

By Joe Sager

For The News-Herald

How does a small school find success on the football field year after year?

In Redbank Valley's case, the Bulldogs follow the Gold Standard.

Blane Gold, a Franklin graduate, has Redbank Valley back in the District 9 Class 1A championship game for the sixth time in the past seven seasons. The Bulldogs (8-4) meet Port Allegany (11-0) on Friday at Kane High School.

"The goal is you want to create a program where, every single year, you're in a position to compete for district titles," he said. "We don't say we want to go 10-0 or be state champs every year — we want to be realistic. Sometimes, it won't look pretty. But, at the end of the year, we want to be playing well once November rolls around. For six of the past seven years, we've been right there competing for a district championship."

The Bulldogs enter the game as underdogs against the Gators, who finished as PIAA runners-up last year and beat Redbank Valley, 36-6, on Sept. 19. That's OK, though. The Bulldogs have seen both sides — they've reached the PIAA quarterfinals three times (2020, '21, '23) and reached one state title game, falling to Bishop Guilfoyle, 21-14, in '21. Gold has enjoyed the ride.

"From 2020-23 we were kind of the top dog on the mountain. Last year, I was really proud of them — the guys exceeded expectations by getting to the championship game," he said. "Now, we're facing one of the best small-school players in America

(running back Aiden Bliss). Sometimes, the best situation you can be in is when you have nothing to lose. There are not going to be many people outside of our community who believe it's possible we can win. We're fortunate to have the chance to compete for our sixth district championship in the last seven years and I'd be disappointed if someone in this program wasn't excited for that opportunity."

Regardless of the outcome, the Bulldogs' stock continues to trend upward, which is how Gold wanted it to go once he took over as head coach from Ed Wasilowski in 2019 after serving under him for five seasons as an assistant.

"I was really blessed and learned a great lesson from him. He stepped down when he knew the cupboard was still full and knew the transition would be easier," Gold said. "A lot of times, you see coaches step down and they give a variety of reasons, but then you see the programs drop off. The cupboard was still full here and it really helped me right off the bat.

"I am blessed with a really good group of kids who buy into what we're doing. It wasn't like I had to overhaul the program," he continued. "I just took a lot of the things I learned at Franklin and from some of the coaches who mentored me. The only way it continues to work is if you continue to win and be successful. We always celebrate when we get to that sixth win of the season because that guarantees we'll have a winning season and a chance to compete in the playoffs. We haven't had a losing season since 2013, which is pretty impressive, especially for Single-A football. We're really proud of the groups of kids who come in every single year and pick up the torch and carry it on."

Leading a football program always interested Gold when he was playing on the offensive and defensive lines for the Knights.

“I was really blessed to go through Franklin when I did with all the great football people there,” he said. “Tiger LaVerde had been head coach there, but stepped down and came back as an offensive coordinator, so I got to be around him. I was teammates with Nate Byham. I was fortunate to be coached by Dave Smith, Matt LaVerde, Rich Hancox and Fred Blackhurst, among others. I can think of so many things I do on a regular basis because of them.”

Once Gold graduated from Franklin in 2007, he went to Grove City College and was a key contributor for the Wolverines.

“That’s where I really knew my calling was to be a coach. I already knew I wanted to be a teacher,” he said. “I am very proud of the fact I was a three-year letterman, purely from being a special teams player. My defensive line coach, Tommy Wilson, coached me the same way he coached every single guy, even though I was a special teams guy and wasn’t playing on the defensive line in games. At the end of my four years there, just as a special teams guy, I really learned a lot from that. It taught me that investing as much time in your 50th guy on the roster is just as important as the time you invest in the first guy.

“Coaches may never fully understand the impact they have on their players,” he continued. “But once I got to the end of my playing career at Grove City, I was really eager to get into coaching because of that experience.”

Gold's first opportunity came at Oil City on Matt LaVerde's staff. After two years there, Gold headed back to Franklin in hopes of taking over the program. However, he didn't get the job, but joined the coaching staff as an assistant for a season. A full-time teaching opportunity took him to New Bethlehem.

"After my second season at Oil City, I interviewed for the head coaching job at Franklin, but they thought I was too young," Gold said. "I spent a year there as the junior varsity coach under Tom Haynes. Three quarters of the way through that season, I got hired as a teacher at Redbank."

Gold was excited to join the Redbank Valley faculty as well as the coaching staff and learn under Wasilowski.

"It was good to start forming relationships there. Jason Kundick, my offensive coordinator who I fully trust, he was there, too, and we've been coaching together since," Gold said. "'Waz' is someone who forgot more about football than I knew at that time and I was lucky to spend six years as an assistant under him.

"Plus, in today's day and age, it's almost like 'cheating' a bit to teach where you coach. I have the ability to be with the kids essentially nine hours a day. I can get into the hallways and classrooms and that made the transition even easier. Once the transition happened, the kids already knew me."

An important thing Gold learned along the way is that it's paramount for his players to enjoy playing the game.

“My goal is to create a memorable four-year experience for anyone who plays for me,” he said. “There’s more to life than high school football and they are encouraged to go out and do greater things. I don’t want this to be the best thing they ever do. But, when it’s all said and done, I want them to look back and see that their high school experience was really memorable. It takes a ton of time, effort and passion. I just hope every kid gets to experience high school football like I did at Franklin.”

It’s important for Gold to enjoy the coaching experience, too.

“I think the biggest thing I’ve learned over time is to just be who you are,” he said. “The kids keep it fun, that’s for sure, whether it’s doing something like jumping into practices with them for a couple of plays. I really find enjoyment in the preparation part of it, teaching kids how to study the game and seeing how a plan pays off. When it doesn’t, it’s a tough pill to swallow. I am one of the worst ones when it comes to not taking time to enjoy success when it happens.”

Success has happened a lot for Gold, who is 67-18 in his tenure, but he credits strong classes of athletes for the success.

“Each group of kids is unique every season,” he said. “As a coach, all you’re trying to do — in a very positive way — is to get every ounce out of them.”

The Bulldogs hope that’s enough to walk away with another district title on Friday.