

ALDINGER: The date is August 5, 1977. I'm here talking with Mel Knowlton who was the football coach at Alliance for 24 year, from 1946 through 1969. From 1969 through 1977 he has served as Athletic Director at Alliance School System. Mel, I wonder if you could explain a little about your background and how you

REMINISCENCES

OF

MEL KNOWLTON

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KNOWLTON: Well, Knowlton, Melvin C. Mass., moved to Massillon, Ohio when we were just young kids and went through the Massillon School System. I graduated from Washington High School in Massillon and then went on to Miami University. After graduating from Miami University in 1937, I went back to Massillon to coach at Edward A. Jones Junior High. Paul Brown was the head football coach; he was also the head coach at the High School. After that in 1941 I went to Steubenville to coach and stayed there one year and then went in the service in World War II.

Interview by
Alan Aldinger
August 5, 1977

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KNOWLTON: Well Alan, I was born in Boston, Mass., moved to Massillon, Ohio when we were just young kids and went through the Massillon School System. I graduated from Washington High School in Massillon and then went on to Miami University. After graduating from Miami University in 1937, I went back to Massillon to coach at Edmund A. Jones Junior High. Paul Brown was the head football coach; he was also the head coach at the High School when I was a senior. After that in 1941 I went to Steubenville as head football coach and stayed there one year and then went in the service in World War II. While in the service the Superintendent of the Alliance Schools who was formerly the Superintendent at Steubenville offered me the job at Alliance so I came here as soon as I got out of the service.

ALDINGER: Now in high school you participated in athletics at Massillon. Would you tell about that?

KNOWLTON: Why yes, I played for Paul Brown. I played football, basketball and ran track at Massillon. We didn't have

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baseball then although I would have preferred to play baseball. Of course Alliance at that time was one of Massillon's bitter rivals. And I can recall a game at Mount Union Stadium in 1932 my senior year when Alliance had one of its greatest football teams. They defeated us 30-6. I have quite a few memories of that game. I met many of the Alliance players since coming to Alliance. I must say George Wilcoxon was the coach then and he had an excellent football team and we didn't stand much of a chance in the ball game frankly.

ALDINGER: What's your opinion of Dr. Wilcoxon as a coach?

KNOWLTON: Well George Wilcoxon was, always was very highly thought of in coaching circles. I know Paul Brown used to think and talk about him frequently. George did a fine job and if it wouldn't of been for his going into medicine he would have probably continued on with his coaching duties. But he had some fine football teams in Alliance High School and he's recognized as a real, an outstanding, excellent football coach.

ALDINGER: Now you went on to Steubenville as a head football coach and how did you do there?

KNOWLTON: Well we didn't do very well that first year. We did get things started, and built it up, and then of course the war came along and I went into the service, and had planned to go back there right after the service, but when the superintendent of Steubenville came to Alliance and asked me to come here; knowing him and knowing the background that Alliance had under George Wilcoxon, I knew that the chances

for having a good football program here were very good. So I elected to come here to Alliance.

ALDINGER: In 1945, the Alliance team had a very poor season. They won one game lost eight and tied one. Then in 1946 you turned it completely around and won seven and lost three. How did you accomplish that?

KNOWLTON: Well I'll have to say this, Joe Quinlan was the head football coach in 1945 and Joe attempted to get everything built up as well as he could for us; starting out when we figured we would in 1946. Even though they had a poor record as far as games won and lost Joe Quinlan did work very hard at trying to get things prepared and ready and did a fine job for us and I think that as much as anything had a lot to do with a pretty good season the following year.

ALDINGER: In 1948 you had a very excellent season, you won nine and lost one. Now John Borton was a member of that team. Would you describe that season and explain the highlight of that year and talk about John Borton for a bit?

KNOWLTON: Well, that was a very good year. We defeated Massillon over here at the Mount Union Stadium and Massillon was an excellent football team coached by Chuch Mather at that time. And Canton McKinley defeated us for our only loss of the year. All three of us ended up with nine victories and one defeat that particular year. John Borton was the quarterback on that team; he was a sophomore. We had a lot of good football players on it; Jerry Thorpe was a running back and a excellent

one; we had Pee Wee Davidson as an end and many others. I hate to mention too many names or some names, for fear that I will leave some out. Russ Addison was center for us, he was not very big, 160 pounds but he was an excellent football player and a sharp boy. I think the main thing about that team, we had some real sharp people, not very big but real sharp people and they were dedicated and they all thought that winning the game was the important thing, not the individual honors. And I can recall many times Candy Carroll, one of our fine backs, talking about John Borton as a quarterback and what an excellent job he was doing. And it was the spirit that we had that I think prevailed throughout the whole year and helped make up a very fine team. And without that you can't succeed.

ALDINGER: What happened to John Borton?

KNOWLTON: John, of course, left here and went to Ohio State. Then they started to play freshmen and he started out as a linebacker and played linebacker as a freshman at Ohio State immediately. Then he played quarterback too and was one of their all time great football players. I think Woody Hayes continually talks about John in the unselfish manner in which he ran a football team and the things that he did for Ohio State. John did the same type of thing for us. He was just outstanding and his leadership ability as well as his ability to throw a ball and his ability to play as linebacker on defense was outstanding.

"well fine if you can do it why that's what we're looking for." And he proceeded to do just what he

ALDINGER: Did he not make it to the pros?

KNOWLTON: John did make it with the Cleveland Browns yet before he could play with them he had to go into the service. He spent three years in the service and then came back out and was rusty and tried to regain in a couple of weeks everything that he had lost in three years of service time and hurt his arm and that finished his football career. But I'm sure that John would have made a fine pro football player if he wouldn't have had that interruption in his playing.

ALDINGER: Where is he living now?

KNOWLTON: He's over in Massillon now. He has an excellent position over at the Union Drawn in Massillon and he's doing very well.

ALDINGER: Okay, now, right after John Borton you had a fellow by the name of Len Dawson. Would you talk a bit about him?

KNOWLTON: Well Len was a sophomore when John was a senior, and one of the things that I recall very vividly about Dawson as a sophomore was that we had about 46 on our varsity squad; he was just a little kid in fact he was about number 46 at the time. And coming off the field after the last football game I was wondering as were the other coaches, just where we would find somebody to replace John Borton and Len came up to us and said, "Coach, I'm going to be the quarterback next year." And he said, "I'm going to be just as good as John Borton." And of course we said, "well fine if you can do it why that's what we're looking for." And he proceeded to do just what he

he certainly did do an excellent job.

said he would be able to do. Of course he worked at it, now a lot of people think that was cockiness and in a sense it is but it was really more his self confidence. He knew that he was going to work hard at trying to become an excellent football player and he just felt confident that he would get the job done, which is what he did.

ALDINGER: Now he gives you much of the credit for his success. What do you say to him?

KNOWLTON: Well I say this, that you can't make something out of nothing when you're coaching - that's impossible. You have to have the raw talent and certainly we did have in kids like Borton and Dawson and Thorpe and Addison and Candy Carroll and men of that type. They were excellent; they wanted to learn, they wanted to work. Len worked twelve months out of the year playing something. If he wasn't playing football he was playing basketball or he was playing baseball, he was always playing something. He was sharp mentally and he had a very good brain on him and he was never satisfied that his was good enough, he wanted to be perfect and he worked at it continually in attempt to become outstanding quarterback and that's the thing that really made him. The fact that he was willing to work hard and listen to his coaches and try to always stride to get just a little bit better, just a little bit better. And he did that and I think that's the thing that brought him through. So if the raw material is there and then the boy has to be willing to really sacrifice and work to really get the job done. And Lenny was that type of a kid and he certainly did do an excellent job.

ALDINGER: Okay then probably your next best season was 1954 and you gained an honor that year, several honors really, you had an outstanding team.

KNOWLTON: Well as in most cases I would say the average normal high school, you'll have your ups and downs. You may come up and have a great year or two and then you may drop a little bit and of course you hope to come back, and that seemed to be the pattern for us throughout the years. We came up in 1954 and we had, we did have an excellent football team that year. Again, I think the biggest thing about the athletes in Alliance was that they were always very coachable; we were always after the type of boy that not only had physical abilities but had mental abilities, because really without the mental ability you don't have a whole lot of chance to be a great athlete. You can be a fair athlete maybe but you'll never be a great one. And then we looked for the kid who had determination and desire to excel. And then they went about it in that respect. I think you have to always strive to prepare to win. I don't believe in the idea that winning is everything. I believe that preparing to win is everything. That is the secret, I think, to the whole thing. And then after you get in the ball game you give it everything you've got, and win or lose if you've given everything you have then you should feel satisfied. And the idea of winning at all costs or winning is everything, I just don't believe really belongs, especially in high school or collegiate football.

ALDINGER: What about Tom Barnett? 28-13. Actually, coaching

KNOWLTON: Tom Barnett was just about as good a runner as they came. And I recall him very vividly. He was not very big again; in fact he was a substitute end at Stanton Junior High School as a freshman. And the following year he started to grow a little bit and by mid season of his sophomore year he became a regular on our varsity football team. So he just shot up and came all of a sudden. Tom was an excellent runner, good blocker. He was one of those players when the football was under his arm he just sort of shook all over when he ran. He had good speed and again he had the determination and the desire to excel and that's the thing that put him over.

ALDINGER: Now what honors did you receive after this season and how did Alliance finish in the state?

KNOWLTON: Well again, I think anybody who has coached over a period of years knows full well that any honors that you receive as a coach are due to the hard work and the dedication of the ball players that you had and the assistant coaches. I was very fortunate through all the years that I've been in Alliance to have excellent assistant coaches. And some really fine, excellent athletes to work with. And on that basis I think that any honors that you get as a coach that is the reason for it. I did get to be named coach of the year in Ohio that year and again I feel that the credit should go to our assistant coaches and to our football players. And then I did coach the North team in the North-South All-Star game over at Mansfield that year which we won 26-13. Actually, coaching

the All-Star game was quite an experience because you get to meet and coach some of the ball players who were bitter rivals. And generally you find that when you do that, you find that those kids are very much like the ones that you have in your own town. And they became great primarily because they had that intense desire to better themselves, and be a little bit better than the other guy.

ALDINGER: And Alliance was ranked second in the state that year?

KNOWLTON: In fact yes, well the top three had each beaten each other. Those were the only defeats, Massillon and Canton and Alliance, I think we defeated Massillon and Canton defeated us and Massillon defeated Canton. And we ended up one two and three in the state.

ALDINGER: Now 1957 you had a fellow by the name of Les Traver who I understand was quite a player.

KNOWLTON: Yes Les was. He was an end for us he was also a fine basketball player, and a real good track man. That was true, of course about all the people that we've talked about, Len Dawson, John Borton, Candy Carroll, Tom Barnett, they all played something practically every sports season; they were good in all sports. And I think that is really important to a high school boy. As an example I just don't think it's wise for a high school athlete to decide "I want to be this" or "I want to be that" till at least he gets out of high school. A good example of that would be, Len Dawson, because if Len Dawson, say as a sophomore, would have decided "well, this is my best sport, I think I'll become", he was a baseball player

at the time. And probably if he had during his junior year is he would have decided to make a choice of one he would of said basketball. And yet here he, because he played everything, by the time he became a senior he was an All Ohio football and basketball player and then of course went on in the great heights in football in College. Now you do have to make more or less of a choice after you get out of high school because the seasons run into each other too much in college. And you can't afford the time anyway.

ALDINGER: Of course Dawson had quite an honor during his senior year something that's rarely been accomplished by....

KNOWLTON: He was an All Ohio football player and an All Ohio Basketball player that's right and you don't find that very often. He was one of the boys, it's a good example of what might of happened if he would have tried to make a choice too soon. I think they are much better off to try to play something and something different every sport season at least until they finish high school.

ALDINGER: Well now we're up to 1958 and that was the year Alliance won the state championship. Now that must have been quite a season for you and the team. Would you go into that and describe it?

KNOWLTON: Well yes, it was a great year. It didn't start out with expectations of being too great because again that football team did not have size at all. We did have, again dedicated athletes, we had quickness, pretty fair speed, and some excellent leadership and the combination of those things

more or less put it all together and helped us become the State Champions. That group was again very dedicated, very loyal. They couldn't wait for Saturday morning to come along to find out what had happened during the previous night, to find out what their mistakes were to try to work on them the following week. And as the season progressed they became a little stronger and a little stronger and at the end of the year they were about as strong of a football team as you could have in high school.

ALDINGER: Now since that was such a significant year in Alliance history I would like you to go game by game and briefly tell about each game and tell what you did and what the team did.

KNOWLTON: Well of course the first ball game we played Akron Central and Akron Central was our opening game for years. They always had talented athletes, they always had great speed. The biggest thing that they lacked, they lacked two things; they didn't have the junior high school football which meant that some of their football players were a little behind some of ours on fundamentals because of that. And they didn't have a very big coaching staff, they only had a couple men coaching and consequently it made it tough on them. But they gave us a battle every year and were a real fine opponent. Cuyahoga Falls was our second team that year, our second opponent and of course Cuyahoga Falls was always a big rugged team and for some reason one of the teams that used to give us quite a bit of difficulty. We defeated them that year without too much trouble but they were certainly a fine football team and through-

out the years I think caused us a lot of grief. We played Massillon over here that year and tied them 8 to 8. And the thing that sticks in my mind about that game was the fact the Walt Zingg was playing defensive halfback and intercepted a pass right about four or five minutes to go till the end of the game. Of course he was our quarterback also. And in running the interception back he was tackled pretty hard and he lost one of his contact lenses. So we had a quarterback in there, we wanted to throw the football as well as run it and he only had one contact lense in and he wasn't sure he could see the way he normally could see. And we just felt that if he could have had both of those lenses in or maybe none at all, which might of been a better idea, we might have been able to score. But we took it down near their goal line but didn't have the time to get it in to break the tie. Barberton was always one of bitter rivals. We played them after the Massillon game and they gave us a lot of difficulty also but we finally came through and defeated them. And then from there on we played the last six ball games and our team just sort of jelled and we played Youngstown Ursuline, Cleveland Glenville, Canton McKinley, Youngstown North and Akron Hower and East Liverpool and held all of them scoreless and gathered quite a few points up ourselves so we ended up with an undefeated season.

ALDINGER: After that East Liverpool game and you had buried them and were probably going to be State Champions, you didn't know for sure at the time, but what was the reaction when you got back to Alliance where the people knew?

KNOWLTON: The odd thing about that, I never believed myself in running up a score against an opponent. And always anytime we could get somebody in position where we thought we had them defeated, we tried to get in our second and third and fourth stringers for more reasons than one. One was we wanted to give those boys who had helped our starters all week long an opportunity to play and by the same token I never did feel that it was the thing to do to make it as difficult as you possible could for an opponent. The week of that Liverpool game in talking to our ball players, because we felt that if we did a pretty good job there we did have a chance to win the State Championship; and talking to our ball players they all said, "well don't worry about the game, we'll get it done providing you'll promise us you won't take us out as soon as we get a two touchdown lead." So I did promise them that I wouldn't take them out if they get a two touchdown lead and of course they went on to win the game 52-0. And of course that then sealed the State Championship for them.

ALDINGER: Now this is the game played at East Liverpool?

KNOWLTON: That was played at East Liverpool.

ALDINGER: And what happened when the team came back into the city?

KNOWLTON: Well we came back into the city, we had a police escort and I don't think I've ever seen the City of Alliance behind anything like they were that particular night. We had quite a celebration which lasted till the wee hours of the morning and everybody it seemed that was in Alliance was at

the celebration. People were very happy for the football squad and I'm sure the football players. I know they the players talk about that even to this day about the manner in which the people were behind them when they came back into town that night.

ALDINGER: What happened after the State Championship? Did the team let down for the next few years or what happened?

KNOWLTON: No, they didn't let down. Some years were a little better than others, but we had some mighty fine years following that. I think that sort of gave them something to shoot for. We had some excellent football teams and some excellent games. I think probably our series with Steubenville High School back in 1961, 62 around in there where we played them up here and they had a great football team and we played them at Mount Union Stadium and beat them 54-38. Then the following year we went down to Steubenville and played them and we came out on top there 28-22. I think those two games were about as rousing of football games as anybody could ever hope to see. We had good talent on those teams and they did an excellent job. But of course once you become State Champions people are ready for you every time you play them and that makes it a little more difficult. Getting to the top is difficult but staying up there of course is even more difficult.

KNOWLTON: Yes, we had, we beat Massillon that night on a real wet field up at Mount Union Stadium 46-0. Things jelled thing special happened in the very last game as head football coach.

properly that night. Everything went real well, we were ahead 20-0 at the half. I know a lot of people were wondering if we could hold it at the half, or the second half, and were fearful that maybe we couldn't but they (Alliance) came right back out and scored 26 points the second half to defeat Massillon 46-0. It was a good rugged solid football game and

ALDINGER: Now your last winning season was 1963 when you were 8 and 2. What happened after that?

KNOWLTON: Well, nothing in reality, I mean, I think we had representative teams after that and if you're 5 and 5 which we were once or twice in there or even four and six. A lot depends on many factors, I know many teams, many times looking back on it we think of some years when we had real fine records where we call them fortunate years. Where maybe we didn't have the injuries or we had the breaks of the game. Other years which we felt were unfortunate years would seem to get good athletes hurt at the wrong time. Maybe your breaks would go against you. I think over a period of time those things pretty much even out but you're going to have a little bit of both of them if you're in the game very long. And I do feel like 1964 and 65 and right on through those kids were good representative teams, we were never out of any ball games really. We always respected this, even if we ended up 4 and 6 or 4,5 and 1 or 5 and 5 we were in every game right up to the end.

ALDINGER: Now in 1969 that was your final season and something special happened in the very last game as head football coach.

KNOWLTON: Well yes that last game we, of course you want to win every one of them but of course the last thing is the one probably that you remember quite a bit. And East Liverpool came up here and they had a good football team that year they were 7 and 1 at the time, and we defeated them 14-6 that night. It was a good rugged solid football game and it happened to be the 150th victory for me (at Alliance) which was more or less a milestone here too. So I do remember that one very vividly.

ALDINGER: Who was the quarterback for that 1969 team?

KNOWLTON: Well that was my son Bob who was never able to do as much as he had hoped or we had hoped he would, due to injuries. He had two broken legs and a broken ankle and a broken shoulder through his high school career and that held him back quite a bit but it was a pleasure coaching him.

ALDINGER: Now as you look back you probably had many, many offers to coach college and pro. What were some of them and why didn't you take them?

KNOWLTON: Well there were some opportunities and again your opportunities are based upon the contacts that you have and things of that nature and I had a few opportunities to go four or five places which I finally decided not to do. Some of them I didn't think that the possibilities were there for doing the kind of job that everybody was hoping would be done. And then with some of the others I felt, that I had been in Alliance for a long time - I liked the people I liked the players

and the life and they were continually willing to fight to get the job done, and I think it was a combination of those two things which made me stay here. But I thought many times one time as going to Marshall University as a head football coach which I felt would have been a mistake and history has proven that it would have been. I had an opportunity to go with Bill Edwards to be his backfield coach at Vanderbilt and I thought that they didn't have the opportunities to become a football power which they were expecting to be. And that proved to be true. I had an opportunity to go to Annapolis with the U.S. Naval Academy, but that was during its declining years. Then illness forced me from accepting the assistantship out at Purdue back in the early fifties. It seemed that something always came up to more or less to keep me here. I recall the opportunity of going to the University of Oregon with Jimmy Akins who was an excellent, as most Stark County people realize, an excellent football coach. He coached Canton McKinley in the 30's and then Akron University and then Nevada and then he went out to the University of Oregon. But I always ended up by deciding to stay here at Alliance which wouldn't have been the case if it wouldn't have been a real fine town and some excellent people, some excellent people working in our boosters clubs attempting to do the job, and last, but not least, the type of students that were in the schools and were coming out for athletics. They were tops and I just didn't think we could do any better any other place. That's one of the big reasons why I stayed.

ALDINGER: Now since you've retired as football coach you've

ALDINGER: As you look back on your high school career at Alliance what would you say would be the biggest highlight if you could point one out?

KNOWLTON: Well I suppose it would be pretty tough to point out any particular one, I will say this, winning the State Championship has certainly got to be one of the tops, winning the last game in your coaching career has to be one of the tops. Two games I mentioned with Steubenville were examples, yet there were some games that we played that we did not win that I felt real good about because I felt that we got everything out of our football players that we could. We felt that they prepared to strive to win and they gave it all they had and that is the answer to what you're looking for rather than you must win at all costs. We used to tell them just before a ball game: "okay we have prepared to the fullest extent and we don't want to worry about anything from there on." All we wanted them to do was to go out and give their very best and we'd settle for whatever score was up on the scoreboard at the end of the game. Some times that score was for you and sometimes it was against you but if you got that type of thing, you got the real lesson that football gives you. And that is that you can't get any place unless you've really prepared yourself and you attempt to be the best and you strive to be the best, but you don't lay down and cry if you find out someone else is a little better.

ALDINGER: Now since you've retired as football coach you've

have a good school and a good community. I think that is one

served as Athletic Director. Would you briefly tell what your responsibilities are?

KNOWLTON: Well there are many things. Of course the paper work is tremendous. I'm sure very few people realize what that is, but we have 13 sports now, we have girls sports, which we should have, along with many of the boys sports. We have what we call secondary sports which are dependent on football and basketball for their money that those two make. There aren't any other sports that can survive that if it weren't for the gate receipts in football and basketball. Actually we've got so many games, we have to contract for something like 400 different contests a year. You have many, many athletes, you have insurance that you have to be concerned about, game officials, you have so many things. It's a multitude of paper work that goes on here day in and day out and you never seem to get done with it. And that's really what the Athletic Director's job is today.

ALDINGER: Now in your years of coaching you've seen ups and downs in athletics. Can you tell what your feeling is about a significance of an athletic program to the school and to the community?

KNOWLTON: Well I think actually one of the features of an athletic program to a school and a community is it should bring the whole school and the community together as one and help unite them in an effort to accomplish something. And if you can be united in one effort then it's much easier to be united in many other efforts, which is necessary if you're going to have a good school and a good community. I think that is one

basis for a good athletic program. Of course the other thing is I think anybody who becomes involved in athletics is getting an education, part of an education that maybe you can't get any other way. And those people have to feel that they are fortunate, very fortunate, to have the opportunity to participate in some form of athletics or some part of the athletic program. And I think an athletic program in the schools is a must. You can control what's going on, you can make sure that the athletes are treated properly and have the equipment, receive care when they should receive care as far as injuries are concerned and it does provide an opportunity for good football players or good athletes in any one of the 13 sports to show some leadership. It's just another facet of your educational program. I don't feel that it should be called an extra curricular thing. I think it should be considered as part of your regular overall school program.

ALDINGER: Thank you very much for your time Mel.

KNOWLTON: Okay Alan fine.

ADDISON.....	Knowlton 6
ADDISON, RUSS.....	Knowlton 4
AKINS, JIMMY.....	Knowlton 17
AKRON CENTRAL GAME.....	Knowlton 11
ALLIANCE HIGH SCHOOL.....	Knowlton 1
ALLIANCE-MASSILLON RIVALRY.....	Knowlton 2
ATHLETIC DIRECTOR, ALLIANCE CITY SCHOOLS.....	Knowlton 19
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BORTON, JOHN.....	Knowlton 3, Knowlton 9
BROWN, PAUL.....	Knowlton 1
CARROLL, CANDY.....	Knowlton 4, Knowlton 9
CLEVELAND BROWNS (TEAM).....	Knowlton 5
CUYAHOGA FALLS GAME.....	Knowlton 11
DAVIDSON, PEE WEE.....	Knowlton 4
DAWSON, LEN.....	Knowlton 5, Knowlton 9
EAST LIVERPOOL GAME.....	Knowlton 12
EDWARDS, BILL.....	Knowlton 17
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MARSHALL UNIVERSITY.....	Knowlton 17
MASSILLON GAME.....	Knowlton 14
MATHER, CHUCK.....	Knowlton 3
QUINLAN, JOE.....	Knowlton 3
STANTON SCHOOL.....	Knowlton 8
STATE FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP.....	Knowlton 14
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STEUBENVILLE TEAM.....	Knowlton 14
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