

Among the Stars

Comets reach new heights with season for the ages



JAMES J. NESTOR/Gazette

‘It’s hard to believe that we got that far’

By ELI NELLIS

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Sure, the Penns Manor Comets knew what they did this season, but it didn't quite sink in at the time.

They were all too busy practicing and playing and coaching and rooting to fully appreciate the history the team was making and the fact that it ended up as one of the four best Class A teams in the state of Pennsylvania.

Not 48 hours following the bitter cold night the Comets' run came to an end, one step away from the state championship game, their fans let them know what they had done. Penns Manor hadn't just made history — it united a community and took it on a thrilling ride.

As the Comets themselves rode through Clymer for a congratulatory parade, the fans were the ones to lift the players up, giving them perspective to just how much they meant and had done for the Penns Manor School District.

"I still don't believe it's over already," senior wide receiver Shawn Stewart said a few days following the season's end, "but we had a parade through Clymer and just seeing all the people come out for that and seeing all the support that was actually behind us, realizing what we did for the whole community, it was pretty cool."

"A lady came up to me and said she graduated in the class of '64 and just said she was so proud of me," junior quarterback Danny Ferens said, "and I didn't even know who she was. It really made me feel like we gave the alumni something to cheer about. It really made me feel good."

Penns Manor put together what can pretty easily be called the best season in school history, winning its first ever District 6 Class A championship and advancing to the state semifinal round. The Comets became the first team from Indiana County to win a district title since United in 1998, and the first to win a District 6 Class A crown since Homer-Center in 1994.

Just getting to the district championship

game was a school first, but the Comets deepened their imprint with the district title and a victory over Columbia in the state quarterfinals.

They became the first area team to win a state playoff game since Homer-Center in 1994.

"I've had some time now to sit back and relax and think about what happened," coach Bill Packer said. "It's a feat that is really remarkable, and I never thought that we would ever get to this point, especially this year. It's a great feat and a credit to these kids for the job that they did and the work that they did throughout the summer and the season. ... It's hard to believe that we got that far."

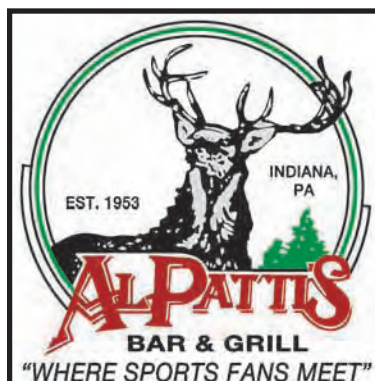
As a 1976 Penns Manor graduate and a standout receiver in his playing days, Packer has his own special appreciation for the history his team made.

"They never had championship games in the '70s," he said. "We never had the chance to get to that point, but they had some good teams. You just think about it and think about where these kids have gone."



JAMES J. NESTOR/Gazette

PENNS MANOR COACH Bill Packer got doused with water after winning the District 6 title.



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Recapping the Comets' dream season

WEEK 1 — FRIDAY, SEPT. 2

PENNS MANOR 22, HOMER-CENTER 0

Penns Manor	8	8	0	6	— 22
Homer-Center	0	0	0	0	— 0

The Comets scored on their first possession of the season when Danny Ferens hit running back Joey Vodopivec on a 5-yard pass. They hooked up again on a 38-yard catch-and-run for a 16-0 halftime lead. Ferens closed the scoring in the fourth quarter on an 8-yard run.

It was far from a smooth performance for the defending Heritage Conference champion against a team that would go on to have a winless season. The Comets gained 316 total yards, with Ferens leading the way by rushing for 112 and passing for 93 for 205 total yards.

"I was hoping we'd play a little better defensively and offensively," coach Bill Packer said. "We have a lot of work to do, and I'm really not pleased with where we're at right now. We missed assignments. We didn't get 11 guys at the same time doing the right jobs."

WEEK 2 — FRIDAY-SATURDAY, SEPT. 9-10

PENNS MANOR 40, PURCHASE LINE 7

Purchase Line	0	7	0	0	— 7
Penns Manor	7	13	14	6	— 40

The game took two days to complete because a thunderstorm rolled into Kenwood on Friday night, forcing a postponement with Penns Manor leading 20-7 at halftime. The game resumed Saturday evening.

Penns Manor won with ease against another of the conference's weaker teams, cranking out 450 total yards. One of the key stats came in the form of penalties, with the Comets committing 11 for 70 yards.

The performance was a testament to Ferens' ability to break big plays when it seemed none were there. He accounted for 318 total yards, rushing for 188 yards on only 14 carries and passing for 130 on a 6-for-9 effort.

"He just makes things happen for us," Packer said. "Sometimes when the holes aren't there you need guys who can do that, and Danny's that guy."

Ferens rushed for two scores and threw for two, hitting Corey Brown for 44 and Vodopivec for 26. Jake Paulina, who rushed for 82 yards, and Cody Bytner also scored rushing touchdowns.

WEEK 3 — FRIDAY, SEPT. 16

LIGONIER VALLEY 28, PENNS MANOR 0

Penns Manor	0	0	0	0	— 0
Ligonier Valley	14	14	0	0	— 28

The Comets suffered their lone regular-season loss, losing to a Ligonier Valley team that was favored to win the conference title and did. Penns Manor had won its previous 18 games against conference opponents.

Penns Manor allowed a modest 207 yards to a powerful team but managed only 189, all but 1 yard of it on the ground.

Ferens was held to 98 yards on 23 carries and 2-for-5 passing with an interception.

Penalties were a big stat again, with the Comets committing 12 for 98 yards.



JAMES J. NESTOR/Gazette

JAKE PAULINA (22) got a lift from Nick Clevenger after scoring against Blairsville.

"You're playing a very good football team," Packer said, "and you almost have to come out and play a perfect game. We made way too many mistakes."

WEEK 4 — FRIDAY, SEPT. 23

PENNS MANOR 26, BLAIRSVILLE 20, OT

Penns Manor	0	14	0	6	6	— 26
Blairsville	0	6	0	14	0	— 20

Facing another matchup against one of the conference's top teams, the Comets were pushed to overtime.

But Penns Manor had the ball last at the end of each half, and each time the Comets come up with big drives to score in the waning seconds. With the game tied at 6 after Blairsville scored 50.9 seconds before halftime, the Comets struck on an option pass, with Vodopivec hitting Paulina for 47 yards. Paulina tacked on the two-point run for a 14-6 lead.

Blairsville scored on two straight possessions in the fourth quarter to take a 20-14 lead with 6:22 left.

Penns Manor took over, and Ferens led a 15-play drive that covered 80 yards. He capped it with a 1-yard run with 17.9 seconds remaining. Blairsville held on a two-point attempt, sending the game to overtime.

After holding Blairsville on the first possession of overtime, the Comets ended the game in quick fashion when Paulina darted 10 yards on their only play in overtime.

"It was just great how we got our momentum back and drove it down and showed a lot of heart to come back into overtime and stop them when they'd been running it on us all game," Ferens said. "I thought that showed a lot of heart."

A worrisome stat continued to plague the Comets: 12 penalties for 105 yards.

WEEK 5 — FRIDAY, SEPT. 30

PENNS MANOR 22, MARION CENTER 20

Marion Center	13	7	0	0	— 20
Penns Manor	8	0	8	6	— 22

Facing a top-tier opponent for the third straight week, Penns Manor again rallied in the late going, this time pulling out the win when Ferens scampered 10 yards for the winning score with 44.6 seconds to play.

"Everything has to be interesting for us, you know," lineman Kasey Jewart said.

The Comets trailed 20-8 at halftime after Marion Center rolled up 205 yards and scored on its first three possessions. They shut out Marion Center in the second half and yielded only 52 yards.

Penns Manor made it 20-16 in the third quarter, the big strike coming on a play the Comets would pull out of their bag several times later in the season. Vodopivec lined up at quarterback, Ferens split wide to the right, and they hooked up for a 49-yard play that set up Ferens' 24-yard scoring run.

The winning drive started with 6:27 left and covered 70 yards on 12 plays, with Ferens carrying 10 times for the last of 157 yards.

"I've got to give our kids a lot of credit for the heart they showed coming out in the second half and playing the game they did," Packer said. "They stopped them defensively like they had to, and they moved the ball on offense. I'm really proud of our kids for that."

WEEK 6 — FRIDAY, OCT. 7

PENNS MANOR 50, UNITED 6

United	6	0	0	0	— 6
Penns Manor	22	14	12	0	— 50

Facing a hot team — United had won three straight after an 0-2 start — Penns Manor scored a rout.

The Comets forced two quick turnovers and scored on all five of their first-half possessions. Sophomore Mitch Hamilton forced a fumble on the opening kickoff, Penns Manor scored 63 seconds into the game, and the rout was on.

The key was the inside rushing game behind the offensive line and Vodopivec, who racked up 145 yards on only seven carries and scored four times, three rushing.

Ferens tacked on 168 yards on only eight carries and scored three times. Penns Manor held United to 166 total yards, including only 118 in its vaunted rushing game.

"We just came out and did all our jobs and dominated, both offensive and defensive side of the ball, all game," Vodopivec said.



TERI ENCISO/Gazette

CHRIS HENDERSON (7) and Louis Tate celebrated after the victory in the state quarterfinals.

WEEK 7 — FRIDAY, OCT. 14

PENNS MANOR 35, SALTSBURG 0

Saltsburg	13	8	7	7	— 35
Saltsburg	0	0	0	0	— 0

A heavy favorite against Saltsburg, Penns Manor shifted into cruise control.

The Comets outgained Saltsburg 379-100, Ferens threw three touchdown passes, and Vodopivec accounted for 188 yards from scrimmage, scoring twice on passes and once on a run.

Ferens was 8-for-13 for 138 yards and rushed for 91 yards. His third TD pass went to Nick Clevenger for 35 yards.

"Joey Vodopivec is just an amazing athlete," Ferens said. "It's a quarterback's dream to just dump it off on a little screen pass and have him run 40 yards."

WEEK 8 — SATURDAY, OCT. 22

PENNS MANOR 42, BISHOP WALSH 29

Bishop Walsh	0	7	8	14	— 29
Penns Manor	14	6	14	8	— 42

Revisiting their past with a Saturday night game, Penns Manor got into a little bit of a shootout with its visitors from Maryland in a non-conference game.

Ferens scored five rushing touchdowns and threw a touchdown pass to Brown, finished with 241 yards rushing and went over 1,000 on the season, and Vodopivec gained 90 yards.

Penns Manor outgained Bishop Walsh 379-233. The visitors passed for 249 yards, but the Comets held them to minus-16 rushing. And an old bugaboo did haunt the Comets, who committed a season-high 17 penalties for 145 yards.

"When I played," Packer, a Penns Manor alumnus, said, "we played Saturday nights. ... Like I told them after the game, you've got to be prepared to play on Saturday nights going into the playoffs."

That statement would prove to be prophetic in the coming weeks.

WEEK 9 — FRIDAY, OCT. 28

PENNS MANOR 16, NORTHERN CAMBRIA 0

Northern Cambria	0	0	0	0	— 0
Penns Manor	0	8	8	0	— 16

In a defensive struggle, two playoff-bound teams hooked up in the regular-season finale. Penns Manor prevailed and earned the No. 2 seed, a first-round bye and home-field advantage in the upcoming District 6 Class A playoffs.

"Going into the season," Packer said afterward, "if someone would have told us we'd be 8-1, I'd say, 'I'll take that any day with the young guys we have.'"

With Northern Cambria negating the plays to the edge the Comets had run so effectively throughout the season, Penns Manor turned to a grind-it-out style with the inside running of Paulina, who gained a season-high 126 yards on 16 carries.

Penns Manor held the Colts to 72 total yards and registered its second shutout of the season.

DISTRICT 6 PLAYOFFS

QUARTERFINALS

FRIDAY, NOV. 11

PENNS MANOR 36, NORTHERN CAMBRIA 6

Northern Cambria	0	0	0	6	— 6
Penns Manor	8	12	0	16	— 36

Penns Manor faced a familiar foe, and one that had given the Comets problems in its last outing.

But this time it was no contest.

Ferens scored three times in the first

half, and Vodopivec scored twice in the second. The two combined for 294 rushing yards.

"Our coaches did a great job of coming up with a lot of good counters and plays that go off our sweeps," Ferens said, "so they couldn't come out and try to stop one play."

SEMIFINALS

SATURDAY, NOV. 19

PENNS MANOR 26, MOSHANNON VALLEY 6

Moshannon Valley	0	0	6	0	— 6
Penns Manor	0	6	6	14	— 26

Penns Manor held a 6-0 lead at halftime, and the game was tied at 6 after the first possession of the second half before the Comets broke the game open and reached the district championship game for the first time in school history.

"This is the first time in Penns Manor history," Packer said. "These kids, they've worked hard. They deserve it. ... We've had the support all year from a great fan group. I'm happy for the fans, too."

Ferens was the workhorse, carrying a season-high 31 times for 246 yards and scoring three touchdowns. Vodopivec put up the final score on a 70-yard burst.

Penns Manor held the Black Knights to 218 total yards, a big chunk of it coming on a 77-yard touchdown run.

The game was marred by a rash of personal fouls in the second half when the visitors initiated several scrums at the end of plays.

CHAMPIONSHIP

SATURDAY, NOV. 26

PENNS MANOR 40, BELLWOOD-ANTIS 14

Penns Manor	12	6	16	6	— 40
Bellwood-Antis	0	14	0	0	— 14

Penns Manor faced perennial power Bellwood-Antis in its first appearance in the championship game at Mansion Park in Altoona, and the Comets pulled off a shocker — not by winning, but in the winning margin against the five-time district champion.

The Comets led 18-14 at halftime and then pulled away in the second half, outscoring the Blue Devils 22-0.

Penns Manor jumped out to the early lead on Ferens' 91-yard run and Vodopivec's 39-yard burst, but Bellwood bounced back to take a 14-12 lead before Vodopivec and Ferenshooked up for a 27-yard score on an option pass.

The go-ahead score was set up by another 27-yard Vodopivec-to-Ferens connection out of the wildcat.

Ferens then intercepted a pass at his team's 2-yard line that preserved the halftime lead.

In the second half, Ferens and Vodopivec scored to make the score 34-14, and Paulina tacked on the final score.

Penns Manor cranked out 439 total yards, with Ferens rushing for 201 and passing for 20 and Vodopivec rushing for 142 and passing for 54.

A loser in the semifinal round the previous two years, the Comets finally reached their goal.

"I'm numb right now," Packer said as players and fans continued the postgame celebration. "It just means so much. These kids worked so hard and deserve everything they got."

PIAA PLAYOFFS

QUARTERFINALS

SATURDAY, DEC. 3

PENNS MANOR 41, COLUMBIA 22

Penns Manor	14	6	14	7	— 41
Columbia	0	16	6	0	— 22

Facing the District 3 champion at Hersheypark Stadium, Penns Manor followed a blueprint similar to the district championship game.

The Comets raced to a 14-0 lead in the first quarter and held on for an 20-16 edge at halftime. Then they broke the game open in the third quarter and put it away in the fourth.

Penns Manor piled up a season-high 481 yards of total offense. Ferens scored on runs of 28, 14 and 56 yards and finished with 230 yards, and Vodopivec broke loose for 57- and 54-yard scoring jaunts and gained 176 yards. Paulina again tacked on the final touchdown.

The victory sent the Comets into the state semifinals.

"If you would have said that to me earlier in the year," Packer said, "I would've said you were crazy."

SEMIFINALS

FRIDAY, DEC. 9

SOUTHERN COLUMBIA 37, PENNS MANOR 6

Penns Manor	0	6	0	0	— 6
Southern Columbia	14	14	9	0	— 37

This time, Penns Manor got caught on the other end of the scale at Central Mountain High School.

It was the Comets who fell behind early, trailing 28-0 in the second quarter, and couldn't catch up.

Southern Columbia, one of the top teams in the state in the last two decades, held Penns Manor to season lows in rushing yards (67) and total yards (103). The Comets gave up season highs in rushing yards (243), total yards (429) and points.

"The kids are really hurting now," Packer said, "but I think later on they're going to realize what they just did."



TERI ENCISO/Gazette

CODY BYTNER had a team-high four interceptions.

SEASON STATISTICS

SCORE BY QUARTERS

Penns Manor	106	107	101	82	6	— 402
Opponents	47	85	29	34	0	— 195

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

RUSHING

Name	Att.	Yds.	Avg.	TD
Danny Ferens	274	2,132	7.8	27
Joey Vodopivec	126	1,066	8.5	11
Jake Paulina	99	561	5.7	4
Nick Clevenger	18	101	5.6	0
Chris Henderson	8	58	7.2	0
Cody Bytner	5	47	9.4	2
Matt Popovich	4	9	2.2	0
Zac Cramer	2	1	0.5	0
Louie Tate	1	0	0	0
Team Totals	550	3,942	7.2	44

PASSING

Name	Com.	Att.	Yds.	Avg.	TD
Danny Ferens	45	90	612	43.7	11
Joey Vodopivec	5	9	183	13.1	3
Team Totals	50	99	795	56.8	14

RECEIVING

Name	No.	Yds.	Avg.	TD
Joey Vodopivec	29	356	12.3	7
Corey Brown	8	127	15.9	2
Danny Ferens	4	136	34.0	2
Matt Popovich	3	44	14.7	0
Nick Clevenger	2	41	20.5	1
Jake Paulina	1	47	47.0	1
Chris Henderson	1	24	24.0	1
Johnny Rizzo	1	18	18.0	0
Shawn Stewart	1	2	2.0	0
Team Totals	50	795	15.9	14

TOTAL OFFENSE

Name	G	Rush	Pass	Total	Avg.
Danny Ferens	14	2,132	612	2,744	196.0
Joey Vodopivec	14	1,066	183	1,249	89.2
Jake Paulina	14	561	0	561	40.1
Nick Clevenger	12	101	0	101	



MIKE WALKER/Gazette

PENNS MANOR QUARTERBACK Danny Ferens rushed for an area record 2,132 yards and 27 touchdowns this season.

One to remember

Ferens rushes into record book with area's first 2,000-yard season

By ELI NELLIS
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Every week in the playoffs, Penns Manor's new opponents all knew who to look for.

All the opposing coaches and players and out-of-town reporters had their eyes especially focused on one player: Danny Ferens.

And once the game started, they often watched the junior race down the open field for a touchdown or shut down the other team's passing attack.

Ferens had a season for the ages, becoming the first area player to rush for more than 2,000 yards — finishing with 2,132 and the area's single-season rushing record. With that and his 612 passing yards he set the area record for total offense in a single season with 2,744 yards, breaking the mark set by West Shamokin's Trevor Henderson in 2003.

"My goal was 1,000 yards rushing this year, to tell you the truth, going into the year," the quarterback/cornerback said. "I didn't think about it during the season. I just did whatever I could to help my team win. That stuff was just a bonus."

"You only get kids coming through like that — who knows? — once or twice a lifetime for a school," coach Bill Packer said.

Ferens' final touchdown of the season, a reception on an injured ankle to give the Comets momentum entering halftime of the state semifinal game with Southern Columbia, gave him 29 on the season — setting the school record for touchdowns in a season. He broke the record held by his great uncle, Mike Paulina, who scored 28 in 1958.

What's more, Ferens' 27 rushing touchdowns set an area record in the modern era (since 1976).

Ferens enters his senior season with 3,732 career rushing yards, which is 280 short of the area record, held by Purchase Line's Brandon Overdorff, who gained 4,012 from 1988 to 1990.

"He's just a kid that I believe is going to go places and do big things," Packer said. "With the kind of attitude that he has and with the commitment he has, I believe he's going to go places and do great things."

Ferens, who once again squelched rumors that he will transfer out of the Penns Manor School District, has gotten some interest from several Division I colleges, though he doesn't have a narrowed-down list.

He looks to attend some

ROLLING ALONG

Danny Ferens' year-by-year rushing totals:



Year	Att.	Yds.	TD
2009	104	926	14
2010	76	674	13
2011	274	2,132	27
Totals	454	3,732	54

prospect camps at colleges over the summer as he and the schools get further along in the recruiting process.

"I've been getting some things from some Division I schools and definitely the smaller schools, Division II schools," Packer said. "I have people calling all the time about him. I know he can definitely play Division II, but I believe he's a kid that can definitely play some Division I football."

Ferens said he isn't looking specifically at one level of college football, but he's looking to strike a nice balance between academics and athletics.

"That's what I really am looking for," he said. "I'm hoping sports can take me to get a good education."

For all the individual accolades at Penns Manor, his focus never shifted from the team concept. In his junior year, a season when most players are only just getting

their first crack at starting, Ferens was entrenched as the starting quarterback, already with two years of experience. Ferens' maturity showed as Packer named him a team captain before the season, something he had never before done with an underclassman.

"He acts like a senior and we made him a captain this year," Packer said. "He's just that kid that needed to be a captain this year. ... The kid doesn't have a big head. He gives the other kids credit. He gives the coaches credit. He has a very level head, and he means a great deal to the team."

Ferens was willing, perhaps even insistent, on giving credit to his offensive line all year.

He was the one that got the credit for all the yardage, but John Stupic, Kasey Jewart, Chris Bracken, Steve Dumm, Luke Ruddock and Corey Brown paved the way.

"My yardage, I think that's also a credit to the line," Ferens said. "I think the line takes it, they should take it, as much as their achievement as mine, because they have a lot to do with me getting those yards."

The young line jelled throughout the season and was clicking by the time the playoffs came along. That's when Ferens did his best work, rushing for at least 160 yards in four of Penns Manor's five playoff games and at least 200 in three of them, after getting his first career 200-yard game in Week 8, in a non-conference game against Bishop Walsh (Md.).

Continued on Page S-4

Comets aren't likely to burn out quickly

Small senior class leaves plenty of talent coming back

By ELI NELLIS
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The Penns Manor Comets don't have to be told that chances at championships don't come around too often.

After all, they reached their District 6 championship game and state playoff appearance this year. But the players also know how to play at that level, and enough of them are returning to give the Comets plenty of hope for next season.

Though Penns Manor will lose 11 seniors, it will return seven defensive and six offensive starters in 2012. There will be plenty of big-game experience to go around, and a good bit of talent as well.

While that experience tells the Comets a return trip to the state playoffs will be anything but easy, Penns Manor should be a favorite to win the Heritage Conference title and should have the tools to make another run to the District 6 championship.

"It's pretty tough to do what we did this year, to do that again next year, even with the talent we have coming back," coach Bill Packer said. "To get to where we got this year, you think, is it ever going to happen again? How long will it be until someone does it again? I think we have the potential with some kids coming back."

The most notable returnee will be Danny Ferens, Penns Manor's quarterback and main rushing threat. But Ferens will get another chance to shine as a senior and fourth-year starter thanks to the bulk of his offensive line also coming back.

"As somebody that runs the ball a lot, that obviously gets me excited," Ferens said.

Left guard Chris Bracken will graduate, leaving big shoes to fill, but Kasey Jewart, now a junior, and sophomores John Stupic, Steve Dumm and Luke Ruddock, along with junior tight end Corey Brown, will be back to open up holes for Ferens and the other backs — something the unit did increasingly well as the 2011 season progressed.

The offensive linemen as a whole en-

tered this season without much experience, and it showed early on as the Comets struggled with formation penalties in the first half of the regular season. But the players improved and the line jelled, becoming a force come playoff time.

"I believe that's where we made our big steps," Packer said. "Those kids are, I believe, some of the best talent in the conference right there. It's going to be the key to our offensive line, Kasey Jewart coming back. I believe he's one of the best linemen in the conference this year, definitely. ... That offensive line is going to be a strength again. We're going to have to find another guard for Chris Bracken, but if we can find a person for that spot, I think our line will be strong."

All three running backs will graduate, but, of course, Ferens will be back to carry a heavy load, and Chris Henderson and Cody Bytner — already quality starters on defense — should step into roles in the offensive backfield, too.

"I definitely feel that they could do just as well, if not better, next year," said Joey Vodopivec, a 1,000-yard rusher this season and one of the highest-profile seniors the team will lose. "We have players in the weight room now starting to lift. We showed all the young kids what they need to do to make themselves better, and they know that we have that feeling, that experience, and we all loved it."

"I was planning to work hard this offseason, get better with my agility," Bytner said. "I think we'll be pretty good next year. ... I think we have some guys that will step up and fill their shoes pretty good."

Naturally, Penns Manor's experience from the playoffs will be very

important, too. "A lot of the guys are texting, 'We need to get people in the weight room,'" Ferens said. "Playing as good a team as we did in Southern Columbia, each one of their guys you could just tell that they worked out and they worked hard in the offseason. I think that kind of showed us what it takes to get to the state championship game, and I think that's going to be our goal going into next season."

The retuning linemen will also give Penns Manor a strong defensive front. And Ferens and Bytner made for a strong cornerback tandem that will remain intact.

"It's obviously really exciting to get a lot of guys back," Ferens said.



CODY BYTNER



KASEY JEWART

PENNS MANOR COMETS

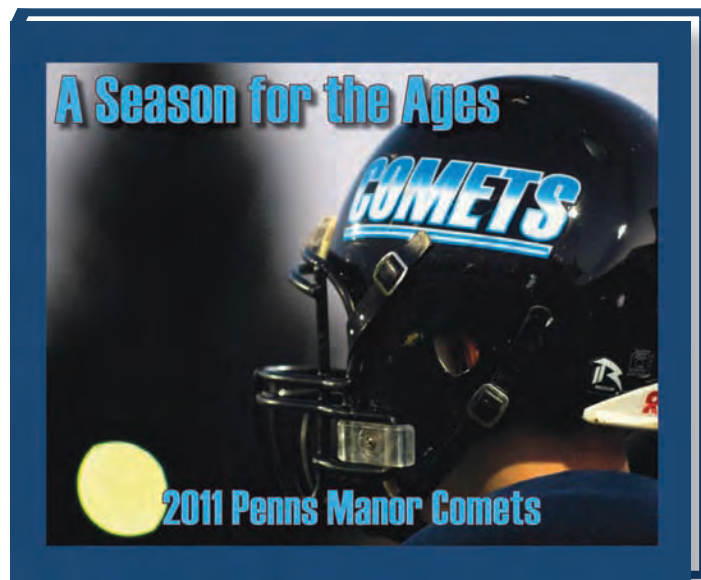
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JAMIE EMPFIELD/Gazette

THE 2011 DISTRICT 6 CLASS A CHAMPIONS: First row, from left, Louie Tate, Chris Henderson, Brandon Ailes, Johnny Rizzo, Danny Ferens, Ethan Marshall, Joey Vodopivec, Lucas Kowalski and Jake Paulina; second row, John Stupic, Cody Bytner, Nick Clevenger, Brock Carrick, Matt Popovich, Zac Cramer, Chris Bracken, Adam Miller and Joe Somogyi; third row, Shawn Stewart, Christopher Aikens, Braden Laverick, Steve Dumm, Luke Ruddock, Brandon Alter, Matt Detwiler, Ned Long and Brandon Troup; and fourth row, Corey Brown, Ryan Gromley, Matt Coy, coaches Aaron Packer, Bob Packer, Eric Misko and Carson Rhea, head coach Bill Packer, coach Bob Paronish, Ben Parfitt, Mitch Hamilton, Chuckie Keith and Jake Shedlock. Absent from photo: Collin Krevell, Kasey Jewart and Garrett Joiner.

All in the Family

Ferens rushes into records



JAMES J. NESTOR/Gazette

BILL PACKER addressed his team after the Comets lost to Southern Columbia in the PIAA Class A semifinals on Dec. 9.

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 "I just think my coaches have a lot of confidence in me, and when we get into those bigger games I think that they have a lot of confidence to give me the ball," Ferens said. "So I think I get the ball a little bit more in the playoffs."

His patient style — bouncing around in the backfield, waiting behind linemen for lanes to develop — wowed fans on both sides as the Comets played into December.

Ferens scored 13 touchdowns in the playoffs, 11 of them rushing. His 91-yard touchdown run on Penns Manor's first play from scrimmage was perhaps the Comets' signature moment in the District 6 championship game against Bellwood-Antis.

"Danny's a very important part of our season, why our records are like they are," Packer said. "To have an athlete like that just makes it easier for us."

Along with Ferens' emergence as a team captain, the quarterback fit right in with his confidence.

While outsiders might have doubted the Comets as they advanced to face tougher competition in the district and state playoffs, the Penns Manor players' confidence never wavered, and Ferens was no exception.

"Danny's always had the confidence. He's definitely one of the people, also those seniors have had that confidence, too," Packer said of those that set the tone for the Comets. "These kids just believed they were going to win and they could beat anybody. Coming from them, that helped the younger kids out. It made them believe, too. Definitely Danny, but also the seniors and (junior) Kasey Jewart."

"I just feel confident because I know that I work really hard," Ferens said. "I don't know if the other players gain confidence off of me. I hope they do. I just tell our line that if they do their job and they block their guy and they hold their guy long enough, I'll get the job done for them. ... I'm not sure how much confidence they have in me, but I had a lot of confidence in them this year."

For Packers, coaching is family business

By ELI NELLIS
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Football teams often liken themselves to families, but for several Penns Manor coaches, they truly are family.

Head coach Bill Packer has gotten plenty of help from his relatives as his coaching staff got the most out of the Comets in 2011. His brothers, Bob Packer and Brad Packer, and nephews, Aaron Packer and Joe Packer, put a family touch to the staff that was instrumental in getting Penns Manor to the state playoffs.

"It's nice because we get along pretty well," Bill Packer said. "We're really close, and I think that closeness we have as brothers, and a whole family with my nephews, that makes it more gratifying, that we can work together so well. I think that just being able to work together like that makes it easier for us."

While assistant coaches don't fetch the headlines, Penns Manor's head man praised his staff throughout the season. So he also thought it deserved plenty of recognition for

the Comets' historic run into states. "I really believe I have the best staff in the area," Bill Packer said. "They put tons and tons of time in, not only during the week of game preparation but throughout the off-season. ... Words are hard to say for all the things that they do, but I'm just so thankful to have a group of guys that are so committed to the program. They have been the ones that have really turned this thing around. I give them all the credit. We win, I seem to get all the credit, but these are the guys that really work with their groups and do a great job."

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Bill Packer,
 Penns Manor
 coach

Penns Manor's success, for a team that entered the season with a young, relatively unproven roster, has spoken volumes about Bill Packer's coaching family — including the blood relatives and those simply bonded by the Penns Manor football. All of the coaches except for one are Penns Manor graduates.

The emergence of the offensive line, which had three sophomore starters, was a driving force. The year started out slowly, and then gained steam for a 10-game win-

ning streak that coincided with the jelling of the offensive line.

"We had that young line this year, and he brought them on so well," Bill Packer said of Bob Paronish, the offensive coordinator and offensive line coach.

Paronish was helped out by Randy Thornton, who worked with the quarterbacks; Chad Kuzemchak, who coached the receivers; and Brad Packer, who helped out with the play-calling.

"Our coaches always seem to know where to go to pop off a big play for me," quarterback Danny Ferens said. "It helps me a lot."

"They love teaching you," said Shawn Stewart, who as a senior came on board to play receiver in his first and only season of high school football. "It was pretty easy to learn from them. They had patience with me, being my first year."

On the other side of the ball, the defense turned in some impressive performances as well, especially in the playoffs when it held the powerful Bellwood-Antis and Columbia offenses to 14 and 22 points, respectively, thanks in large part to the schemes dialed up by defensive coordinator Eric Misko.

"Our defense was what was lacking for many years," Bill Packer said, "and I think that's what brought us

to the championship caliber that we are now. ... They really turned things around with these guys."

Bob Packer coached the defensive line, with Carson Rhea working with the linebackers and Aaron Packer, a son of Bob's, with the defensive backs.

"They game-planned really well for all the teams," said junior defensive back Cody Bytner, who made a key interception against Columbia in the state quarterfinals. "They watched film every night and they just knew what they were going to run, so they showed what we needed to do to stop them."

Bill Packer also had special thanks to Joe Packer, also a son of Bob Packer's, who volunteered with the team after having previously served other assistant roles, as well as Rudy Bassaro, who worked with the special teams, especially the long snappers, and Mark Dalton, the "behind-the-scenes organizer."

And the head coach, a 1976 Penns Manor alumnus, still finds himself being helped out by other Comets' coaches.

"We had some pretty good teams back when I had Coach Julius Misurda and John Petro, very good coaches I had," Bill Packer said. "They really instilled football into me and into the program."

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