

# A Championship Season

## The 1978-79 Campaign in Review

By Mike Chason, Ferris Sports Editor  
The Valdosta Daily Times

For some high school football teams, the pressure of being ranked number one in the state is like a boa constrictor which coils itself ever tighter around the top ranked team's neck until that team finally loses.

But for other teams, that number one ranking is like a steady shot of adrenalin which keeps pumping new life every Friday night.

Put Valdosta's 1978 Wildcats into the latter category.

Valdosta was rated as the top Class AAAA football team in the state by the Associated Press for every single week of the 1978 season. That includes the final poll although the Wildcat's year ended on a note of half joy, half sorrow when Griffin managed a 7-7 tie in the state championship game.

But VHS danced through 14 straight cuts of Friday Night Fever before that cold December night when the Cleveland Field Ghost took an early Christmas holiday.

The success story that Coach Nick Hyder and his staff produced last season really began in March when the Wildcats romped over a revenge-minded Warner Robins club by a 34-7 margin in the Spring Jamboree.

That set the tone for a season filled with runaways and very few games which were really in doubt near the end.

A 40-0 wipeout of Central of Thomasville on the first night of the season gave Valdosta fans a hint of what was to be a strong defensive club which had an offensive ground corps better than Patton's Army.

The 'Cats then took their dazzling offensive fireworks on the road to register a 34-7 victory over Crisp County in Cordele. This time senior quarterback John Lastinger unleashed a throwing arm second to none. Fredrick Blair and Robert Smith proved more than adequate receivers.

If ever there was a game that put Old Man Momentum on Valdosta's side, it was a 16-7 victory over Thomasville in Week Three. That brilliant exhibition of hard-nosed



football by both clubs looked to be headed for overtime until Lastinger choreographed the go-ahead TD drive in the final two minutes.

Seldom has there been a better example of reaching back for a little something extra when the time came.

Subsequent 49-0 victories over Albany and Colquitt County (Moultrie) proved little but did fatten a VHS scoring average which wound up at over 30 points a game. Lastinger ran for five touchdowns against Albany as the 'Cats waltzed up and down Cleveland Field like they owned it, which they do.

Game Six was expected to be one of the supreme tests of the season before 12,000 folks in Tifton. But it didn't turn out that way.

Taking advantage of every Blue Devil error, the Wildcats walked over Tift County 35-7. That set the stage for the Big One, the game everyone had talked about since a certain 7-2 night in Martin Stadium.

This time, the Wildcats were ready for the invasion of their cross-county rivals and proved it in a 22-0 triumph over the never-say-die Lowndes' Vikings. The game was played before a full house at Cleveland Field, but

half the fans had trouble distinguishing where the ball was because the lights on the home side of the stadium went out an hour before kickoff.

But not a single Flowboy fan blamed the lights for the final result. Led by cornerback Troy Thomas and linebacker Lynn Roberts, the VHS defense deserved at least a couple of curtain calls.

Valdosta closed out the regular season with a 41-0 win over Monroe, a 42-0 blitzing of Bainbridge and a 33-7 burial of Dougherty. Lastinger operated coolly behind an offensive line of Tony Bisetti, Scott Griffin, Andy Chapman, Bubba Hardin, Harvey Carter, Darrell Swindle, Rob Register and Billy Harvey.

For the first time this season, Region 1-AAAA (formerly 1-AAA) went to a four-team playoff. The 'Cats still had two games to go before they even qualified for the state playoffs despite finishing with a 10-0 regular season record.

It was the first time since Thomasville did it in 1973 that a team in the 12-team league, often called the toughest in the state, had finished with a perfect record. It was the first time Valdosta had an undefeated slate since Wright Bazemore's final team in 1971.

In the first round of the region playoffs, Lowndes made a return visit to Cleveland Field in a game which lacked the emotion of the two titans' earlier meeting. Valdosta came away with a 21-7 win in a contest where Lowndes' quarterback Chuck DeVane saw more of VHS defensive end James Harris than he did of his receivers.

Valdosta's junior tandem of running backs, Irvin Roe and Ernest King, ran for 165 yards between them in the game and certainly lived up to their "Double Dynamic" tag.

Roe and King repeated their heroics the next week before a standing room only crowd at Thomasville's Veterans Memorial Stadium but the Wildcats needed every one of the 175 yards to doo picked up in a thrilling 12-7 Region championship-clinching win over the Thomasville Bulldogs.

Valdosta fell behind for only the second time all year in the game but hitched up its britches, tightened its belt and wrapped up win number 12.

No one really knew how easy the next victory was going to be. In the first round of the state playoffs, Valdosta demolished Westside's Patriots 52-0 in the most lopsided game the Wildcats played in all season.

But the victory took its toll.

Lastinger went down with a shout-

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der separation before Valdosta had even posted one point on the scoreboard. Junior quarterback John Bond came on to run for three touchdowns and spark the VHS win.

The defense just kept proving it ranked with the best ever to wear the black-and-gold. Carl Roe, Jimbo Hancock, Rodney Gordon, John Brunan, Kenny Evans, Carroll Johnson and Co. were at their stingy best.

Defensive coordinator Jack Rudolph again had his unit psyched up the following week in a 23-0 win over Benedictine which gave the Wildcats their second straight South Georgia title. With offensive coordinator Butch Brooks mixing up the VHS running and passing attack, Valdosta managed to penetrate the tough Cadets' goal line three times, all on runs by Bond.

And then came the finale.

So much had already been accomplished. No other Valdosta team had ever won 14 straight games without winning a state title. Hyder had picked up his 100th career win in the Westside game and was now en route to another hundred. Lastinger had been named offensive player of the year in the region, and Thomas had been named defensive player of the year. Hyder had also been selected as the coach of the year.

It all boiled down to what looked like a Valdosta win to tie a neat ribbon on what was a historic season. But Griffin's Bears kept it from happening.

Valdosta scored in the first quarter on a 1-yard run by Bond but was never able to break through the Bears' defense again. Irvin Roe did return a punt 62 yards for an apparent touchdown but it was called back because of a penalty.

Griffin scored in the fourth quarter before a by now Cleveland Field-fal of near frozen onlookers. And that was the end of both teams' offensive efforts.

Ultimately, it was also the end of another chapter in the Valdosta history book of winning football teams.

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