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Akron Beacon Journal (Ohio)

November 3, 2004 Wednesday 1 STAR EDITION

## **TRYING TIMES; EAST HIGH STRUGGLES TO REGAIN ITS PAST GLORY**

**BYLINE:** Gary Estwick, Beacon Journal staff writer

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Coach Damon Beasley paces on the sideline, trying not to trip on his headset wire as he consults with assistants. His eyes are red, his hair frazzled from the long day, and an even longer Friday night.

It's fourth down. Three seconds left. The coach has to make a decision.

Should we punt to Firestone and risk a special teams disaster? Should we run time off the clock and give up a safety, but risk a turnover? Mistakes have become all too familiar in his three years of coaching his alma mater.

Or should we tell quarterback Aaron Palmer to take the snap, plant the ball in the gut of running back Aaron Mitchell and put the fate of the team in his sturdy legs?

So much is on the line. The shaky confidence of the young team. The shaky support of the high school, which sits atop a hill overlooking East Market Street. The pride of the East side community.

This is one of Beasley's last chances this season to show his players that their football team once was a winner, and can be again.

He pauses.

This would have been an easy decision when he played. His East team won the school's last City Series championship in 1975.

East siders had everything they needed on their side of Market Street so there was rarely a reason to venture outside of familiar surroundings.

Blacks and whites co-existed, as they both worked at nearby tire and rubber companies. The factory smell followed employees to their neighborhoods every night, but everyone was happy because prosperity tagged along.

Since those days, the businesses have slowed down or left the area.

The high school has put together only four winning seasons.

Perhaps the only link between the teams of the past and today's squad is "The

Hill," which has stood as both a conditioning tool and punishment for decades of lucky and unlucky lettermen.

But today's team is a victim of open enrollment, which allows East's best athletes to transfer to other schools in the city. Off the field, financial problems stop the athletic department from purchasing lights for its practice field. There is no official athletic booster club.

Fan support is as unpredictable as Akron's fall weather. Fewer than 200 spectators sit behind the East sideline during its Week 9 game against Firestone at the Rubber Bowl. The school has held two pep rallies this season.

Coaches often pay for miscellaneous items. When the team needed ponchos for a rainy game against Ellet, the coaches split the bill.

A few hours before Friday's game, an assistant coach and two players drive to Save-A-Lot to purchase the team meal: ham and/or turkey breast on white and wheat bread, potato chips and punch.

Oops. Forgot the cheese. The coach sends his helpers to grab it.

"Make sure you get the cheap one."

Five of 10 football coaches volunteer their services.

Only two coaches work or volunteer at the high school. Hallway recruitment is often left up to players like senior Jeremy Parker.

He persuaded strong safety Robert Vaner to rejoin the team. Vaner quit two years ago after losing his hunger to play.

That hunger returned his senior year.

Senior Dionte Younger, the leader of the defense, is not always so lucky.

He walks around school in search of potential teammates. He spots someone.

"You wanna play?" Younger asks.

"I gotta work," the student said.

"I don't have time," another student said.

Some guys look Younger in his eyes, shake his hand and tell him they'll see him at practice.

They never show up.

Others show up, but quit after a few days.

The last coach hired before Beasley quit before coaching a game. Fewer than 22 eligible players showed up for his first practice.

Beasley hoped for a turnout of least 28 players when he took over.

As he walked toward a group of students on the football field, he felt numb.

Only 14 showed up.

"What did I get myself into?" Beasley thought.

An assistant coach patted him on his back.

"Coach, it'll be all right," he said.

The players looked out of shape, unsure of themselves and unsure of their new coach.

That changed as Beasley addressed his team for the first time.

"We don't have a lot of people, but we're going to work with what we have," he said.

Heads started to nod.

By late fall, a squad of 28 suffered through a winless season. Last year's team won three games.

Despite a losing record, Beasley sent eight players to college on scholarships this fall.

The morning of East's game against Firestone, a tall man wearing a West Virginia jacket patiently waits for Beasley in the front office. He wants to know more about Parker and Bais Easley. Both are seniors.

There is talent on school property. But the coaching staff is still trying to teach the players how to win.

Coaches want them to believe they're part of something special, so they show them that they are.

An East player from a generation ago photocopied a newspaper article from Nov. 25, 1966. The story captures East's 35-6 win over Kenmore, which sealed a third consecutive City Series title.

The corresponding letters from a letterman's jacket hang above the article on a bulletin board.

At 2-6, this year's Orientals did not qualify for the state playoffs. What they did, though, is gain momentum as the team heads into the off-season, and send 14 seniors away with the feeling that they started something special.

In the Rubber Bowl locker room, players cram close together in chairs. Some stretch on the floor.

They chat in little circles. Some are talking about football, some are just talking.

Twenty minutes to kickoff.

Beasley reminds his team that they have never won a game at the Rubber Bowl.

He wants this game.

"You guys haven't played your best game yet, and it's the ninth game of the season," he said. "What are you waiting for?"

He offers them a chance to have an attitude. Want to take out some frustration? Take it out on the football field. Don't wait until you get back to school, or at home.

"This is the place to do it," he said.

"Dedicate this game to someone you love," Parker yells. "I'm dedicating this game to my grandmother."

Turnovers plague East in the first half. Quarterback Aaron Palmer throws an interception. Running back Aaron Mitchell fumbles near midfield. Jeremy Parker fumbles deep in Firestone territory.

"You owe me one," Beasley said to Mitchell. He finds a spot on the sideline.

Looks of despair fill the East bench. "Offense" cheers turn into mumbling sneers. Arms fly in the air and eyes roll.

In the stands, the small crowd is silent, wondering if they are about to witness another East disappointment.

Trailing 3-0 at halftime, frustration and panic dominate the locker room.

Parker sits in the back of the room, away from the coaches. Mitchell sits near the front, close enough to see the veins pop out on Beasley's neck when he addresses the team.

"This is going to be interesting," he said. "We're going to find out what we're made of in the next 24 minutes."

Sophomore Terrence Stallings runs down the field as East kicks off for the second half. He is flattened by a Firestone blocker who outweighs him by 50 pounds. No sooner than Stallings hits the turf, he pops up and pursues the ballcarrier. He is the first East special teams player off the field, and the first to start "DEFENSE" cheers on the sideline.

He has spirit.

So do the cheerleaders.

You can win this game, if you really want to.

You can win this game, so do what you have to do.

F-I, F-I, G-H-T, G-H-T

Fight for, fight for, a victory, a victory.

It's the fourth quarter. East leads 7-3. Fourth down. Three seconds separate a win and another loss for a program that is struggling to regain its lost glory. Three seconds.

Senior Aaron Parker calls the play in the huddle. The team jogs up to the line.

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Mitchell takes the handoff, runs wide to his left, runs past a defender at the line of scrimmage, then hits the sideline.

Eighty-seven yards later, he's tackled by teammates as they pile on top of him in the end zone.

East wins 13-3 as time expires.

Back in the Rubber Bowl locker room, Mitchell grabs Beasley's shoulder, and whispers in his ear.

"I got it back."

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**NOTES:** SAME BALL: DIFFERENT GOALS: DIFFERENT STYLES: How does a high school football program measure success? The Beacon Journal listens in on chalk talks and captures the personalities of players and coaches at three schools. Monday: the suburban look at Green. Yesterday: the country atmosphere of Smithville. Today: the city profile of east: the last of a three part series: Messages for **Gary Estwick** can be left at 330-996-3826 or [gestwick@thebeaconjournal.com](mailto:gestwick@thebeaconjournal.com)

**GRAPHIC:** PHOTO: Akron Beacon Journal photos by Phil Masturzo: 8;

MAP: Akron Beacon Journal map showing the location of East High School;

(1) Above: East coach Damon Beasley sends in a play with junior running back Courtney Brown during the Week 9 game against Firestone. (2-3) Beasley shows his frustration with his team's play during the first half of the game as they trail Firestone 3-0. (4) Fan support is as unpredictable as the fall weather as only about 200 people turn out at the Rubber Bowl to see East take on Firestone on Oct. 22. (5) Above: East sophomore Willie Shropshire kills time before suiting up for the game against Firestone. (6) Left: East coach Damon Beasley celebrates with an assistant after his team locks up a 13-3 victory over Firestone with an 87-yard touchdown run by senior Aaron Mitchell. (7) East sophomore JaVeon Day and assistant coach Jed Ebersole shop for bread and lunch meat for the team meal of sandwiches. (8) East player JaVeon Day folds uniforms in the team's locker room before the Firestone game., a vikybteer washes the uniforms for the team.

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