemned building. We met all the big time high school players at Fred's. We pumped iron and drove the "sled" at Fred's. We hated the "sled". You were not a champion football player in Indianapolis until you paid your dues against the clock as you drove the "sled" to beat the Cathedral players' times or the Scecina High School players' times. The times were chalked on the wall. Ask an old timer who claims he played football back then about the "sled". If he doesn't know about it, don't trust his stories of glory.

Facilities? How about members of the football and track teams crawling on hands and knees with buckets picking up rocks off the remnants of Bacon Swamp? Someone footed the bill to curb the track and dumped ashes on the track and a bunch of fill on top of the practice area. Players labored to level the fill, spread the ash. We laid sod and more sod. Ever try to lay sod by hand on a football field? It ain't easy and it ain't quick. But we players did it. We worked and we worked, motivated by the knowledge that some day, we could practice on a field without rocks. There was no baseball field then, nothing else, just the practice track outside the concrete curbing. We heard back then that the field could never be a real class facility because the zoning was too restrictive and the nearby homes objected to the potential noise and lights of a stadium. How disappointed we were. And these were the homes we graced with our door to door trick-or-treating on Halloween after practice; our dirty, smelly practice uniforms an appropriate costume of disguise for the evening.

I graduated from Bishop Chatard in 1967 and went far away to college. It was a four year military academy and I found it a tough go. I am not ashamed to say I thought of quitting a number of times in the early years. What kept me there and drove me on was a handful of personally supportive and inspirational academy schoolmates, some whose names are now sadly listed on a wall at the Viet Nam War Memorial. But no less a motivation to endure then and now came from Bacon Swamp. From Coaches Deem, Purichia, Koers, Dullaghan, Alexander, Moran, who instilled within me a winning attitude, the thirst for perfection and honor, and a courage to overcome loss and pain, from teachers and mentors like Gettelfinger, Harpenau, Marshall, Powell, Noone, McCurdy, Mendez, Mary Therese, who believed in me, opened my mind, fostered faith and who simply convinced me that I “could”, and from teammates, schoolmates and friends who taught me friendship, trust and loyalty. The Trojan family has accompanied me throughout a lifetime. Since I left, there have been wonderful things that have happened at Bishop Chatard. Great leaders and caring, service oriented citizens continue to graduate from this school of academic and leadership excellence. Many young men and women in this school have participated in a top notch athletic program and continue to add new dimensions to a heralded legacy of sportsmanship. New stories are formed each day for the story tellers of tomorrow. These stories are rooted in a place once considered foreboding and dangerous, but always a focal place of learning. And that learning has come from a host of capable, dedicated administrators, teachers, coaches and mentors, all supported by loyal alumni and parents.

At this writing, there is a new and exciting initiative at Bishop Chatard to expand even more boldly a decades long program of improving academic and sports facilities. There are real plans to bring a lighted football stadium, a track, baseball and softball fields and related appurtenances to that rocky remnant of Bacon Swamp. It has taken twenty thousand and 50 years for the dream to become a viable plan. The fund drive has begun. Soon, from that formerly foreboding and dangerous Bacon Swamp will emerge a triumphant Bishop Chatard High School football team with true home field advantage. The Trojans of Bacon Swamp.

October 14, 2011
Tampa, Florida

Additional source: Alice Ashby Roettger, “Bacon’s Swamp”: The Encyclopedia of Indianapolis, David Bodenhamer & Robert Graham Barrow, ed., 1994 *Indiana University Press*

About the Author: Ronald S. Trowbridge is a 1967 graduate of Bishop Chatard High School and played on the Trojan varsity football team from 1963 to 1966, becoming the first Trojan to letter all four years in a single sport. He was co-captain his senior year and earned All Capital District honors and Honorable Mention All-City. He also played basketball, baseball and track and was recognized as the singular student who as a spectator, attended every varsity basketball game, home and away during his four year attendance at Chatard. Ron was President of the Letterman's club as a senior and a two year winner of the School Spirit Award. He attended the United States Military Academy at West Point becoming the first Chatard graduate to attend the Academy. After graduating with a B.S. in General Engineering, he served 13 years in the US Army as a Military Police Officer attaining the rank of Major. Ron holds a Master of Science degree from the University of Southern California's Viterbi School of Engineering. He is owner of a small, commercial real estate company in Tampa, Florida. Now single, Ron has two grown children, a daughter, Heather, who is a third grade science and math teacher in Plant City, Florida, and a son, Justin, who is a commercial real estate development executive in Washington, D.C. Justin was the All-State goal keeper and captain of the 2001 National high school championship soccer team at Tampa Jesuit and the All ACC goal keeper and team captain of the Duke University soccer team where he led the Blue Devils to the 2004 Final Four of the Collegiate National Championship. Just to please his dad, Justin played one year of JV football at Tampa Jesuit. Heather and Justin's mother is a 1968 graduate of the former Indianapolis Ladywood High School where she was a varsity cheerleader for Brebeuf Jesuit and dated Brebeuf football players. Ron coached nine years (eighteen seasons) of youth Pony Baseball, including seven all-star Pony teams, two of which earned Florida State championships. Ron writes stories as a hobby and tries to avoid English teachers with red pencils. He dedicates this story to the Bishop Chatard Family on its 50th year anniversary.