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Hillsborough JR Raiders Bring Home State Championship



The Hillsborough JR Raiders defeated the Willingboro Panthers on December 13 by a score of 34 - 13 to win the first American Division State Championship of the New Jersey Unlimited Weight Youth Football Association (NJUWYFA). The New Jersey Unlimited Weight Youth Football Association NJUWYFA (www.njuwyfa.com) was established in 2007 to provide and promote competitive unlimited weight JR high school age football in New Jersey. The association consists of nine unlimited weight football leagues, representing over 100 individual teams.

The JR Raiders earned their spot in this state championship game by registering an undefeated season in JR Skyland Football Conference play. The JR Raiders are a travelling team consisting mainly of 7th and 8th grade players who reside in Hillsborough. Members of this elite squad were recruited from the ranks of the in-town JR Raiders youth football program (<http://www.eteamz.com/JrRaiders/>). Since the inception of the JR Skyland Football Conference four years ago, the JR Raiders have compiled a record of 40-2-1 and have won three conference championships. This was the first year of competition for a state title.

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“This game today is the culmination of intense work and preparation that began back in early August,” said Steve Ughetta, Head Coach. “I can say without question that this is one of the best groups of boys I have ever coached.”

This decisive victory was lead by the near-flawless performance of John Banaciski, who ran for two touchdowns. Sal Fama lead the team from the quarterback position and scored a rushing touchdown in the fourth quarter. Together John and Sal also lead the defense with numerous tackles and sacks, which contributed to the disruption of any consistent progress by the competitive Willingboro Panther Squad.

“Despite confronting teams that, more times than not, were bigger and stronger, our young men employed their training and skills to prevail,” said Ernie Santorelli, Assistant Coach. “This victory today proved to these young men that you can surmount any adversity if you believe in yourself and work as a team. A lesson for success on the field and in life”

Eric Schneider, at tight end, also shined bright in this JR Raider championship win. In addition to catching a 10-yard pass and running it through a legion of Panther defenders for a touchdown, Eric also contributed numerous tackles in the contest. Robert Foti, at full back, was the workhorse of the offense, helping to clear a path for nearly every one of Mr. Banaciski’s successful runs with the offensive line of Alex Duncan, Ian Whitman and Bryan Merriman. Foti also contributed with a number of successful carries. In addition to strong performances on special teams and defense, Rhys Weinberger led the JR Raiders from the quarterback position for much of the fourth quarter.

“Since early August these young men practiced in the heat, the rain, the cold, and at all times of day and night,” said Scott Roller, Assistant Coach. “And, while I might not have shown it during practice and games, I can say that I love every one of these young men.”

Holding the Panthers to a stingy 13 points proved the JR Raiders’ defensive metal, especially on this wind-swept, bone-crunching, 30-degree day. A resolute performance by core JR Raiders defenders were lead by Tyshon Murdock, Chris Vitkovits, Fredo Santorelli and Dylan Roake. Nick Villa, Dan Turner and Cody Dembiec also helped disrupt the Panther running game. Tommy Kellerman and Mike Kouten worked tirelessly in the Raider secondary to provide near perfect coverage against any Panther passing attempts. Each contributed a number of blocked passes and near interceptions. Stephen Kannellos did a great job kicking on special teams.

“I’ve played football at many levels, including college, and working with these boys reminded me why I love this game,” said Matthew Bruce, Assistant Coach. “The spirit, the team work, and the pride made me grateful to be a part of this organization.”

Jared Siegel, Christian Buckley and Ian Whitman, working hard on kick-off and punt return special teams, contributed to the win with numerous tackles. Adriel Crispo, Jake D’Agostino and Devon Sixt, cornerbacks, rounded out the JR Raiders defense,

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contributing to a number of failures by the Panthers to convert fourth downs. A fierce pass rush by the Raider line forced an errant Panther pass late in the game that was gobbled up by Tyshon Murdock (playing with an injured hand), representing the only JR Raider interception of the game.

“This is the most successful JR Raider team we have fielded since we began participating in the JR Skyland Conference,” said Sal Fama, Assistant Coach. “I am proud to say, including our win against Willingboro, this team finished 11-0-1.” Today’s State Championship is the culmination of a long and hard season. The regular season record was 8-0-1. Unfortunately, Tyler Workman, running back and back-up quarterback, sustained a broken leg on November 8 in the Skyland Conference semi-final. Mr. Workman’s performance prior to his injury contributed significantly to the overall success of this JR Raider team. Further, Chris Melfi sustained an injury to his shoulder in the regular season game against Hunterdon Central. Mr. Melfi’s contributions at defensive end and tight end were missed for part of season, however he returned on special teams in the semi-final and championship games.

This regular season record earned the JR Raiders a coveted berth in the JR Skyland Conference Championship game against rivals Watchung Hills. The JR Raiders handed the Watchung Hills JR Warriors a 26 – 12 defeat to win the JR Skyland Conference championship on November 15.

On December 7, in Jersey City, the JR Raiders competed against the Paterson Mustangs from the Twin Valley Football Conference in the state championship semi-finals. Despite being much smaller, the JR Raiders employed a high-speed ground game to prevail against the Mustangs in a largely one-sided 28 – 13 victory.

This first ever State Championship could not have happened without the leadership of Founders Guy Paolillo, JR Raiders/Director of Football and Pete Passe, President who have built a program of excellence in Hillsborough where nearly 700 cheerleaders and football players take the field and enrich the community.

Lastly, we would like to thank Pete Davies, JR Raider’s equipment manager Karen Kellerman and Arlene Duncan who served as trainers and the entire JR Raider coaching staff who have prepared and trained the young Champions called the JR Raiders.