

## **An Old “Roll” Player Comes Home**

by Tom Donnelly

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The Mystery Player may have once cut his teeth on a football while growing up in beautiful downtown North Star, Ohio, but he eventually lost two of them while playing center and middle linebacker for the Tigers in 1968. Dick Roll says now that it was his own fault; he was caught using his mouthpiece as a stick of chewing gum when he unexpectedly collided with a Piqua Catholic player. He played without his two front teeth from then on, although he did learn his lesson and kept the mouthpiece where it belonged from that time on. One can only imagine what opponents thought when they saw Roll bark out defensive signals while displaying his “battle scar.” Even his own teammates admitted that it was a bit intimidating. At least he now wears false teeth when he coaches so as not to scare anyone else.

Dick is the second oldest of four sons and one daughter born to Verla and Virginia Roll. Older brother Bill was followed by Dick, Tom, Judy, and Mike, and their yard in back of the house on US 127 in North Star was the site of many a battle over the years. Reportedly, Verla (pronounced “Verlie” by the locals) liked to keep a close watch on his kids, so the boys were encouraged (required?) to host most of the neighborhood football and baseball games as well as countless kick-the-can contests. The tough thing about playing anything in the Roll estate was that the large yard had an old chicken coop right in the middle of it. It made for some interesting ground rules when the building got in the way of a ball carrier or a pop up, but the kids soon learned how to come up with some interesting strategies for it. Talk about a home field advantage!

Outdoor sports were not the only activities for the Roll kids. The living room often became a wrestling venue when the kids pushed back all the furniture and had tag team matches, much to Mom’s dismay. Younger sister Judy was always proud of being able to hold her own in those rambunctious rumbles. Mike, who was quite a bit younger than the other boys, never had much of a chance and usually stayed clear out of self-preservation.

The countless pickup football games, which usually started out as two-hand touch but always seemed to end up as full-contact, featured a wealth of talented young athletes, many of whom went on to become excellent players for the Versailles Tigers. In addition to the three older Roll boys, teams were chosen from the likes of Bill and Jim Alexander, Mike Gavit, Tom Schuette, Fred Groff, Dan Leeper, and assorted Davis brothers and cousins, among others. It was not a place for the timid; the only chickens were the feathered ones in the coop.

Dick, who was not quite as big as older brother Bill, was nonetheless a starting offensive center and defensive linebacker on one of the finest teams in Versailles football history, the 1969 squad. That group, which was Al Hetrick’s second team as a head coach, started the season with shutout after shutout. In fact, they were unscored upon for the first nine games. Several teams came close to the Versailles end zone, but they were all turned away.

The pressure on our boys mounted each week as opposing coaches pulled out all the stops in hopes of being the first to score on the Tigers. Just ask any member of that 1969 version of Tigerball what the locker room was like at halftime of the Delphos game! Hetrick, as well as a fiery young assistant coach by the name of Bruce Stall, had yet to mellow into the calm, cool, collected veteran mentors that most fans remember now.

The season all came down to game number ten against Piqua Catholic, the school that was considered the biggest rival for Versailles in those days. Piqua Catholic eventually became what is now known as Lehman Catholic. Coached by the legendary Bob Heil (who passed away recently), the opponents took an early 8-0 lead, and the perfect season for Versailles seemed to be slipping away. However, the added weight of being unscored upon was now off their shoulders, and the Tigers roared back in the second half to secure a 14-8 victory and finish the year 10-0. Of course, there were no playoffs in those days, so the season was over.

Dick, who also wrestled and ran track for VHS, went on to play football at Wilmington College and eventually joined the high school coaching ranks, just as his brother Bill had done. Dick was head football coach and athletic director at Plymouth High School in northern Ohio for many years before he decided it was time for a change. After completing his thirtieth year of teaching but no longer serving as head football coach, he made a daring move. Last summer, long after most football coaches were already well into their off-season conditioning programs, the man now sometimes known as Richard Roll, retired from Plymouth and signed on to take over the struggling football program at Lehman Catholic, the very school that had separated him from his front teeth so many years before!

Roll had no delusions of being the sole savior of that once highly successful program. He knew what their recent problems had been and what they had coming back this year in terms of athletic talent. It would be a challenge, to say the least. One of the first assistant coaches he enlisted was the former offensive coordinator from some of Lehman's glory years, Bill Zimmerman. Dick also twisted the arm of another former Versailles Tiger, Mark Schmitz. Mark, who has a son that plays for the Cavaliers, was once a co-captain and All-American linebacker for one of the best-ever University of Dayton teams back in the late 1970's and is the brother of longtime Versailles assistant coach Dave Schmitz. Mark took over the offensive line, with Dick content merely to assist him in those duties while he, as head coach, concentrated on handling the defense.

This new coaching staff began the season with three straight losses but kept working hard at improving their players' skills and also their attitudes. The turning point for the young squad was week number nine when they upset defending state champion Patrick Henry in overtime. That win, coupled with a fine record of 6-4, propelled the Cavaliers into the playoffs for the first time in several years. They eventually lost their first-round game to Springfield Catholic Central on a last-minute field goal, but the groundwork had been laid for a potential return to glory for Lehman Catholic. Most of Richard's players this past season were underclassmen. The Lehman coaches and players are finally looking forward to next year for a change!

Dick, who also serves as Lehman's athletic director, made quite a few sacrifices in order to make that big move this past summer. He has some very strong ties back in Plymouth. He has two grown sons (20 and 28 years old), as well as twin daughters who are 26. Two of those children are currently teachers in the Plymouth school system and their extended families are there, so Dick's wife has chosen to remain in Plymouth until their house can be sold and Dick can find a suitable place for them to live in the Sidney area. Roll could probably make the long drive to Plymouth in his sleep as a result of those frequent weekend trips he manages to squeeze in among his practices, games, and athletic director duties. But for the time being, he lives during the week right back where it all started, with his mother, Virginia, in beautiful downtown North Star, Ohio.

Once his inaugural season at Lehman was complete, Dick managed to make time for a side trip to V-Town and tour the most recent addition to H.B. Hole Field, Hetrick Field House. Just as most coaches and other visitors who take the tour have said, Dick was very impressed with both the layout and the craftsmanship. He said that it is a better facility than just about any locker room he visited during his years as a player at Wilmington College, in addition to his hundreds of trips to opposing schools when he was back in Plymouth.

Of course, just as most former players have done, Dick also wanted to pay a visit to what is now known as the "Old Field House." When the Roll boys, not counting Bill's son Zach, played for the Tigers, the old field house was quite a bit smaller than it is now. The late 1970's structural addition to the building was not yet even on the drawing board, and those teams had to make do with the very same World War II army surplus barracks that had been the home for the football team since the late 1940's.

Upon entering the building, Dick immediately pointed out the very same bench upon which he had sat during his senior year in 1970. It had not changed much. He then poked his head into the tiny room that had served as a combination coaches office/officials dressing room. Same result. A few coats of paint and some closed-in windows were the only big differences from the way the place was way back when. Even the smell was the same!

Finally, he climbed the old stairs to "the penthouse" to see where he had spent his first season just as every other Tiger freshman did until this past season. Going through a door from the "recently remodeled" section to an old storage area where he and his buddies such as Bill Alexander, Jerry Knapke, Dave Schlater, Gary Cohee, Steve Brewer, and Ron Huelskamp had sweated out those feared summer two-a-days, Roll saw just how bad it was--and still is. "It certainly was time for a change," he mused. Yes, it was. Change can be a good thing.



