

Northside Methodist Academy Football:

The Long Road to Friday Knights



Even though the history of football at Northside is relatively short, the road to our first home varsity game has been a long one, faced with many obstacles. Yet, it has been exciting to see how God's hand and timing have been in place throughout every step of the journey.

Discussion about having football at Northside goes back to the 1990's when Northside was establishing itself in the Wiregrass as a K-12th grade school. Throughout the years, Northside has had lots of success with athletics - winning dozens of state championships in the Alabama Christian Education Association (ACEA).

Traction for football started in late 2011, when then Athletic Director, Derek Kilgore, and Headmaster, Chris Frith, talked about starting football with an eight-man league in association with the ACEA. The school board agreed to pursue a team in that league and the work began. There was a lack of interest; however, from students and parents. They desired to have an 11-man team rather than an 8-man team, so the efforts quickly diminished.

In the summer of 2012, a new AD and Head of School were named. Paul Newton took over as AD and Matthew Johnson, who had been the business administrator for the school, took over as the Head of School. Coach Newton had a strong background in football and both Mr. Johnson and Coach Newton talked about plans to bring an 11-man team to Northside. It was their belief that it would take two years to create something that even resembled football at Northside. However, the more they talked and dreamed, the more they thought it might be possible to get it started sooner.

"Northside needs football. Football is a draw to a school and we lose many students to other schools due to us not having a football program." Mr. Johnson proposed, while addressing a Booster Club meeting in the fall of 2012. He went on to challenge the students, "Those of you who are brave enough to take the field, knowing that you will lose every game in the beginning, will do something not many kids can say they did - to trail blaze a football program for their school. Ten years from now when you watch the Friday night

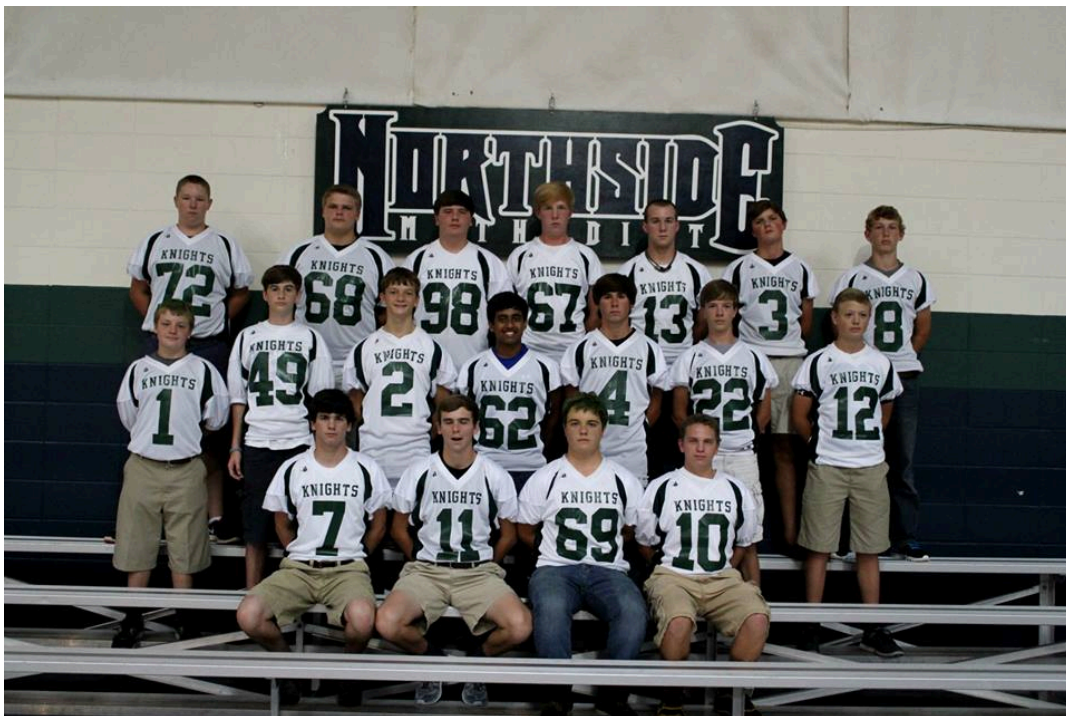
football shows on TV and you see Northside winning another state title, you can say, ‘ I was one that started that team.’”

Mr. Johnson’s challenge sparked excitement and interest from the parents and the student body. Soon after, an interest meeting with students was held by Coach Newton. It was at that time that both Mr. Johnson and Coach Newton thought football could become a reality at Northside.

Coach Newton and his assistant, Coach Michael Marks, set out on the journey of starting the team. It was not an easy road. Boys who were interested in playing, and who were not playing another sport at the time, began weight and conditioning training. Some realized early on that football wasn’t for them and the numbers dwindled. However, by the time spring workouts started, the players were wearing actual football gear. They were practicing what looked like actual football plays on the school’s old soccer practice field. Students and parents began to take notice, and excitement for Northside football took a new leap. The team held a scrimmage game on the school baseball field to conclude their spring workouts in May 2013. Mr. Johnson said, “It was a cool thing to see *our* guys playing football at *our* school. There was an excitement and energy I had never seen before.”

A Modified First Season

Since the school was now competing in the AISA, the 2013-14 season was in the middle of the scheduling cycle. Coach Newton had to find AISA teams that would play Northside in a JV type of schedule. He tried to find schools that had big enough programs to be able to field a younger team to play Northside JV. The hopes were that our guys wouldn’t get so beat up and discouraged that they quit football altogether. Coach Newton was able to schedule four exhibition games. The games were located among three different states at the other schools’ venues, but it was a start.



Expectations were low for that first modified season, but this season was a necessary barometer to see if football really had a future at Northside. Eighteen players took on the task of playing the four-game schedule.

Game 1 – Abbeville Christian – August 23, 2013

When the Knights took the field and were announced for the first time, it was an incredible sight. It didn't matter how the team performed. All that mattered was seeing the green and white represented on the football field. It was an ugly start for the Knights. Turnovers and mistakes showed how young and inexperienced a team they were. After being down 30-0 in the first quarter, history happened. Coach Newton called in a play that he thought might work. It was a quick-toss sweep play. Quarterback Landon Pilcher tossed the ball to tailback Nick Manzella and 86 yards later, Northside's first touchdown in school history was scored!



Not only did they score the first touchdown in school history, but they scored two more that night with a 47-yard QB sneak by Landon Pilcher and a 77-yard pass from Pilcher to Caleb Chandler. The Knights lost the game 50-20, but it felt like a victory for the Northside family.

The Other 3 Games

The rest of the schedule saw the Knights travel to Georgia to play Sherwood Academy - where the movie "Facing the Giants" was filmed, to Florida to play Robert Monroe, and to Troy to finish out the season playing Pike Liberal. All these games ended in losses. Two ended without scoring any Northside points. The Knights finished with fewer players than they started with due to injuries.

A New Chapter

The Knights were ready to take the next step, but there were some bumps in the road. Both Coach Newton and Mr. Johnson stepped down from their positions at Northside to take other jobs the Lord called them to do. However, God constantly reminded us that He was in control and that if He wanted football at Northside, it would happen.

Great things have happened over the spring and summer for the Northside Football Program. The Knights are now an official member of AISA football with ten games on their schedule for the 2014-15 season. The number of players has grown to over thirty taking the field on Friday night. A full coaching staff has been brought in, led by Head Coach/ AD Dustin Harrison, and the Knights have great expectation for this first official season. New Head of School Bill Reif has continued and supported the football vision and has plans to take it to the next step with the leadership of Harrison.

History will be made this Friday night when the Knights take the field for their first home game in school history. "Our expectations are very high. We believe in setting a high standard for our team. I'm not just talking about wins and losses but also representing Northside well on and off the field, being good leaders, and being Christ-like." Coach Dustin Harrison said in a local radio interview. Mr. Johnson was asked what he was most looking forward to about this first home game. He replied, "I'm most looking forward to watching the Knights run through that paper sign and take the field."

Coach Newton said, "I know the team has grown and improved. I am looking forward to that first win. Go Knights!" Mr. Johnson went on to say, "I expect it will be an emotional time for me, knowing how it all started and how much work has been put into getting this team here. There have been so many people that have worked so hard for this team. From getting equipment, putting stickers on helmets, wrapping sore ankles, and the list goes on. But most of all, I'm thankful that the Lord brought football to Northside and that I had even a little part of helping make that happen."

To Be Continued...