

From 1968 to 1990 the annual Thanksgiving Day football game between Bridgewater/Raritan's two rival high schools – East and West – was the premiere local event. An estimated 6000 to 7000 fans attended each game. Nothing matched the intensity of the rivalry between the two schools. Each school spent the days before gearing up for the game. That week was often labeled "Spirit Week" where on the last day a large "pep rally" would be held. For most years a bonfire was held the night before the game on each school's property. Here cheers were chanted, speeches were made, and a dummy dressed in the football uniform of the rival school would be burnt in the fire. (A fun tradition back then, certainly not politically correct today.) The game was a celebration of "school spirit" as many who attended the game were not even football fans.

All the Thanksgiving Day games were at Basilone Field (on Garretson Road) as East never had its own football stadium. Due to the overflow crowd the regular stands could not hold everyone so bleacher seats were moved over from other sports fields. But even with these extra bleacher seats there were still no seats for thousands of other fans – thus many stood three deep around the fence that surrounded the playing field.

When this author asked alumni on B/R H.S. FACEBOOK pages about their memories of the Thanksgiving Day game there were dozens of responses. They talked about the size and loudness of the crowd, and the intensity of the play.

The rival coaches even shared the excitement together as the East and West coaches would often meet for breakfast that morning. The game had a prized trophy that the victors would hold onto for the year.

When contacted today the coaches of these games still passionately recall the excitement and atmosphere of The Thanksgiving Day game.

Tony Maglione, the head coach of "West" (1979-84, 1987-90), recalled *"There was nothing like it. The kids knew each other, so pride was on the line. It was a total battle. The place was loaded with people ... it was nuts ... it was madness ... it was great! "*

Bill Savage, the head coach of "East" (1978-90), remembered *"When I came to the school I could not believe the intensity of the East-West game. It was a lot of fun and a wonderful tradition. The kids were great. It was a coach's dream."*

The 1<sup>st</sup> Bridgewater/Raritan High School on Garretson Road opened in the fall of 1959. The second High School off Foothill Road opened in the fall of 1966 with just a 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade class. That new school was labeled "East" and the original school took on the designation "West". By 1968 East had a senior class and was now ready for varsity play against other high schools. Thus East and West played for the first time on Thanksgiving Day 1968. It was a natural and intense rivalry from the start. Some players on opposing teams had once been teammates playing together on the Freshman Football team three years before.

The first game proved indecisive as it ended in a 14-14 tie. These early years saw East develop into a football powerhouse as they would go 34 games in a row without a loss. Their only tie in that streak was the tie against WEST.

The results of the games, the defining plays, and some of the individual performances have become firmly entrenched in the memories of the players and students of that era.

### **The most memorable game of them all - West finally beats East in the 1976.**

While there were many significant games, this author has found that one game seemed to stand above the rest. That was in 1976 when West finally beat East. For the first eight games West could not come up with a win against East. But the West fans were still always high spirited hoping that this would be their year. That Thanksgiving Day the first half of the game started out like most years as East took a commanding 13-0 lead at halftime. Legend has it, according to the West alumni at least, that at halftime in the East locker room some players were boasting how it was business as usual, another victory against West. But West came out in the second half a different team. Half way through the third quarter, still without a score, West was at the East 40 yard line. Wide receiver Mike Krochta told quarterback Dave Incao that when two receivers went out on a pass on his side that both the East defensive backs were covering the other receiver. Incao took his teammates advice. On the next play he threw 20 yards to Krochta, who, as he predicted, was uncovered. After catching the ball he was able to out run the defenders to end zone. A two point conversion made it 13-8. West was still trailing, but was back in the game. Their defense would keep East from scoring again. Later in the fourth quarter West drove down the field again. From the 16 yard line Incao again found Krochta for a touchdown pass. West was in the lead 14-13. The crowd went crazy. Anyone at that game recalls the noise level that the fans made. The West fans that is. The East side of the stands was very quiet. As the game moved on the West fans were on the edge of their seats watching the clock tick down as West held onto the lead. But then ironically with four minutes left the power on the scoreboard clock went out. The "official time" was kept on the field by the officials so the game continued. But it drove the fans crazy. How much time was left, two minutes, one minute? After what seemed like forever the referee signaled the game was over. West, after eight disappointing years, had finally beaten East. Thousands of screaming fans stormed the field to celebrate. Mike Krochta, who scored two touchdowns, recalled how amazing it was that thousands of people were on the field. In their exuberance the crazed fans ripped down the goalposts. Today, that is considered an act of vandalism, but back in 1976 it was just part of the fun of a long awaited victory. The school would gladly spring for a few bucks to put the goalposts back up.

### **1969 – A trick plays proves to be the winning score**

EAST, in the midst of that undefeated streak, squeaked out a 20-14 win. It was a well-executed fake punt that made the difference. Punter Bob Santora hit Bruce Hennemuth on a screen pass that caught West defenders charging in to block the kick. Hennemuth, aided by excellent blocking, coasted from midfield into the end zone.

### **1979 – The big upset**

A West team with a 1-7 record went up against a heavily favored East team whose record was 5-2. From the time the game started everything that could go wrong for East did. Fumbles, penalties... . West took advantage of each turnover converting them into touchdowns. West would shock the crowd by going out to a 30-0 lead before East was able to mount some offense. But it was too little, too late, as West hung on for a memorable 30-20 upset win.

#### **1984 – Defensive touchdowns win it for East**

This game saw two defensive touchdowns by Jeff Anderson of East make the difference in a 16-12 win. One of Anderson's touchdowns was on an interception return while the other was on a recovery of a blocked punt in the end zone.

#### **1985 – The Mud Bowl – scoreless tie**

Heavy rains on Thanksgiving morning caused this game to be rescheduled to Saturday. The postponement to Saturday did nothing to help game conditions as it was played on a slippery field of mud. Players could not build up any speed with the ball. Thus each team did not generate much offense. As the game went on the uniforms became so muddy that the fans had trouble telling which players belonged to which team. The game ended in a scoreless tie. After the game the field needed major repair to be ready for next season.

#### **1990 – Final Game**

West's Jay Hobbs had three touchdown runs of 75, 45, and 16 yards to lead West to a 21-12 win. This was one of the best individual performances of the rivalry. That day he ran for 203 yards on just 14 carries.

In the fall of 1991 the two schools, East and West, merged into one – thus the era of two rival high schools was over. For many people in Bridgewater and Raritan Thanksgiving Day would never be the same. It was indeed a great tradition. Perhaps East coach George Greiner (**1968-1977**) sums it up when he said ***"It was like playing in The Super Bowl. It is a shame that it is over."***

The final record was 15 wins for East, 6 wins for West, and two ties.

To see articles and box scores for every Thanksgiving Day Game between Bridgewater / Raritan East and West login to [www.raritan-online.com](http://www.raritan-online.com).