

## 2000 Football Team

In the long and storied history of Fitchburg High School football, there have only been three undefeated and untied Red and Gray squads, the squads of 1895, 1993 and today's Hall of Fame inductee the Raiders of 2000. Some teams came extremely close to this tremendous accomplishment such as the 1922 squad which went 10-1 losing only to Maywood, Illinois, and Massachusetts powers



and Boston College High. This great Red and Gray squad featured stars like Larry Hobbs, Bart Hodge and Erwin Beach. The Red and Gray eleven of 1927 went 9-1 outscoring opponents 278 to 7. Featuring a lighting tailback named John Oliva and small dynamic linemen called "Iron" Walsh only lost to Malden High 7-0 in a contest which the Red and Gray faithful called "highway robbery" for decades after the contest.

The 1930 and 1935 FHS teams of Coach Clarence Amiott which featured stars like Al Secino, Rollie Blake, Bill Whelan, Jimmy Leo, "Ossie" MacLean, Lauri Shattuck and Carl Fellows both went 10-1, only to be beaten by Eastern Mass. giant Brockton, and then there was the 1964 team which went 7-0-2 having two ties against Gardner and Nashua. The 1964 Red Raider squad featured the state's very best player in Warren Muir, who later became an All American running back at the University of South Carolina. Then there was Coach Ray Cosenza's squad of 1998, which went 11-0 in regular season only to lose a heart breaker against an outstanding Springfield Cathedral squad 28-21 in the post-season. This great team was led by big Keith Leavitt and a tough running back named Justin LeBlanc along with a young quarterback named Jason Twomley.

The 1895 squad went 4-0 in the "push and pull" era of the gay nineties which featured "flying wedge" football in which participants played a violet game without helmets, while the second Red and Gray squad was Coach Amiott's team of 1933 which featured Bill Mackie, Jimmy Leo, the Esielonis brothers, Stanley and Felix, and Russell Dik, handled its eastern Mass. opponents like Brockton, Brookline, Arlington and Quincy with relative ease and on Thanksgiving morning of 1933 stopped the Blue Devils of Leominster 20 to 12 in a contest which many local football historians called the greatest Turkey Day Classic of them all. That Blue Devil squad which had been undefeated for nearly two complete seasons was led by the incomparable Ronny Cahill who many considered LHS' great player.

The third Raider squad which completed its season with an unbeaten and untied slate was the 2000 team, which is being inducted into the Fitchburg High School Athletic Hall of Fame just eleven years after their fabulous 12-0 season. That's how great their accomplishment was. Coming into the pre-season workouts Coach Ray Cosenza was guardedly optimistic about the 2000 Red Raider's chances. He based his positive thoughts on the fact that the squad had had tremendous spring and summer workouts, which showed the dedication of this group, particularly his seniors, a great finish in the 1999 season when FHS had finished with six straight victories after a tough 1-4 start, and senior leadership from the likes of Frank McDonald, Jason Twomley, Marcus DiNatale, Tim Caron, Tim Keenan and Jimmy Alexander. But even Coach Cosenza could not imagine in his wildest dreams what the 2000 campaign would bring. Like the old Amiott teams of the 1920's and 1930's, the Red

and Gray schedule was loaded with powerful opponents like St. John's, Milford, Turkey Day rival Leominster and Eastern Mass. powerhouses Xaverian and the Boxers of Brockton High.

The Raiders opened their storied season with solid victories over good squads like St. Peter-Marian, Nashoba and Milford and there began to be a buzz amongst the Red and Gray faithful that this could be the Red Raider squad that could go all the way. The faithful looked at the power running backfield of Frank McDonald and Jason Twomley who were aided by the devastating blocking of junior fullback Norman Cole who was becoming a major force. Running behind a solid offensive line led by the likes of Sean Roy, Marcus DiNatale, Tim Caron, Josh Raboin, Anthony Fanelli, Mike Thomas and Jimmy Alexander, the Red Raiders averaged nearly thirty points a game as they rolled through their first three opponents, but the critics said, "Let's see how they do in October."

Facing the Red and Gray in early October as the leaves turned into their beautiful colors, Coach Cosenza and his gang would face one of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts' toughest schedules, St. John's, Brockton and Xaverian. Just before the Columbus Day holiday the Raiders faced their biggest challenge when they trailed St. John's of Shrewsbury 10-6 at halftime. As Thomas Paine had said in 1776, "These were the times that tried men's souls." And the 2000 Red Raiders answered the call with a brilliant second half rally, which found the Raiders on top 20-17 as the final whistle was blown. Frank McDonald had a "monster second half" with powerful runs which left the Pioneers scattered all over the field and when the game was finished the Raiders held a 20-17 score and a fourth straight victory.

Following the great comeback victory over St. John's, the Raider took on two of eastern Massachusetts' most powerful elevens, Brockton and Xaverian, and the kids from the North County showed the big city boys, that they were made of the right stuff! Fitchburg 28 Brockton 14 and FHS 31, Xaverian 14. Now the Boston Globe and the Boston Herald knew that FHS was a major powerhouse and the city of Fitchburg reveled in the glory of the Red and Gray. Coach Cosenza loved that the squad was made up of individuals who played for their teammates, their community located along the Nashua and their high school located on Academy Street. It really was "Hail to the Red and Gray" squad.

As the weather turned colder, and FHS returned to their Central Massachusetts' opponents the "Big Red and Gray Machine" rolled. The Raider defense, led by inspirational tri-captain Tim Caron, became an immovable object. The "D" line of Marcus DiNatale, Ernie King, Josh Raboin, Mike Thomas, Tim Roy and Tom Foote became FHS' version of the steel curtain. And if you were lucky enough to escape the defensive line, you they had to face Frank McDonald, Jason Twomley, Tim Keenan, John Shea and BJ Fitz in the backfield. The Raiders cruised into Thanksgiving morning averaging nearly 40 points a game in their previous five contests, and the faithful came to Crocker Field to enjoy the classic.

But Coach John Dubzinski and his Blue Devils came into Crocker with a defensive scheme to stop the undefeated Raiders. The Devil's defensive was going to stop the Raiders' inside running attack, featuring Frank McDonald behind the tremendous blocking of Norman Cole and the quarterback sneaks of Twomley, and for most of the first half the Devils were successful. As the teams went off the gridiron at halftime the Raiders appeared frustrated, and an upset of epic proportions appeared possible for the Devils.

Those dreams of a Blue Devil upset would disappear with the play of an unexpected Raider star, which would have the half of his life on the Thanksgiving morning of 2000. Tim Keenan was the last of the Keenan's of West Fitchburg who had starred on the gridiron for the Raiders in the 1990's, and he would do them proud this Turkey Day morning. Early in the second half Tim intercepted a Blue Devil pass, as they were beginning to threaten the Raider end zone. Then Tim would take a Leominster punt around his 20-yard line, and deftly scamper up the sidelines to midfield to set up a Raider touchdown, which featured the bull-like rushes of Frank McDonald and Jason Twomley. Finally Tim would catch a down and out pass from Jason elude the first Leominster tackler and race down the field

for a 75 yard touchdown which finished the Blue Devil's hopes of an upset. As the Faith United clock approached 12:30 pm the Raiders marched off Crocker Field with a satisfying victory, and now it was on to the Super Bowl.

It was cold at Coughlin Field at Worcester State, as the Red Raiders took on Springfield Central in a contest of contrasts, central with its super speed and FHS with its strength and dogged determination. It was so cold the Eskimos would have stayed at home, but hundreds of Red and Gray fans arrived in clothing that was suited for a visit to the North Pole. Central broke out of the starting gate quickly with their lightning fast tailback named Don Jones, and for the first time since the St. John's game in early October, the Raiders trailed 7-0. But that just increased this Raider's blue-collar determination. You are quick, so we will just hit you a little harder, and soon Central was putting the ball on the turf and FHS took control. And the temperature continued to plummet on this sunny December afternoon. Even Coach DiGeronimo seemed cold in his ever-present shorts.

First Mike Thomas recovered a quarterback fumble by Central near mid-field and the Big Red and Gray machine went into overdrive. McDonald smashed into the middle of the line, Twomley skirted the end on option plays and unheralded Norman Cole blasted Centrals defense with tough inside yardage. As Springfield's defense crept closer to the line of scrimmage, Jason faked to Frank and Norm and stepped back and floated a perfect pass to Ryan Davenport for a 27 yard TD pass. The Raiders had tied the game, 7 to 7 but it would not stay that way for long.

Central started another drive with their lightning backs and reached midfield quickly. Then Frank McDonald laid the lumber on Centrals quarterback on an option play, and the ball squirted loose. And alert Jimmy Alexander pounced on the ball and sprinted toward the end zone. Fifty-two yards later, the Raiders had a lead they would never relinquish. FHS went into the halftime with a 20-13 lead, but the faithful were still nervous about those Springfield Central backs, as they slowly froze to death as the sun set in the December sky. Fitchburg received the second half kickoff and immediately showed one and all their greatness. Running behind seven blocks of granite named Roy, DiNatale, Caron, Raboin, Fanelli, Thomas and Alexander the Raider offense rumbles down the field like Patton's tanks in Germany in 1945 for nearly seventy-five yards in nine minutes. It was not pretty but it was devastating. There was nothing that Springfield Central could do to stop Frank McDonald, never mind Cole and Jason Twomley. When Frank burst into the end zone it was 27-13 and there were less than two minutes left in the third quarter and the Golden Eagles from Central were finished. As the clock slowly moved toward zero the Raider fans and players were jumping for joy and hugs and kisses were being passed out freely. For the first time in 67 years the Red and Gray were going to finish undefeated and untied. This "lunch pail" team, which truly represented the blue-collar community along the Nashua, was now going into the history books. The players shook hands with their leader Coach Ray Cosenza, Craig Chalifoux, Paul DiGeronimo, "Nick" O'Reilly, Chris Canning, Dale Burg and trainer Alan Twomley for all of their hard work and dedication. The 2000 Red and Gray eleven was one for the ages, forever enshrined in the annals of great FHS football teams and the FHS Hall of Fame.