

# "IT WAS JUST HARD-NOSED FOOTBALL." 1929-1979 SEASONS.



## BY DAVIN VANATTA, GREG DEROSA

Davin and I (Greg) were interested in football late last summer when I started two a day practices and Davin, an avid fan, began to have hopes for the upcoming Sailor season. The 1979 football team had talent but wasn't expected to pull off a state championship. Head coach Mark Drake and his assistants Bob Harris, Chris Decker, Bo Yennie, and student teacher assistants, Richard Southall and John Ramunno, pulled the Sailors through a winning season. This was the first time in Steamboat's football history that any one team from Steamboat had won the state championship. In 1929 the Steamboat football team won the Yampa Valley championship by winning all six games played, and they were never scored against all year. This 1979 victorious team seemed so extraordinary that we wanted to see what the team 50 years ago was like in comparison. We endeavored to seek some of the old time winners from 1929 and we talked with members of this year's team to see what differences there were. We had the opportunity to visit with Glenn Werner, one of the players, and the coach, Henry Zehner, of the 1929 team. Plus this year's winners were eager to tell us their experiences. First we spent several days in the library researching the 1929 team and found that Glenn Werner played an important role on the 1929 team and still lives in Steamboat.

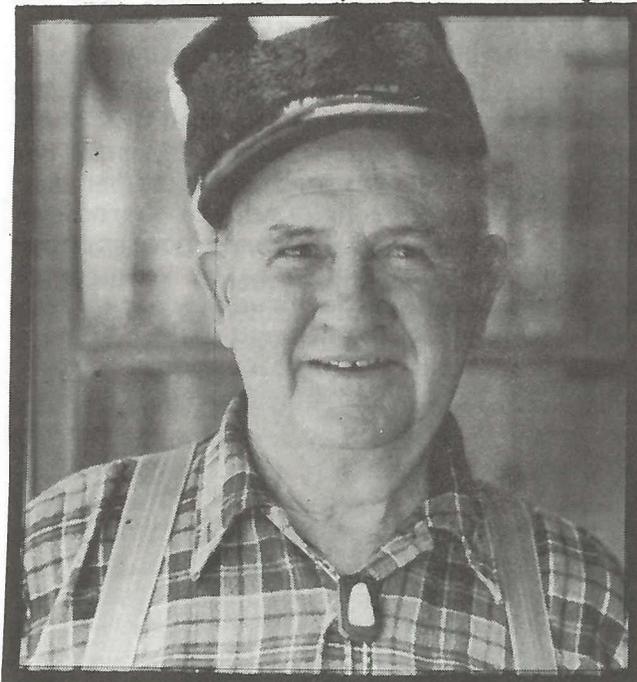
We also found Coach Zehner in Hayden and they both shared the success story with us.

Henry Zehner, the 1929 football coach, presently lives in Hayden with his family. Coach Zehner started his coaching career in Steamboat in 1928, and by 1929 was the head coach. 1929 was a very good year for Coach Zehner and his Sailor football team. They were undefeated and unscored against while capturing the Yampa Valley championship. Mr. Zehner talked to us about Steamboat's success story.

"I came to Steamboat in the fall of 1929. Mr. W.K. Webb was the coach at that time. He was a man who had just come into the community from New York. When he came Steamboat was short a football coach. Webb took over the coaching, but he didn't have the academic training to stay in the school. He was a student of football, especially underneath Knute Rockne. I learned a great deal from Coach Webb, because I helped him coaching the 1928 team. The thing that we tried to introduce was what we called 'Notre Dame Football,' and at that time there were really only two basic types of football. A Western coach, Pop Warner, football star and coach at Stanford and U.S.C., used what they then called the single wing and the other was the double wing. The important thing used was reverses

and regular power plays, you see, from wing-pattern football. The reason that Notre Dame football was so great at that time was because of Knute Rockne. The horsemen of Notre Dame at that time were tops in the whole country. The only team that ever seemed to beat 'em was Nebraska, and I happened to see one or two of those games. The first year we used the Notre Dame type of football. It was called the Notre Dame shift. We had three men in the backfield and the quarterback right behind the line. Then they would shift two on two which gave us an advantage over the defense. I think they got to where they could go to either side, when they adjusted to the t-shift. We used this shift because all the other teams had to shift with them.

"We had some real good boys. Paul Young was one of them, our halfback. He weighed about 160 pounds and was very versatile. He could run and pass, but was mostly an open field runner. Bill Daugherty was our line puncher. He was real stocky and quick so he could hit the line with a lot of power. Our team captain, John Childress, was also a line puncher and punter. Whenever we got into scoring position we always used the T formation. The cross bucks with two good line punchers could make it pretty effective. We had two good ends, Dick Fletcher and Frank Brockner. We only had one fullback behind the line, so our ends were responsible for turning the



**1929 CHAMPIONSHIP FOOTBALL COACH  
HENRY ZEHNER.**

plays in.

"I went to a coaching clinic in Ohio taught by Knute Rockne. I was there for three weeks and learned a lot about football. I wasn't very experienced since the extent of my football knowledge ended my senior year in high school.



## **I LEARNED A GREAT DEAL ABOUT FOOTBALL FROM KNUTE ROCKNE.**

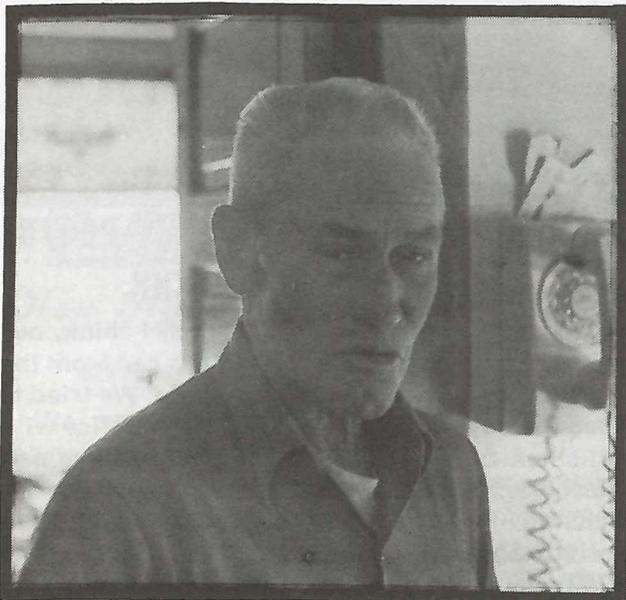
As far as condition was concerned, I think, our boys were in good shape. We always ran from the high school to the rodeo grounds field. We tried to keep the boys in shape, and started practice with calisthenics. We had quite a few regular football exercises. We always used our time pretty efficiently, I thought. We would have light scrimmages on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and a really tough scrimmage once a week. We had goal line stands and goal line practices once a week, trying to find ways of scoring on the goal line. I think the fact that our boys worked so hard in practice attributed to us having no trouble with injuries that year.

Glenn Werner is the only player I know that is still around Steamboat. He played guard for us. He was only about 145 pounds, but he was a good guard. He had a knack for defense that not many guards have. He made a lot of unassisted tackles. In fact Glenn was the one who won the championship against Craig. It was late in the fourth quarter when Craig fumbled, and Glenn picked up the ball and got the safety for Steamboat. We won the Craig game 2-0.

"One of the hardest things about being a coach was firing up the team. The school and townspeople helped a lot in that category. Every Friday we would have announcements and rallies that would build school spirit. That was one of the most effective things we had for firing up the team. To keep the team spirit alive there were always the fans. We always had a good following of people for our games. The Lions Club was behind us and they invited us to lunches at different times. Before the games we would

have a pep rally with all the kids in town. The kids were always willing to do anything, like little skits and once in a while we would bring in one of the stars from earlier years to give a pep talk. That always helped. A number of effective things built team spirit, like sometimes we would have the whole team go out the window. By gosh, things like that boosted spirit!"

Coach Zehner concluded the interview with thoughts of the past and his feelings when he stopped teaching and coaching, "My folks had a ranch here. I had to make a choice whether to stay at school or be a rancher. Once I got out of coaching I really missed it. I loved working with the kids, and I loved the small town community and closeness of our students and staff."



### **GLENN WERNER STILL A PROUD SAILOR**

Glenn Werner, a lifetime resident and rancher in Steamboat Springs, recalled for us many of the memories of the winning 1929 team fifty years ago. "I went to elementary school at Mesa, then to high school in town, where the junior high is now. We had 33 who graduated in my class. There were 22 guys on our football team and coach Henry Zehner was our gallant leader. He was tough and a good coach.

"Practices were held over at the rodeo grounds. Every day we had to run from the high school to the practice field, and Coach ran right along with us. Practices never got boring. We always had plenty of drills to do and plays to run. After practice we would all run back to the high school and then be on our way home.

"Transportation was different then. Not many people had cars so it was hard to get from place to place. I drove my Model T sometimes except during the winter when I blocked it up to keep the tires off the snow. Local supporters helped us get to games. No busing was available then, so the team would just car pool with fans. Believe it or not, we went all the way to Glenwood, Meeker and Craig for some games.

"Our closest game of the season was against Craig when we won 2-0. Both teams went up and down the field, unscoring for three and one half quarters. Late in the fourth quarter Craig fumbled on their own goal line. I picked up the ball and scored a two point safety. Throughout the game it snowed hard, and by the end of the game there was six inches of snow on the field. That was the Yampa Valley championship game and we were the champs of 1929.

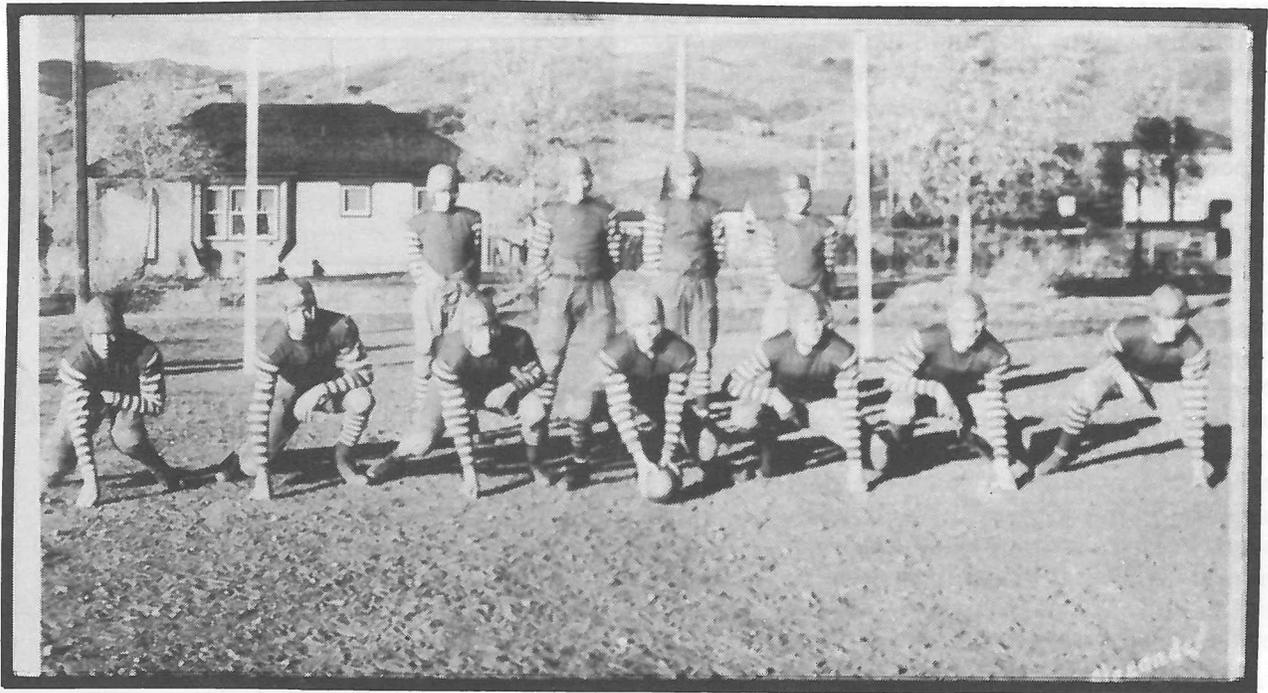
"We didn't have a lot of turnovers then, because we weren't sophisticated enough to pass much. The Craig game was mostly a kicking game because of the snow. Most of the season we couldn't pass much, but in one game against Oak Creek we really capitalized on our passing game. We just couldn't seem to get the ball across the line by running, so we passed our way to victory, winning 19-0."

Glenn talked to us about the community support during the 1929 season. "The town and fan support during the season really helped the team a lot. The people would show up at the games each week yelling and rooting for our team. During the Craig game we had so many people there it was like closing up the town. You couldn't even buy a postage stamp that day. Sometimes our fans would even load a piano on a truck and play music during the games. We had four football cheerleaders that year, two boys and two girls, one from each of the four classes. They wore sailor outfits and would lead the crowd in cheers with their megaphones."

We were interested in the different kind of equipment used then as opposed to now. We concluded that we are pampered now as Glenn told us about the uniforms then. "Most of our equipment in 1929 was made from leather. Our helmets were leather with no face guards. Not many people got hurt, but every now and then someone would sprain an ankle. We had the same type pads that they have now except ours were made out of leather and more primitive. Our shoes were leather high tops and at the time



**GLENN'S SAFETY WON THE STEAMBOAT,  
CRAIG GAME 2-0.**



### COACH ZEHNER'S 1929 FOOTBALL TEAM

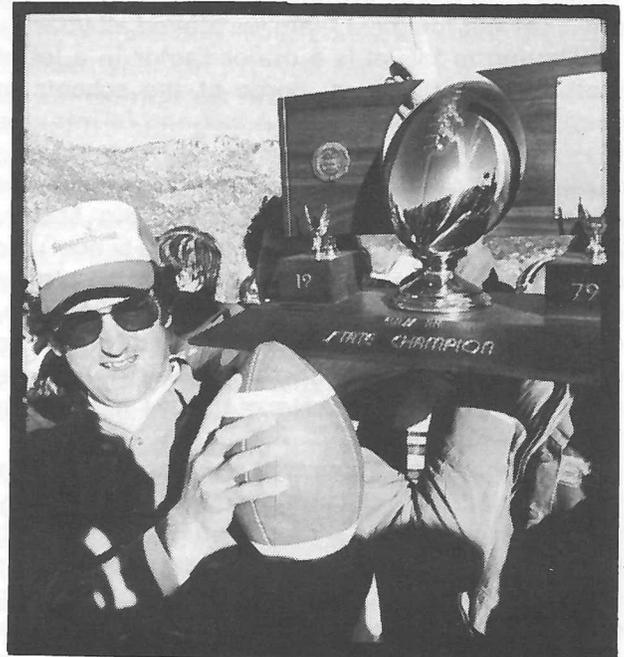
cost \$6.50 a pair with cleats of hard leather. The school bought all of our equipment except our shoes. When I was a senior I sold mine to a sophomore for \$5.00, which most players did.

"Fifty years ago the goal posts were on the goal line, not like they are now. Lots of guys ran into the goal post, but none of them were hurt. Also I remember when we played Oak Creek, the field wasn't level by any means. When we kicked off, the ball went clear out of the field because it was downhill. We had to kick off three times before we could get it on the field.

"The biggest honor we had on the 1929 team was never being scored against all year. The closest anyone ever got was the twenty yard line and there were no field goals. We felt good, not only because no one scored against us, but also because we kept them well away from the goal line. It was just hard-nosed football in those days."

Mark Drake, a coach here for the past ten years, experienced along with the team, feelings of success. His endeavors and pursuits on the field have brought the winner's circle to Yampa Valley residents for the first time in 50 years. Mark told us, "I don't even know for sure what equipment was used in '29. I'm sure the helmets were considerably different than what we have. Theirs were made of leather, and now we have all of this plastic and fiberglass. Probably every piece of equipment we have now is more modern than what they had in '29 and I think the game has changed considerably because of the equipment. The tackling form and hitting techniques have changed. I think that if you're a tough individual you get the job done either way, though, with fancy plastic or hard leather.

"We knew that the 1979 team had to play



### STEAMBOAT 12 BUENA VISTA 0

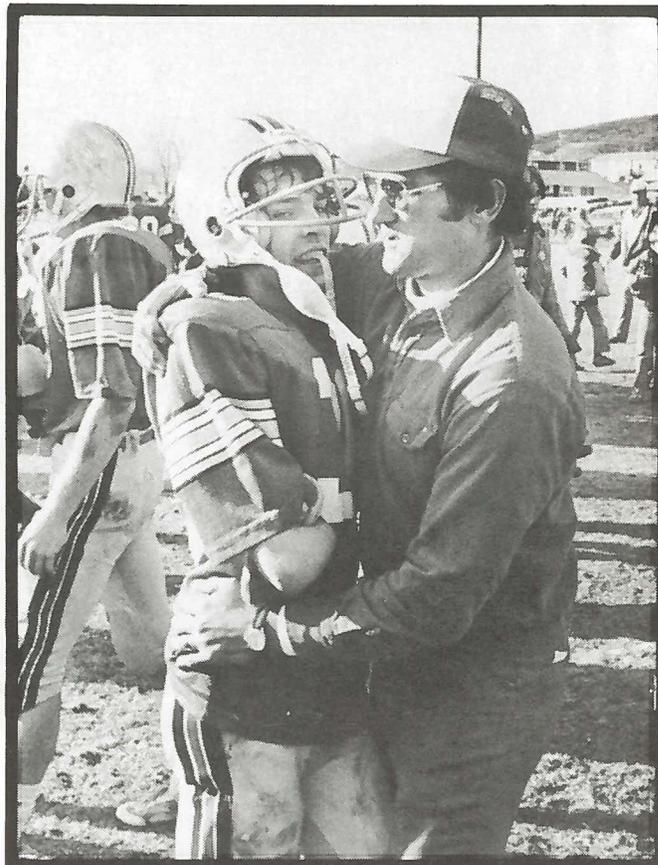
together as a team. It wouldn't be just one individual that would carry us through the season. We had a lot of outstanding individuals and everybody worked together well. There were some individual efforts that we didn't plan on that really came through. We tried to create a family unity, and that really helped us. When we were beginning we felt that we had a good team, but hadn't displayed it. We still felt our good team could get into the playoffs. We had to discipline ourselves against mental errors, so we stuck with an original game plan. We went back and re-evaluated everything and felt that we were doing right, but we needed to keep stressing the right things more. The kids worked hard and

once we got a win or two under our belt we got momentum going. It seemed like each week we got better as the season progressed. By the end of the season we were 11-2, nine regular season wins and four playoff games."

Coach Drake was pleased with team consistency and dedication of the individuals who comprised the team effort. "Most individual goals weren't selfish; the players mainly wanted to help the team with their talent. We had a unique group of individuals, and we kept noticing after the game everyone would be happy for a while, then just sit with sighs of relief. It was all business, and we weren't finished yet. We had many tough opponents, but Gunnison was undoubtedly the toughest team we played. They were the same size as us and had the same speed. We had a really good ball game against them in Gunnison. We were trailing for a while, then we had a scoring spurt with three touchdowns in six or seven minutes. I think that kind of broke their backs. When we went back to play them in the playoffs, it was really tough. We won 14-8. They were, without a doubt, the most physical and toughest team we played all year.

"Having to travel is a major factor in a lot of football performances. Some of the schools in Denver just had to hop on a bus and in minutes they were at the field ready to play. We had some three-hour trips like to Rangely, Glenwood and Aspen. I definitely think that's a big factor. Another factor is that of being a small school; we often don't have much depth. Some of the bigger schools don't have to worry about size and depth. On the actual traveling squad we had thirty-two players. Believe it or not, that's the smallest we have had in ten years. Normally we have from sixty to seventy-five.

"With the small amount of players we had this year we had a lot of good practices. We usually started around four o'clock, on the field with flexes. Then we would practice one phase of our specialty game like punting and punt receiving or kickoffs. Then we would break down and work on individual problems like in the defensive backfield, the line, and offensive backfield. Then we'd gather as a team and scrimmage or run plays. Monday was usually a light practice with lots of running and flexes. Then we would have the scouting report. Tuesday was defense night, concentrating on defensive plays and Wednesday offense. Thursdays we had a review of both defense and offense, and then Fridays we played the game. Once we got to the playoffs we asked ourselves if we should continue doing what we usually did in practice or change. I asked some players for their opinion, but we just stuck with the original practice schedule. There wasn't a day we didn't go outside. We would go out, then come in to finish practice because of the freezing weather. One practice session it was only three



## THE THRILL OF VICTORY

degrees, but we still went out for a while."

An important aspect of winning is the coach's as well as the team's philosophy. Coach Drake talked with us about some of his thoughts concerning this year's victories. "The main thing that I strived for was the acceptance by the other coaches in our league. This was my goal, to be accepted by the other coaches and respected. My first few years, I was so young, and as a head coach going against other league teams with more experienced coaches, I knew they looked at me as an inexperienced coach. I felt they really didn't have that much respect for me. I felt I finally earned the other coaches' respect when they voted me Northwest League Coach in 1978.

"I really don't know if I am any tougher than the other coaches. That's something that I would like to know in my own mind. I'd like to take time off to go watch other successful high school programs. I'd like to see how they run their practices, how they are organized, and what they stress during practices. I've never been able to do that because as soon as I got out of college I went into coaching right away. I've never had time to actually scout other coaches. Sometimes you wonder just how you stack up in comparison with other coaches.

Reflecting on this year's beginning and ending of a winning season Coach Drake discussed his feelings about the victory and the upcoming possibilities of future winning seasons.

"I felt at the beginning of the year our health status and maturity would matter. Then the community rallied around us, it was phenomenal. I couldn't believe the support the community gave. I don't think you could ask for anything better, especially when you travel 160 miles for the state championship game and have more fans there than the home team. That just goes to show the fan's support of the football program. When we got into the playoffs, I've never seen so many fans at a high school football game.

"After the state game a lot of the players were actually crying, not so much that they were happy tears, but sad tears too because they knew it was the last time they would get to play together as a team. The team really stressed family unity. The hardest part of my job next year is that we're losing a tremendous amount of talent on the line. We will have to rebuild our entire offensive and defensive lines. Our whole backfield is coming back and the defensive secondary and we feel that if we can rebuild our line while they're young, we can get experience for them early. We're hoping that this year's success will give us the confidence that we need. Also next year's kids played one on one everyday in practice against the team that was the best in the state of Colorado. If next year's team works like they did this year, I think we will have a pretty successful season.

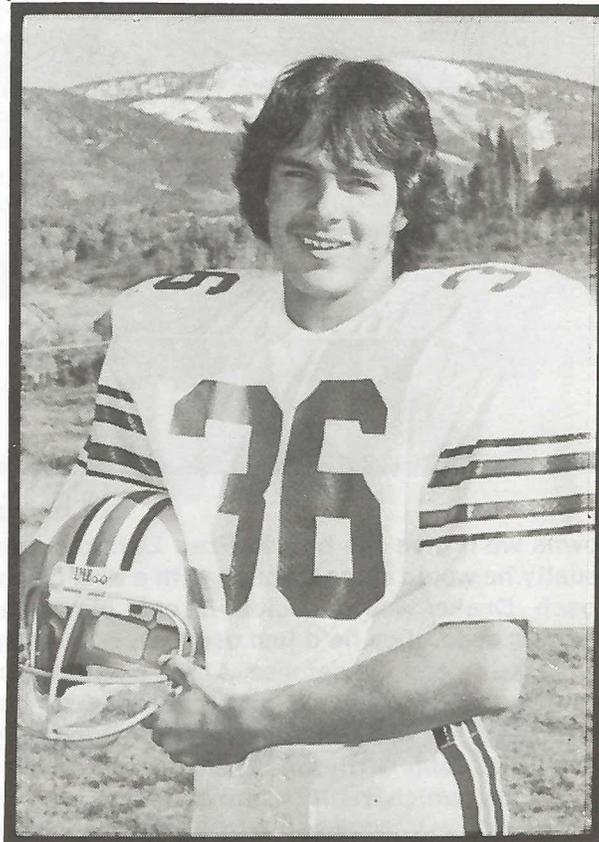
"Even with the energy crisis, I can't foresee doing away with the athletic program, but I'm sure there's going to be cuts made. They'll probably have to eliminate lots of meals and kids will have to bring a brown bag at times. Game schedules might be cut back. Maybe instead of nine league games there might be eight.

"All of the money receipts from football goes into all of Steamboat's athletics. Exactly how much varies from year to year, but this next year it will be quite a bit more because of the playoff games. Even on away playoff games we get a certain percentage, but then our expense bill is taken care of. Football usually supports itself. Its costs are a bit higher simply because of the equipment. Also just because we have a real good season doesn't mean our sport brings in extra money. It's divided equally between all of the sports."

"I think this year I was fortunate to have extraordinary kids because of all the hard work. Some of the guys really work hard in the weight room during the summer, and it pays off. I think this was a big factor in the season, because if we would have lost a few individuals it could have been a different story. I think that's what made them extraordinary. They're a phenomenal group of guys with a great attitude. Their hard work and attitude paid off in the end."

Tom Southall, a member of the 1979 winning

team, excels in numerous ways on and off the football field. His talents are exemplified in many athletic and scholastic endeavors. He spoke with us about the way the team felt pre-

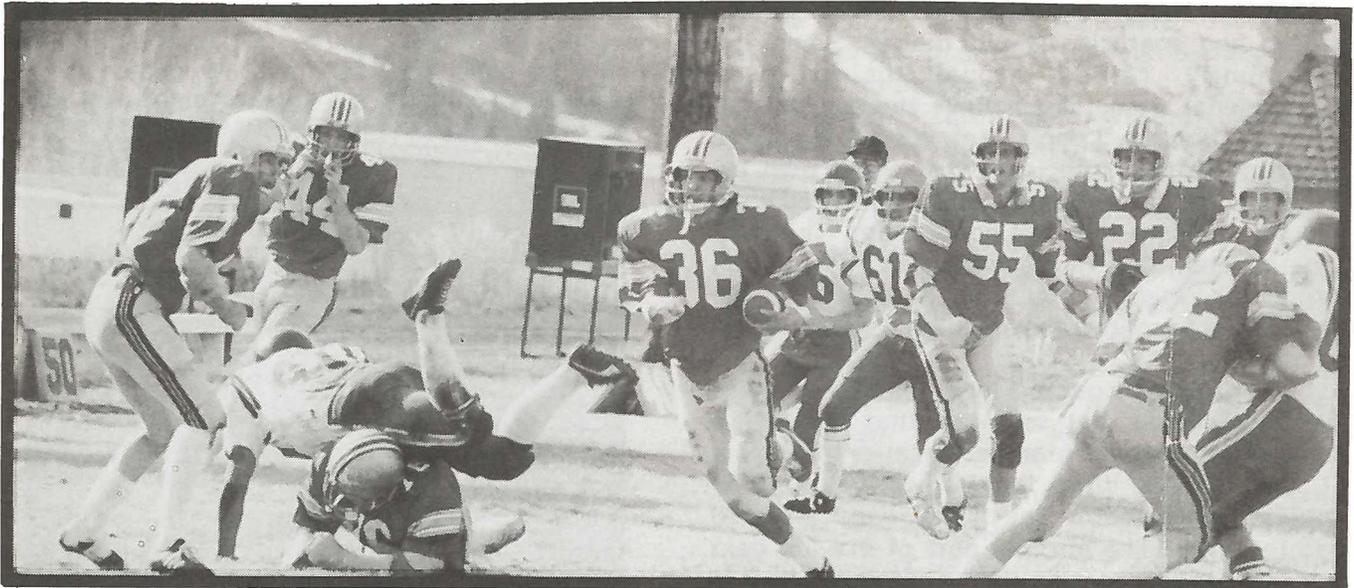


### **TOM SOUTHALL — COLORADO OUTSTANDING BACK OF 1979**

season. "We knew we had some talent, but we never dreamed of being state champions. As the year progressed we turned into a championship team. Each week we had a different saying that went along with a movie we saw. I can't remember all of them, but I think each week as they changed it gave us a newer and higher goal to shoot for. We knew we had a pretty good chance and there were several of us who played on varsity last year, so we did have some experience. A couple of guys went to a football camp and just about everybody spent time in the weight room working out. Coach worked us hard, but we still never dreamed of being state champions."

Tom Southall is considerably small for a tailback, but he certainly gets the job done. "I weigh 140 lbs and am only 5'8". I think my size intimidates the defense somewhat, but my quickness definitely helps. After a few plays my quickness earns the respect of the defense. My favorite play is the pitch sweep where the quarterback pitches the ball to me and I am led by the tight end and tackle, to sweep around the end."

Tom talked to us more about some "bread and butter" first down plays. "Usually on short



## IT'S ALL TEAMWORK

downs we'd give the ball to Fred Latimer, and usually he would come through with a first down. Coach Drake would decide if one play was working good, then he'd just use that, depending on the game and the defense. At the beginning of the year I played both offense and defense, but then some of the other guys started coming along, like John Gittleson. Then I didn't have to play both, which really contributed to my offensive success because I had a chance to rest. Joe Ramunno had just come off of three operations and got his finger cut off. So we didn't always have the same offensive and defensive starting line ups. Each game we had different people, so it was kind of hard to get together and play as a team, but we kept our heads up and didn't let it bother us."

Joe Ramunno came back from injuries and played an excellent season for Steamboat. Tom continued to reminisce about the winning season. "We played Craig and beat them, then went down to Denver to play Holy Family. I think the opportunity to travel to Denver helped us in preparing for the Buena Vista game. When we got in the playoffs, it was exciting because it was the first time for Steamboat. The knowledge of being in the playoffs kept us going. Football didn't get old at all. Even at the end of the season we guys still wished we were playing."

Tom talked more about the wonders of winning and his personal feelings about his own football success. "It was an exciting experience. The team had been together since the middle of August, four months. I was not only happy for myself, but for my team and teammates. Even before the championship game, we had to realize this season was for all the marbles, and we'd gone too far to lose now. So we got it together and won. We were nervous the first half of the finals, but I think the fact of being in the state championship

game brought out the butterflies.

"We had a definite advantage, the fans who backed us. Even when we traveled on long trips we had lots of fans who really supported us. It was great to know if we lost or won it would not only be important to us, but for the whole community.

"It was really my goal after not making offensive back of the league to be the outstanding back in the state. I worked especially hard during the playoff and played at my peak each game, not only for me, but for my team too. I ended up making a total of thirty touchdowns during the season and was awarded Outstanding Back in the state, 1979. That was great! On the field when we got the trophy we did our celebrating. In the locker room afterward, we realized that this would be the last time we would play together as a team. We were a real close group of people, like a family, even those who weren't on the starting lineup. I think the family feeling went through everyone who went to Buena Vista. It was a great experience."

After fifty years, football tactics and equipment styles have changed, but the game still has the same intensity as in 1929. The 1929 team was very successful in their season, as was the 1979 team. The 1930 team was just as successful, and we are foreseeing the same success in the 1980 football season at Steamboat Springs High School. The 1980 season will be exciting because every team in the state will be out to beat the best.

A special thanks to Tom Ross, Ross Dolan and the Steamboat Pilot for some of the photography in our story.

