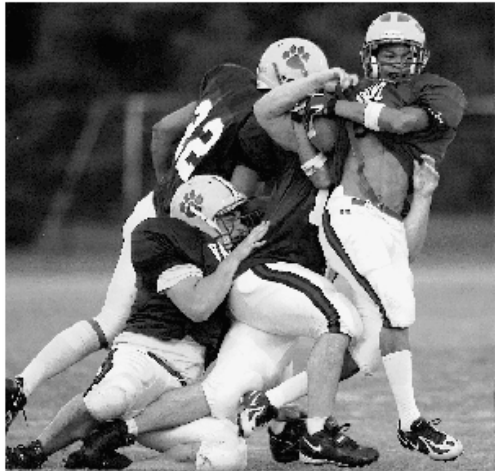


Patriots play proud host to Valor Bowl

By ANDY CAMPBELL



Staff photo by Tom Kelly IV John Ray of West Chester East is brought down by three North defenders during the Valor Bowl on Thursday.

EAST WHITELAND -- On the surface, the 2007 Ben Crisi Valor Bowl Trophy was awarded to Downingtown West High head coach Mike Milano after his North squad won the annual all-star football game by a 24-10 margin.

Behind the scenes Thursday night at Valley Stadium lurked much more meaning.

Crisi touched the lives of high school students for more than 35 years as a teacher, mentor and football coach at Great Valley High, constantly preaching the values of hard work and sportsmanship. After battling non-Hodgkin's

Lymphoma for more than five years, Crisi died in January 2006.

In a Valor Bowl that saw big-time plays made by big-time players, Crisi would have been proud of the even bigger sportsmanship displayed by both teams.

At the tail end of the contest, with the North up by two touchdowns, South running back John Ray of West Chester East was shaken up by a hard tackle while carrying the ball to the outside. Without hesitation, North defensive end Carlos Navarro of host Great Valley picked Ray up off his feet and carried him to the sidelines.

There's no doubt Crisi would have been pleased.

"One of the greatest men I've ever known," Navarro said of Crisi. "He was an awesome teacher and an awesome influence on my whole football career."

Great Valley's seniors belong to the last group to have been coached by Crisi, who served as an assistant under current head coach Gary Phillips after guiding the Patriots from 1983-88. Navarro, kicker Bobby Eppleman, running back Pat McBride, tight end Joe Havrilla and lineman John Sargent all were influenced by Crisi in one positive way or another.

"I remember him showing up always eager to help," said Eppleman. "He was just a creative guy, always giving guidance."

Phillips knew Crisi for years. And he emphasized the depth and substance of the man's character -- a spirit that perfectly represents the Valor Bowl and its beneficiary, Chester County Special Olympics.

"It means a lot to the seniors that they got a chance to play and win the trophy on Crisi's home field," Phillips said. "He was the epitome of a great football coach."

Crisi was a great family man as well. His wife, Kathy, and their five children attend the game each year in honor of him and the trophy that bears his name.

"He was humbled to receive this award," Kathy Crisi said. "It means a lot to him and a lot to our family."