

FOOTBALL ALL-2K TEAM

DEFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE 2000s

Bishop Carroll's Koenig took unconventional route to success

BY MIKE MASTOVICH
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Todd Koenig never took the easy path to football success.

Koenig instead opted to bide his time, put in extra work and utilize his natural talent as a star at Bishop Carroll Catholic High School and Ohio University at the NCAA Division I level.

So, it didn't surprise former Bishop Carroll football coach Craig Sponsky when, at age 28, Koenig changed his career path and enlisted in the U.S. Navy. He eventually became a Navy SEAL.

"He hit the age of 28 and that's the cap for the age to become a Navy SEAL," said Sponsky, who now resides and works in Palm Beach, Florida. "He did it the hard way. He had to enlist in the Navy. He advanced straight up through."

Sounds familiar to those who played with or competed against Koenig, The Tribune-Democrat Defensive Player of the All-2000s football team.

A defensive back and running back, Koenig was a key part of an extremely talented Bishop Carroll team that advanced to the PIAA Class A championship game on a snowy December afternoon in 2003. The Huskies finished as state runner-up to Southern Columbia, a program still winning gold medals as evidenced by its 2019 finish in Class AA.

"The most important thing and the thing that sticks with you is just the chemistry and the camaraderie the team had," Koenig said during a telephone interview. "We were a small team, maybe 30 or 35 guys on that team. We were close with each other. We knew each other well. We trusted each other."



Bishop Carroll Catholic's Todd Koenig

"That combined with the level of coaching we had by a very dedicated coaching staff were two huge pieces to our formula for success."

Sponsky's Huskies won their first 14 games in 2003, including a 49-14 win over Northern Cambria in the District 6-A final at Mansion Park followed by state playoff victories over Clarion-Limestone (18-7) and Springdale (28-20).

Southern Columbia won 49-20 on a snowy Hersheypark Stadium field.

"I remember feeling like we were breaking new paths," said Koenig, a two-year starter on those powerhouse Huskies squads of the early 2000s.

"There was a lot of success in our program. This was our first shot at the state title. We had a lot of successful people around us in the past – the Crookshanks, the Piccionis and the Lavericks – who helped build the program. They showed us what success and hard work looked like."

"This game was new to us, though," he said of the state final. "This was the first time we were on this different stage. I remember the feeling, 'We're finally doing something new. We're taking it a step further.' We were prepared. We treated it like we treated any other game."

Koenig was Tribune-Democrat Play-

er of the Year in 2003 and a first-team Associated Press All-State selection as a defensive specialist.

He had 83 tackles, with 44 solo stops, during his senior season and broke up seven passes with one interception. Koenig forced two fumbles and recovered four fumbles.

The 6-foot-2, 192-pounder also was a key part of the Huskies offense with 1,722 rushing yards, 30 touchdowns and 188 points.

"Of all the highly-heralded kids we had, Todd may have been the kid who worked the hardest to achieve what he achieved," Sponsky said. "And he had to wait in line. Todd had to wait until his junior year and he just developed. That was partly because of the talent we had at the time."

Koenig was recruited by several mid-sized Division I programs and signed with Ohio University, which was coached by Johnstown native and former Nebraska head coach Frank Solich.

In 34 games played for the Bobcats during his final three seasons, Koenig collected 222 tackles, with 120 solo stops. He had two sacks and two interceptions. The defensive back helped the Bobcats win a Mid-American Conference (MAC) East Division title. The Bobcats had a berth in the conference title game as well as an appearance in the 2007 GMAC Bowl.

"I felt comfortable with Ohio and it turned out to be a great opportunity with four seniors leaving right after my freshman year," Koenig said. "Some spots opened up for a starting role."

Koenig said his time at Bishop Carroll and competing in the Laurel Highlands Athletic Conference also prepared him for the Division I level of college ball.

"The area has a lot of talent and a

very high level of high school football," Koenig said. "That and the coaching staff we had put a lot of the senior players my year in a great spot to compete to play in college."

"It was all progressive, everything you learn and try to incorporate in high school. You were building on top of what you learned in high school," he added. "It was a transition, but it was almost as if I could keep on running and take this new coaching and this new philosophy and high level of play and keep on running. The foundation was set at Carroll."

Koenig signed with the Cleveland Browns as an undrafted free agent and later had a tryout with the Buffalo Bills. Neither NFL opportunity worked out.

While training with a group of elite athletes in advance of his draft year, Koenig was introduced to a physical fitness and training business. He took over a franchise in Charlotte, North Carolina.

"The business was doing well. It was rewarding," Koenig said. "I felt like something was missing and the deeper I dug, the more I was getting pulled toward service. I looked into those avenues to see what options were on the table."

He's been a Navy SEAL for seven years.

"That's the story that sums up Todd," Sponsky said. "You go in unheralded, the hard way, through the Navy SEAL program. To make it through the program is unrivaled in itself. But he got two of the three awards presented, coming out of his training class. That is Todd Koenig."

Mike Mastovich is a sports writer for The Tribune-Democrat. Follow him on Twitter @masty81.

TOP ATHLETES OF THE 2000s

GJHS's Loe, Ligonier Valley's Smith followed similar paths to honor

BY MIKE MASTOVICH
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Greater Johnstown's Exree Loe and Ligonier Valley's Collin Smith had shared headlines and sound bites throughout the 2016 high school football season.

In fact, Loe and Smith shared the cover of "The Opening TD" preseason section in The Tribune-Democrat.

Both versatile and talented playmakers stood out whether on offense or defense as their respective teams posted milestones that season.

Each player eventually announced his commitment to NCAA Division I West Virginia University to play on defense.

Perhaps it's appropriate that Loe and Smith now share the honor of top athletes on The Tribune-Democrat All-2000s football team.

The Tribune-Democrat Player of the Year in 2016, Smith was a two-time all-state selection, earning the honor as a safety during his junior season and at quarterback as a senior, when the 14-1 Rams won their first District 6 crown, a Heritage Conference title and a championship in the reboot of the Appalachian Bowl. Ligonier Valley advanced to the state semifinal round in Class AA.

A four-year starter, Smith was a USA Today All-Pennsylvania Team selection and received



Ligonier Valley's Collin Smith

offers from eight Power Five BCS schools before signing with West Virginia. Smith passed for more than 200 yards in 10 games as a senior and was part of 64 of the 89 offensive touchdowns scored by the Rams that year.

"Collin Smith is the best quarterback to have ever played football in this area," Ligonier Valley coach Roger Beitel said. "He could do everything."

Smith finished with 3,011 yards passing and 42 touchdowns as a senior and rushed for 1,013 yards in 2016. His career totals included 5,673 passing yards, 3,010 rushing yards, 69 TD passes and 118 total TDs.

Smith eventually transferred from WVU to Lackawanna College before leaving the sport to pursue a mixed martial arts



Greater Johnstown's Exree Loe

career, Beitel said.

Tribune-Democrat Offensive Player of the Year in 2016, Loe was a two-time PFN All-State selection and a Pennsylvania Football Writers Class AAA first-team all-state defensive back. During his senior season, Greater Johnstown won a school-record 12 games and repeated as District 5-6-9 champion despite moving up to Class AAAA.

A USA Today All-Pennsylvania second-team pick, Loe was a 1,000-yard receiver each

of his final two seasons and had 1,621 all-purpose yards, 13 touchdowns and 80 points as a senior. Once the Class AAAA playoffs began, Loe caught 19 passes for 444 yards and three touchdowns in three games.

"Exree gets better as the game gets bigger," former Greater Johnstown coach Tony Penna Jr. once said of his often electrifying playmaker. "Exree is one of those guys you absolutely have to account for on every play. He's one of those guys who, when something happens

on the field, it directly is a result of him. He was doubled and triple covered.

"I told him I was more impressed in the games when he didn't have the ball and people were blanketing him," Penna said.

Loe had a 45-yard touchdown reception in a Trojans playoff victory over DuBois in 2016, the first postseason game at Trojan Stadium in eight years.

Later, after quarterback Austin Barber was injured, Loe moved to quarterback and rushed for 90 yards on 11 carries in a 48-24 win. With Loe in the defensive backfield, opponents tended to attack the opposite side of the field, though he finished with 184 career tackles, 11 passes defended and two interceptions.

Loe has emerged as a special teams player and linebacker with the Mountaineers. In 23 games with WVU, including three starts in 2019, Loe has been part of 500 snaps, including 309 defensive snaps.

Last season, Loe made 40 tackles, 3.5 tackles for a loss, two pass breakups and had one fumble recovery for the Mountaineers. In a 2018 game, he recovered two fumbles against Texas Christian University (TCU).

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SPECIALIST OF THE 2000s

Hawkins' NFL career began at McCort

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Andrew Hawkins' time at Bishop McCort High School – competing against the top football players in a loaded Laurel Highlands Athletic Conference – provided a foundation that led him to the highest level in the sport.

"We had LaRod Stephens-Howling at 10.7 (seconds), we had Shawn Lewis at 10.9 to 11, we had Brad Kanuch 10.4 in the 100-meter dash," Hawkins said, referring to stars from Greater Johnstown, Bishop McCort and Westmont Hilltop, respectively. "(Bishop Carroll's) Todd Koenig was a 10.8 guy. I was the fourth-fastest player in my town. I went to college and I was the fastest player on my team."

"I didn't realize how good our competition was in Johnstown."

Competition always fueled Hawkins, who at 5-foot-8, 150 pounds during his high school career, faced plenty of adversity and doubters.

That didn't stop him from earning a NCAA Division I scholarship to the University of Toledo before he turned professional and won two Grey Cup championships in the Canadian Football League and played six NFL seasons with the Cincinnati Bengals and Cleveland Browns.

"We always knew Andrew was a really special talent. It was a matter

of putting everything together and getting him the opportunity to showcase that talent," said former Bishop McCort coach Ken Salem. "I think about his grit, determination and belief in himself. That is what helped him become the outstanding player, parent and business person that he is today."

Hawkins, whose inspirational story is the subject of an upcoming biopic, is The Tribune-Democrat all-2000s team specialist for his role as a stand-out defensive back, running back and receiver on successful Crimson Crushers teams in 2001, 2002 and 2003. He earned Associated Press second-team all-state honors after his junior and senior seasons.

"My junior year, I was more of a receiver on offense, but all of my years I was more of a DB," said Hawkins, who played receiver in the NFL a few years after older brother Artrell Hawkins Jr. ended his nine-season career in the league. "Artrell was a professional defensive back. That's where I made my hay. I was all in on being a DB. It was a little different from that perspective. We had to shut down a side of the field."

"My senior year, I played a mix of receiver and running back before I got injured in the Johnstown game," he said. "The opening game of Trojan Stadium was the game I got hurt my senior year. It was the seventh game of

the season and we were 5-1."

Hawkins had 527 rushing yards and eight TDs on 65 carries as well as three interceptions on defense prior to the injury. The Crushers had one loss.

After he left the lineup with a broken ankle, Bishop McCort lost three of its final four games. As a junior in 2002, Hawkins tied for the area lead with eight interceptions to go with 59 tackles. The 2001 squad was a state semifinalist as the Crimson Crushers won 27 games during his final three seasons.

Hawkins' determination to land a scholarship even after most major Division I recruiters showed little interest in him has been told many times over the years.

At the University of Toledo, he was a contributor on both sides of the ball while playing in 36 games on offense and defense from 2004 through 2007.

In the CFL, Hawkins was part of back-to-back Grey Cup championships with the Montreal Alouettes.

He finally got his chance in the NFL and played three seasons apiece with the Bengals and Browns before retiring after a brief time on the New England Patriots' preseason roster in 2017.

He had 2,419 receiving yards, 209 receptions and nine receiving touchdowns during his NFL playing career.

While playing in the NFL, Hawkins earned a master's degree from

Bishop McCort Catholic's Andrew Hawkins



Columbia University. He's held several high-profile broadcasting positions since his retirement and is known for his social media savvy. Currently, Hawkins is part of the NFL Network.

Hawkins credits his time in Johnstown with Bishop McCort for molding him into a successful person both on and off the field.

He believes the football exploits of area players of his generation brought credibility and opportunities to those who came after him.

"LaRod bursting on the scene kind of helped everyone," Hawkins said

of Stephens-Howling, a former NFL standout and ex-Pitt Panthers running back. "College coaches were so used to flying into Pittsburgh, seeing all the Pittsburgh kids and then flying home – unless they had a reason. LaRod brought them here. I had schools coming to see me. Todd Koenig, Shawn Lewis, Scott Corson (of Greater Johnstown). It went from being a novelty to being a part of the recruiting trail. It raised the recruiting field."

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