

# Vessey Academy Fields First Charter High School Football Program

## By Claud Allaire

In 2008, Vessey Academy became the first charter school in Minnesota to offer tackle football. This was the result of the many requests and dreams expressed by our young men. Certainly, there was a feeling that these kids didn't know what football was really all about, nevertheless, we felt we had a duty to help provide them with this lifelong opportunity. For sure, coaching this team while also coaching at Hamline helped me understand that "coaching football" can mean two entirely different things based on the different challenges you face.

Vessey Academy is a free public JROTC high school located in West St. Paul with its mission to help students learn the discipline and leadership necessary to become better citizens. Vessey Academy serves a primarily disadvantaged population of students who come mostly from St. Paul but from throughout the Twin Cities for a number of reasons, many for a second chance at high school. With a student population of 120 students grades 9-12, the thought of even attempting to play 11 man football seemed impossible. Nevertheless, it was a worthy experiment with many benefits and few downfalls. Thanks to the generosity of a number of high schools programs willing to provide us with used equipment, we were able to overcome the overwhelming obstacle of equipment cost. Our answer to finding a home field was simply to play all away games and our practice field was almost a mile away. It is important to mention that our strategy to ensure that our kids would stay with the experience was to schedule practice as a physical education class, making attendance a requirement of the school day. Scheduling was not

difficult as we were happy to play J.V. and sophomore B games. We ended-up playing four games including the Minnesota Academy for the Deaf and sophomore B games against North St. Paul, Minnetonka, and Blaine.

Coaching football at Vessey Academy was not like anything you would imagine; It certainly wasn't about technique, strategy, or X's & O's; It couldn't be... It was about teaching skills such as listening, eye contact, paying attention and having a sense of initiative and values such as toughness, resilience, confidence, and teamwork. Starting from ground zero, we had to set short term, progressive goals. For instance, my unstated goal for our first practice was to have a successful dynamic warm-up! The experience could be described as challenging at the very least. We had about 40 kids run through the program, yet we only had about a dozen stay with it from start to finish. The things we all take for granted were a challenge; From finding our way to our practice field to simple things such as substituting with 11 during a change of possession, getting our line set for a cadence, or simple ball management. Our first game against the Minnesota Academy for the Deaf was by far the most challenging sideline experience I have ever had. Offensively, we struggled to get set for a cadence or consistently execute the center quarterback exchange, defensively, we couldn't figure out where to line-up, and on special teams, we couldn't figure out who was supposed to be on the field. Although we thought we were prepared in these areas, we underestimated the role of intimidation and our kids' lack of confidence, initiative, and teamwork. Nevertheless, we learned from the experience and made tremendous strides in our next

three games. We did not win any of them but we became competitive and were actually ahead by halftime in our last game despite the fact that we only had 15 players dressed for that game.

We were fortunate to have a number of guys help coach this team. Kofi Bain, Steve Rivera, and former Gopher Gary Reiersen graciously volunteered to help coach. I remember Gary telling me over the Summer that this was a crazy venture and asking me which offense we would run. I responded "you're right; It is a crazy venture but it can be done and I don't think it will matter much which offense we run". Many people ask me if the experience was difficult or frustrating. I don't think coaching is ever frustrating if you know what you're trying to accomplish, you know what you're up against, and you set realistic and progressive goals. What we were trying to accomplish was to put together a team that could compete through a four game schedule, what we were up against was the fact that our kids knew little about football, preparation, teamwork, or how to compete, and we set our progressive goals accordingly. As a result, the experience was far from frustrating and one that provided our kids with the opportunity of a lifetime, to learn valuable life skills and to play high school football.

This will always be a year to year effort for us because of our small numbers and limited resources. I was wondering if our kids' interest would continue now that they know there is more to football than dreaming of playing in the Super Bowl or playing Madden football. We had a core group develop a real passion for football and as of right now, we couldn't not continue the program into next year so here we go again...