

Thanksgiving win shows Fitchburg has returned to form

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FITCHBURG -- Trust the process.

That was Fitchburg's motto all season long.

There would be many bumps along the way during this process -- head coach Tom DiGeronimo's first year at the helm -- but the key for these Red Raiders was to stick together and battle until the very end each and every day.

Fitchburg's trust in DiGeronimo and the program reached a climax on Thanksgiving, as the Red Raiders snapped Leominster's eight-year dominance on Turkey Day with a pride-restoring 34-21 triumph at Crocker Field in the 136th overall meeting and the 111th on Thanksgiving between these two storied high school programs.

"At first I didn't know what it was, but the process is to win and to bring back Fitchburg traditions," said FHS running back Sal Figueroa, who rode off into the sunset in his senior season with an unreal 324-yard, four-touchdown rushing performance.

Toughness was Fitchburg's calling card from Day 1.

After DiGeronimo took over the coaching reins and added fiery Charlie Raff into the mix as the defensive coordinator, the Red Raiders knew from the get-go there would be no easy shortcuts to success.

"Coach did bring our spirit back," Figueroa said. "He's a great coach. I just love my team. I'm so happy. I just want to eat my turkey."

The coaches demanded the absolute best from everyone who donned the Red and Gray. Accountability was a must. And excuses weren't acceptable. Toughness, passion and determination were front and center.

There were bumps along the way and losses to learn from this year. Adversity even struck against Leominster on Thanksgiving Day, but these Red Raiders didn't turtle under the pressure.

They've been taught to fight back no matter how big the mountain is to climb.

"We have great kids," DiGeronimo said. "They played hard. We could have folded at times, but they hung in there and did what they had to do."

Pride is being restored within Fitchburg High School. Pride is back inside the football program.

"Hats off to coach DiGeronimo," Leominster coach Dave Palazzi said. "He's done a nice job of bringing that program back. They deserve to win today."

The football team gave the city of Fitchburg hope, and the team certainly didn't let down all the Red Raider supporters.

"A couple of years ago, they didn't have a freshmen program and we didn't have a freshmen game," Palazzi said. "I don't want to see that, either. I want to see three programs at Leominster and three at Fitchburg (freshman, JV and varsity) and keep this rivalry going and have games like today where we have a lot of fans. Obviously I want to be on the winning side, but I love this rivalry and I think it's great for the area. I'm glad the buzz is back.

"We've got 365 days to think about this and then we'll go after it at Doyle next year."

Through hard work, determination and a strong belief in everyone inside the Fitchburg locker room, the Red Raiders became a strong-willed team over time.

They now believe 100 percent in the process.

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