



A Commitment to Excellence: Summit State Champions Team with Berkeley Heights' Gabriele Fitness and Performance for Magical Season

By Josh Shreckengost
1/30/2010

BERKELEY HEIGHTS, NJ - One of the tried and true ideals of sports is that if a team works hard enough they can achieve greatness. The Summit Hilltoppers put that belief on display this season, running off an undefeated record and winning a state championship, their crowning victory a come-from-behind thriller against Orange at Giants Stadium. While the highlight of the Hilltoppers' season was certainly stamped on that frigid December evening in East Rutherford, head coach John Liberato's team put in countless hours in the off-season and during the year at Gabriele Fitness and Performance on Locust Avenue in Berkeley Heights..

The personal connection between Liberato and gym owner Vince Gabriele dates back years, and once Gabriele returned from several years in California where he trained numerous NFL players, the two former New Providence high school graduates saw an opportunity to work together to bring out the best in the area's student-athletes. "Vince went to high school at New Providence, where I went to high school," Liberato said. "After he got back from California, he wanted to open a gym in the area. He looked me up and I looked him up and we just got started."

What Liberato, Gabriele and the Hilltoppers started this past off-season was an extensive strength and conditioning program that, combined with the players' training and practice in their own weight room at Summit High School, helped to create



ROW 1-COACH KEVIN KOSTIBOS, SAL LIBERATO, ANDREW MILLER, NICK ORISTANIO, NICK LIBERATO, PETER BADGLEY; ROW 2-HEAD TRAINER TOM LANGTON, WYATT BEBOUT, BILLY HADLEY, MIKE WATTS, MIKE STEINBERG, STEFANO STADLINGER, OWNER VINCE GABRIELE, COACH JOHN LIBERATO; MISSING- MATT REA, DWAIN DABNEY, MATT MULHOLLAND, HENRY RASWEILER, PAUL COVIELLO

one of the greatest football teams in Summit history. An undefeated, 12-0 record, numerous personal awards and the team's first Sectional championship since 1994 were all the result of countless hours spent in Gabriele's facility.

"[This place] symbolizes hard work," team defensive Most Valuable Player Mike Watts said. "All the equipment you see right here symbolizes how much we've done over the minimum. Some teams just stick to the weight room, other teams don't even use the weight room to their advantage. We not only used our weight room at the school, but we came out here and put in the extra work we needed in order to get better."

Watts was more than just a dominant force on the interior of Summit's defensive line this season. He was an absolute juggernaut that completely disrupted each and every opponent's offensive game plan. Watts was constantly in the opposing team's backfield, either stuffing hapless ball carriers, pressuring the quarterback and, more often than not, bringing said quarterback down for a sack. The Hilltoppers' star defensive tackle led the team with 85 tackles, was second on the team with 15 tackles for loss, and was third on the team with four sacks even though he was constantly double and triple-teamed. Watts attributed his monster senior season to all the sweat he and his teammates spilled at Gabriele Fitness and Performance.

While Watts entered the 2009 season as an established starter, senior linebacker Mike Steinberg used this past off-season to turn himself into the team's most improved defensive player. Steinberg had a solid year for the Hilltoppers, registering 23 tackles, two tackles for loss and a forced fumble. More important than statistics for Steinberg was the appreciation he gained for comprehensive training. "It made me realize that football is more than just 12 weeks out of the year," Steinberg said. "We were here in the summer and during the season. It definitely made me faster, more explosive."

Explosive is a perfect word to describe the 2009 Hilltoppers. Their offense averaged well over 40 points per game during the regular season, but it was Watts, Steinberg and the defense that answered the bell with the season on the line. Down two scores to Orange early in the game after two costly fumbles, Summit's defense dug in and clamped down until the offense found their footing and put the game away late. Perhaps it was luck. Perhaps it was destiny. More likely, that extra reserve of strength was partially crafted at Gabriele Fitness and Performance under the watchful eyes of Vince Gabriele, head trainer Tom Langton, Liberato and assistant coach Kevin Kostibos, all of whom gathered on Tuesday night to commemorate a perfect season.

However, for the four men who helped build the muscles that lifted the Hilltoppers to their highest peak in 15 years, the gathering wasn't about reminiscing over the past season and congratulating one another on a job well done, it was about getting back to work. "As you can see, we have at least 15 guys here right now," Liberato said while watching several members of his team follow Langton in a series of drills designed for building speed and burst off the ball. "All of these guys play a spring sport and we'll be here after baseball and lacrosse are finished up. We'll be here throughout. We're already back to work."

■ Josh Shreckengost