

PROGRESS

PEOPLE & PROGRESS

Geneseo Youth Football: 50 years and counting

By Steve Tappa
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During Bill Dale's commute home from work in the fall, the Geneseo banker said there's no better sight than driving past the Geneseo Youth Football practice fields to see dozens upon dozens of white helmets bobbing and up and down, busy in activity.

Mr. Dale has good reason to feel this way, as a member of the organization's board of directors since 1992. However, many others share that same sentiment, as witnessed by the incredible community support that's kept the tackle-football program virtually free to Geneseo's fifth-, sixth- and seventh-graders for 50 years now.

"The only thing we've ever charged each player is \$1 to cover the cost of their mouth guard," said Mr. Dale, the long-time treasurer for a nine-member board charged with keeping the organization running and the competition fair.

"And, we could get by without charging that much if we didn't want to at least put some value on a program that completely outfits kids to play football. It's a real community effort, making sure there are no financial barriers for kids to be involved. But a lot of people see the value in what we do."

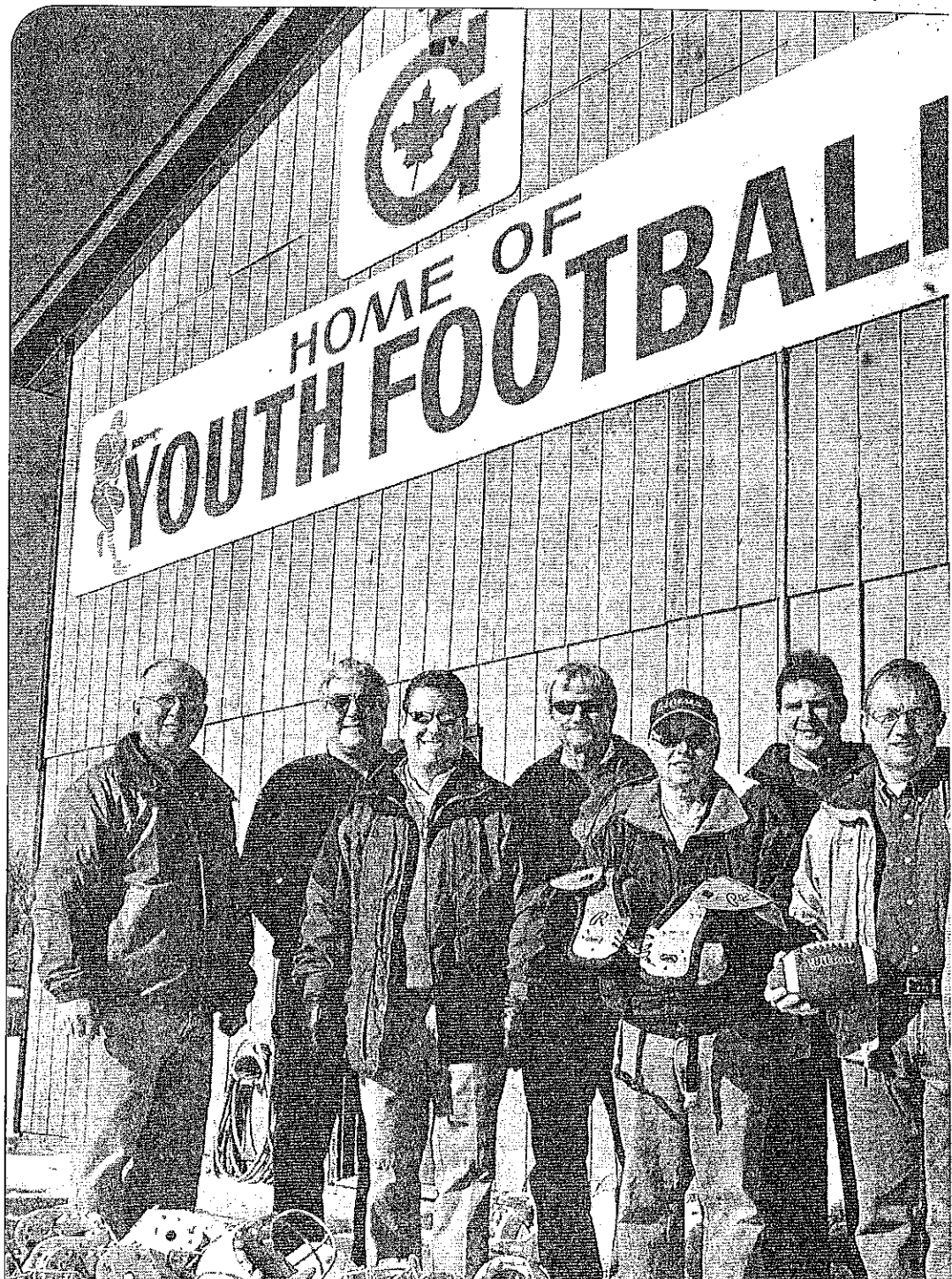
Nearly 70 businesses and families were major contributors to the eight-week program last fall, Mr. Dale said, and that doesn't include the 41 coaches volunteering their time and efforts.

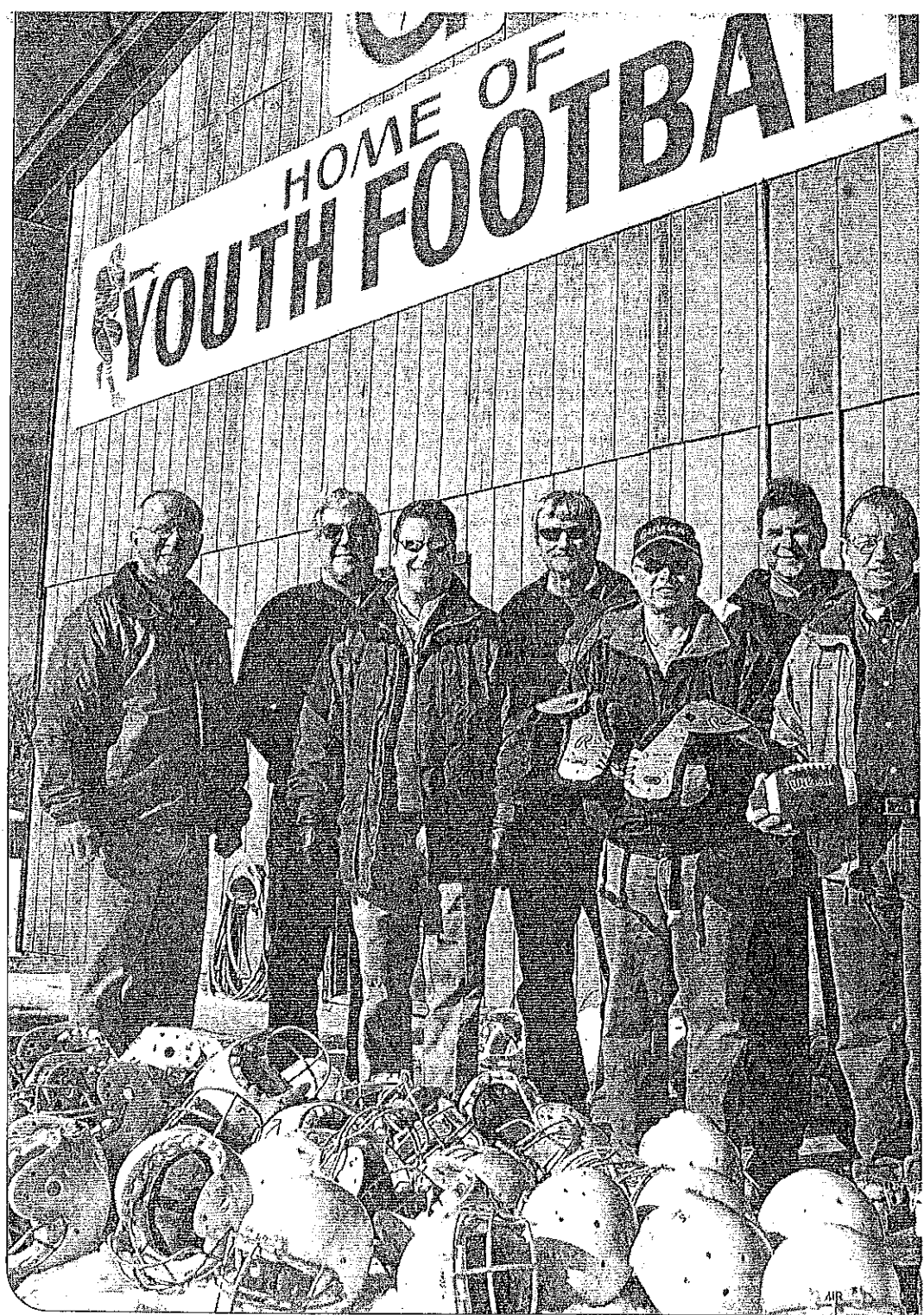
Geneseo's schools also support the program by allowing use of its lighted athletic fields for game action.

All of that involvement allows the organization to operate without any of fundraising activities normally used to offset costs in youth sports — such as selling candy, popcorn or raffle tickets.

"It takes a lot of money to cover insurance and equipment costs, but the only thing we do is accept donations at the gate of our games," said Ray Hanson, the board's current president.

"Everyone in town seems to give at least \$5 or \$10. And, if we should ever need more, I've got a list of former players who have become successes in life, who have said, if you need anything, just call and we'll take care of you."





Members of the Geneseo Youth Football board of directors gather at the old athletic field where they played, just west of the Geneseo Community Center and swimming pool. Members include, from left, Tom Mapes, Randy Clary, Ray Hanson, Jim VanOpDorp, Ky Wirth, Hank Smeltzer and Larry Ward. Ab

ties to play.

"We've had people asking to do all of those things over the years, but the founders always figured those were things for down the road. We keep it simple to just give kids a taste of football."

Indeed, Mr. Hanson said, not a lot has changed since the program started in 1958, when current board members Hank Smeltzer and Tom Curnyn were among the first-year players.

Four of the founders numbered among the organization's first five major financial backers — John Edwards (Edwards

More than 90 kids benefitted last fall. The program stresses fundamentals while running the same offensive plays as the high school team.

However, while the program has long been a big reason behind Geneseo High School's standing as a state gridiron power, Geneseo Youth Football, Inc., has been more than just a feeder program over the years.

"Not every kid who plays for us will end up playing for the high school," Mr. Hanson said. "But they will end up doing other great things in their school and their community. They learn dedication and teamwork, responsibility and overcoming adversity, and so many other great lessons this game offers."

The proof is in the program itself. Former players often become the program's coaches, financial supporters and board members, wanting to give back to their community by providing the same experience they enjoyed.

"What's neat about this program is it never has been a star-making platform," Mr. Dale said. "It's all about the team and teamwork. That's why there are no all-star teams, no playoffs and no trophies. We also don't travel to outside communi-

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John Greenwood

Youth Football board of directors gather at the old athletic field where the football games are held at the Geneseo Community Center and swimming pool. Members include, from left: Tom Curnyn, Frank Hanson, Jim VanOpDorp, Ky Wirth, Hank Smeltzer and Larry Ward. Absent was member Bill Dale.

Readymix), Bill Hanford (Hanford Insurance), Art Sieben (Sieben Hybrids) and Jim Terry (Geneseo Republic).

Dairy Queen also provided the programs. The other board members included Gene Keag, Scott Larimer, Gus Lohman and George Pinks.

"The founding fathers knew what they were doing when they sat down to write the bylaws we still live by," said Mr. Smeltzer, who has had a son (Jeff) and two grandsons (Jeremy and Jordan Mills) participate in the program.

"We really haven't messed with their

vision over the years. There's a reason we've been a blueprint for other communities to follow all these years. What we do is simple, but it works."

Mr. Hanson said his organization fields 2-3 requests annually for a copy of its bylaws, as well as experienced advice.

"Like Ryan Reade, one of our former players, he's the head coach at Dixon now," Mr. Hanson said. "He called this year saying he needed some help with his junior program. We're always willing to share what we know. Why not? It's good for kids."

Geneseo Youth Football

► **What is it?** Formed in 1958, the organization offers the Geneseo School District's fifth, sixth and seventh graders a chance to participate in tackle football for just \$1 each in the fall.

► **Then:** Four teams played a combined 12 games the first season. The program included 64 players and five financial backers, four among the eight founding board members.

► **Now:** Last fall's 50th anniversary season included 91 players, 41 coaches and nearly 70 major contributors. Seven teams played a combined 21 games on either Wednesday or Thursday nights in September and October. The program also featured daily practices during the week and a Sunday season finale at the high school field.

► **Philosophy (unchanged since 1958):** "To inspire boys to practice the ideals of sportsmanship and physical fitness, to teach them good habits of fellowship with other boys, to respect adults, and to develop the ability to take adversity without complaint." — Geneseo Youth Football bylaws.

► **More information?** Call board president Ray Hanson at (309) 944-7130 or treasurer Bill Dale at (309) 944-0580.