



Ohio's football playoff season welcomes the return of Manchester's wise leader, says Terry Pluto

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Terry Pluto, The Plain Dealer



Joshua Gunter/The Plain DealerAn

institution on the football field and in the administrative office at Manchester High School, Jim France prepares his team for another trip to the state playoffs this week. AKRON, Ohio -- Imagine being Manchester football coach Jim France, walking into a high school stadium named after you. It's right there, a big sign, in bold letters: JAMES R. FRANCE STADIUM.



TERRY PLUTO

That's where a first round Division IV playoff game will be held Saturday at 7 p.m., your fourth-seeded Manchester Panthers hosting No. 5 Cortland Lakeview.

You joke with people that it's nice to still be alive when they name something after you. And you don't spend a lot of time thinking about how you are a 66-year-old ex-Marine, how you have been Manchester's football coach for 37 seasons.

But once in a while, you realize you've been at the school about 12 miles south of Akron for a long, long time.

You look at star running back Craig Dougherty and remember you have coached three of his brothers.

But even more revealing, you see middle linebacker Nick Miller, and you remember when Doug Miller was your quarterback. Doug is Nick's father.

Then there's special teams star Clayton Hanzel, whose dad Chris Hanzel was your fullback.

You've coached about a dozen father/son combinations at Manchester over the past three decades.



Joshua Gunter/The Plain Dealer Manchester's Panthers may have

traditionally relied on the running game, but coach France has allowed quarterback Steven King to open up the passing game, to productive results. Sometimes, you find yourself telling a player in practice, "You're slower than your dad." Then you smile and think, "This has been a great situation. How many coaches last this long in a job they love?"

Not bad for a guy who is eligible for social security and Medicare.

Of course, it helps when you are the principal, too. Especially the principal of a high school that has received an "excellent" rating from the state in each of the past six years.

Winning all those football games doesn't hurt, either.

Your career record, including one season at Coventry, is 322-80-3. You are Ohio's second winningest active football coach, behind Ironton's Bob Lutz, who late last month set a new state record for career coaching wins with No. 361 in a Week 9 game against Nelsonville-York.

You say you don't think about chasing that record, and for the most part, you don't. You are a one-day, one-practice, one-game at a time guy.

That's why this year's team at 9-1 is one of your all-time favorites.

The players take everything one day at a time, and you could see them molding into a team where the whole is far better than the parts. You'd never tell them this, but at the start of the season, you thought it was another 7-3 team.

You feared the kids would not win the Principals Athletic Conference -- they went 7-0 -- that the 13 seniors would be the first class in two decades not to make the playoffs in their four years.

The previous three seasons, the Panthers were 7-3, 5-5 and 7-3. Solid performances at many schools, but a slump at Manchester.

From 1989-2005, your teams lost only three league games -- total. A state playoff appearance was expected and delivered, year after year. You advanced to the playoffs in 16 of 17 seasons from 1989-2005, including a runner-up finish in 1997.

Then something changed. Not the kids. Nothing you could exactly explain. But your teams just didn't dominate like they had for decades. No one said anything to you, but you knew some fans were wondering if your relentless running attack was like trying to win the Indianapolis 500 in a pickup truck.

Your son, Jason France, has been an assistant coach for 15 years. He owns a landscaping business, and also uses the wide-open, pass-first spread offense at times when coaching the junior varsity team to 29 victories in its past 30 games.

He has been after you to let the kids throw the ball, to have some wide-open formations. So have some of your other coaches, and you have two great ones in Jim Robinson (34 years at Manchester) and Scott Cantrell (25 years).

You didn't turn the team into "Air France," but gave senior quarterback Steve King a little freedom, and he responded with 17 touchdown passes against two interceptions. Dougherty caught three, and ran for another 17 for his 1,221 yards.

Dougherty is only 5-9, 170 pounds. A typical, tough, gritty blue-collar Manchester kid, you tell people. Then there's Tyler Masters, a slot back at 5-7 and 140 pounds. You can't quite believe that you make the poor kid try to block outside linebackers -- or that he does it so well. All of these players have at least B averages in the classroom.

As much as the 9-1 record, you are proud of the team 3.0 grade-point average and the six kids in the National Honor Society. Lineman Kyle Kelly plays offense and defense, using his 235 pounds so well on the line while owning a 3.5 GPA.

You know not every player is a scholar, not every kid is a choir boy. But you also know that most of the players will grow up into good men, just as you watched that happen with their brothers and fathers.

Sometimes, you think about quitting. You have been married to Nancy for 41 years. She beat breast cancer in 2001. But six weeks ago, she had a minor stroke. She has bounced back strong, and even was in the stands for last week's 35-14 victory over Cuyahoga Valley Christian Academy.

But so far, she wants you to keep coaching. So far, coaching is still something that helps you wake up each day and looking forward to what happens next.

You get older, the kids don't. Maybe that's why you don't feel 66. And maybe that's why you think, "OK, I'll let them throw a few passes, make everyone happy even if I don't like it. Maybe I can learn something."

And this season, you did.

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