



Tiger LaVerde is pictured with sons Jake and Phillip and wife Mary. He also has two daughters, Leah and Sophia.

By Joe Sager

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KIRTLAND, Ohio – As a young football coach, Tiger LaVerde dreamed of competing for a state championship.

He never thought it'd become a regular occurrence.

Nearly two decades later, it's the standard his teams have set since he took over the Kirtland High School program. The Hornets have appeared in 13 of the last 14 Ohio state championship games and won seven of them.

"I remember watching the state title games on TV and thought it'd be cool to coach in that someday," he said. "To have coached in it 13 times is crazy."

Well known in Ohio football circles for his impressive work, LaVerde, a 1991 Oil City High School graduate, opened eyes across the country when he was named the National Federation of State High School Associations Coach of the Year in 2023-24.

"I don't know how they picked that, but I was fortunate enough that they picked me," he said.

The honor is just another accolade for LaVerde, who has a 244-21 (.928 winning percentage) record at Kirtland, including a 70-13 postseason mark. He became the fastest coach to reach 200 wins in Ohio high school history and third fastest to 200 wins at one school all-time nationally. His overall record is 264-31, which includes a 20-10 mark in three seasons at Franklin (2001-03).

Gaudy statistics like that were never on his mind when he began his coaching career. LaVerde began his journey as an assistant coach in Aurora, Ohio, before coming back home to take a teaching job at Oil City. He took over as Franklin head coach in 2001 and guided the Knights for three seasons. He resigned after the '03 campaign, but stayed on Dave Smith's staff as offensive coordinator for two more years before moving to northeast Ohio.

“It was really hard to be the head coach at Franklin and teach in Oil City,” LaVerde said. “My wife, Mary, is from Cleveland and wanted to get back over here. I found a job that was interesting. Kirtland was a small school.”

Mary taught at Wickliffe, just a short distance from Kirtland, but got a teaching job in the same building as her husband in 2009. Three of their children, Sophia, Phil and Leah graduated from Kirtland, while Jake will be a senior this fall.

“Our K-12 is in the same building, so it was really nice for us all to be in the same place. The elementary school is attached to the middle school and high school,” Tiger said. “My kids love it here.”

Once he took over the football program, the Hornets continued to build. Prior to his arrival at the school, which is located about 20 miles northeast of Cleveland, the program had one winning season in the previous six years and had never won a playoff game.

That all changed in 2008 when the team tasted postseason success for the first time.

“They had been to the playoffs twice and lost in the first round both times,” LaVerde said. “The first time we won a playoff game, we all celebrated like crazy. Now, we’ve won 70 games. It’s crazy.”

The program found another level in 2011 when it captured its first state title. Since then, the only year it hasn’t reached the state championship game is in 2016.

“We don’t talk about getting to the state championship game,” he said. “We talk about getting in the weight room and getting better every week and every day.”

So, what’s driven the success for Kirtland, a public school with roughly the enrollment size of Rocky Grove?

“We graduate about 40 boys per grade. We’re not a private school and there is no open enrollment – we don’t get any players from other areas. You have to buy a house in Kirtland to go to Kirtland,” LaVerde said. “First, you have to have a good youth program. We had guys before me who started a youth program. It kept growing and, by the time I got here, it had grown to 100 kids and five teams, which is incredible. The kids’ parents do a nice job coaching the youth teams. We have good middle school coaches. Our kids play a lot of football by time they are freshmen. That also helps.”

It took a dedicated class to set the standard for the Hornets, too.

“There was a group of kids about 15 years ago, where we were working out three days a week. But, they came to us and asked what they could do on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, too,” LaVerde said. “It was a group of kids that wanted to work out a lot. That team had success as a result and it kind of became the norm. Our kids get in the weight room every day. These kids don’t know anything else but hard work. They love each other and work really hard.

“You have to have a lot of fun, too. If you don’t have fun, what’s the point? We have as much fun as we can every day and the kids want to be there every day,” he continued. “It has to be self-motivation. You can tell them what to do, but, if you want to be great at anything – football, baseball, soccer, tennis – you have to put in time when no one is

looking. Our kids are really motivated. These young kids coming up, they don't want to be known as the team that didn't make the big run. It's a lot of pressure on them, but it drives them. They know the expectations are incredibly high. One of these years, we are not going to go as far as people would like."

Another key for LaVerde is consistency.

"We've been running the same offense for 15 years. We run about four plays on offense and try to run them really well. We try to play great defense and run the football," he said. "Everybody we play kind of knows what we're going to do, but we're not going to change. The kids know we're everybody's Super Bowl week in and week out. They've done a good job handling that."

LaVerde continues to evolve as a coach, too, which is a key to sustaining the program's success.

"You learn a little bit every year with experience. I look at games where I was calling the offense 10 years ago and say to myself, 'What was I thinking?'" he said. "When I was coaching at Franklin it was a totally different offense than what we do now; you just get comfortable with what works and what doesn't."

"I think we've simplified over the years. I think that helps you execute, especially when you get injuries and have backups in the game," LaVerde continued. "When you have starters out, if you're trying to run some fancy stuff at the varsity level and you get JVs in the game and they've never run that stuff, you tend to make mental mistakes. I want our varsity to do basically the same things as our JV and ninth grade teams."

He's thankful to have a dedicated staff as well.

"I have great assistant coaches with me," he added. "We have four kids on staff that played for me, too. It's just fun. We have a lot of fun with it."

While summer has just begun, Kirtland has turned its attention to contending for another OHSA title again this fall. The drive begins Aug. 22 when the Hornets travel across state lines to visit Central Clarion in a matchup of squads that went 15-1 and finished as state runners-up a year ago.

"We're very excited about that. We've never played a team from out of state yet," LaVerde said.

LaVerde said Kirtland was slated to play Oil City one year, but the game was cancelled due to COVID restrictions.

"Clarion was available this year and we're both kind of in the same boat with how we did last year, getting to the state championship game and losing," he said. "It'll be a great opener for both teams. We had about 12 seniors and most of them played. We lost seven starters on offense and about six on defense. We always lose a lot, though, since we're such a small school. Our kids play a lot of JV games and ninth grade games, though. So, it's a new group this year, but it's a new group almost every year. That's the exciting part – to see how these kids step up.

"There is a lot of pressure on our kids since a lot of these teams before them have had success," LaVerde continued. "Last year, we were down 14-0 in the state championship game. Our guys were so used to winning that they didn't react as well as

we wanted them to react. They were a little stunned. So, the success can get you both ways. It's good to have high expectations, but also, the kids feel pressure sometimes, too. That's why we play teams like Central Clarion. Last year, we had two state champions on our schedule. This year, we have one (Perry) and a team that played for a state title (Central Clarion). You try to get those kinds of games because they'll test you a bit."

One of the seniors this fall is LaVerde's son, Jake, who will be a four-year starter at quarterback.

"He's been on the sidelines with me since he was little – both of my boys were ball boys for us," Tiger LaVerde said. "It's been a real blessing coaching them. You hear people say it's hard to coach your own kids, but it's been very exciting and rewarding for me. They both were easy to coach because they work very hard. I never had to get on them for working hard. Plus, I got to coach their friends, too."

That's one of the main reasons LaVerde has no intentions of leaving Kirtland for the multitude of offers he's received from bigger programs throughout the years.

"My kids love Kirtland. The happiness of your kids is more important than anything else," he said. "It's been very fun for my wife and me to both teach at Kirtland and raise our kids here."

LaVerde is Kirtland's JV boys basketball coach and middle school track and field coach, too.

“I enjoy helping kids be successful,” he said. “Seeing the smiles on kids’ faces when they do something they didn’t think they could is very rewarding.”

In addition, LaVerde coached Kirtland’s girls flag football team since its inception until this year. That allowed him to coach his daughters on the gridiron, too. The program won three Northeast Ohio championships at the Cleveland Browns’ Huntington Bank Field, including last season with Sophia on the team.

LaVerde was going to coach the flag football squad again this year, but son, Phil, who plays college football at Case Western Reserve University, and his Spartans teammates participated in a tour of Italy and Greece this spring, which included an exhibition game in Rome, and Tiger and his family made the trip.

“Coaching the girls was incredibly fun. I think it’s awesome to see the growth of girls flag football and the investment the NFL is making in it,” he said. “The Browns do an unbelievable job with it and it’s really catching on. The first year, they had like 12 high schools participate and, this year, they had 55. It’s great for the communities in the area.”