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ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

## Smith assembles another

**Head coach said school is not a "football factory," but he churns out winning teams year after year.**

By [Doug Fernandes](#)

FORT LAUDERDALE -- Perhaps it isn't, as George Smith argues while others might disagree, a "football factory."

"I wouldn't say that by any means," he contended. "I'd say it's a program overall that suits the needs of its students."

But what the head football coach at St. Thomas Aquinas High School cannot dispute is a locale more suited for a factory.

A legacy of success, a tradition of greatness, a block away from a Value Pawn shop. Next to a grimy sign for Superior Meat-Seafood. On these dirty streets this morning, a few people wander about, seemingly oblivious to life around them.

The school itself, established in 1936, gives no hint of its many accomplishments. St. Thomas sits crammed on a 20-acre site, with little surrounding space. A majority of its teachers and 2,100 students park their cars in an adjacent garage.

The Raiders' football coach for 28 years, Smith doesn't ascribe to a real estate agent's mantra of location, location, location. Rather, he said, it's the people inside the buildings who make the difference.

St. Thomas Aquinas, the host of the Riverview Rams in Friday night's Class 5A state semifinal game, is an inner-city school whose combination of athletics and academics has pushed its reputation well beyond its Fort Lauderdale boundaries.

Academics? The school was recognized this year by The National Catholic High School Honor Roll as one of the nation's top 50 Catholic high schools. Smith said he boasts more than 25 national merit scholars each year.

This year, his starting guards are two of them. Smith said they both carry GPAs of 4.0-plus and scored more than 1500 on their SATs. Last year 28 of Smith's 42 seniors received scholarships.

All noble, yes, but it's the Raiders' athletic deeds that put them front and center on sports pages in the area. This season the school's girls volleyball and boys and girls swimming and diving teams won state titles.

Last year, the girls soccer team claimed the winter state crown. Two years ago, the Raider baseball team copped top honors. Then there's the Raider football program, which Smith controls with a stern yet benevolent touch.

St. Thomas won state titles in 1992, '97 and '99. When the Raiders aren't winning it all, they're simply winning, which often gives outsiders to the program the impression that it begins and ends with players' God-given talent.

"We've had our share of athletes," Smith said. "But I think the misconception about us is that we are just stocked with great athletes, and that's not the case. I don't think we get credit for working as hard as we do sometimes."

A graduate of Butler and Purdue, the 56-year-old Smith came to Aquinas in 1972 to start a wrestling program. Three years later, he became the Raiders' head football coach. That first year, 1975, St. Thomas finished 6-4.

Seventeen years later, Smith returned to graduate school, departing with a 161-42 mark. Beginning two years later, his encore was even better.

From 1995 through this season, Smith has posted a 117-18 record. Only once during that span did the Raiders lose more than three games in a season.

That's a big reason why a parent outside the school Wednesday said he pays the \$5,500 yearly tuition fee -- \$6,500 for non-Catholics. To have his son coached by a man he called "a legend."

"A legend, that's ridiculous," Smith scoffed when told. Much like his Ram counterpart, John Sprague, Smith is gruff on the exterior, likable once the shell's been pierced.

And always in control. He tells a reporter his players are off-limits this week. Don't try watching our practice. They're closed. In control, and in demand. Soon, recruiters from Brown, Iowa and Kansas State are outside his office.

His team practiced on Thanksgiving until 6 p.m. Around 60 former players were there to watch.

Michael Irvin, the Raiders' most famous alum, wasn't one. But he spoke to Smith's team a couple of weeks ago while in town to receive induction into the Brevard County Hall of Fame.

Current Miami Hurricanes Tavares Gooden and Mark Gent played for Smith. So did former NFLers Twan Russell, Stefan Humphries and present Chicago Bear Jeremy Cain. As did Johnny Congemi, the former Fiesta Bowl MVP and the quarterback who followed Dan Marino at Pitt.

The sons of former Dolphins Bob Brudzinski and A.J. Duhe play for Smith. And Matt Shula, son of David, the son of Don. David Shula, ex-NFL head coach, spots for the team's statistician in the Raiders' press box.

A thread of tradition. With Smith as the eye of the needle. Through which this thread passes.

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