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Football, family honored in book

BY HOWARD MCEWEN | ENQUIRER CONTRIBUTOR

Author Ted Mandell has named Thomas More football's Oct 30, 1993, game against Defiance College as one of college football's greatest finishes. The game is listed as No. 76 in Mandell's new book, "Heart Stoppers and Hail Marys: The Greatest College Football Finishes (since 1970)" (Hardwood Press; \$24.95 paperback).

"I was hunting in the NCAA record books," Mandell said about discovering the game. "When it says 'blocked field goal returned for touchdown on last play of game,' it gets your attention."

But the play was perhaps the least interesting thing about the game.

Mandell tells the story of two brothers, Greg and Mike Stofko, both players on the Thomas More squad.

On a bye week Saturday, Greg, a TMC senior wide receiver, was watching a Notre Dame game resting up for the following week's league championship. His dad took the call about his freshman walk-on brother: Mike had been killed in a car accident.

The following Wednesday, Defensive Coordinator Joe Schlager called. Greg. Mandell quotes Stofko: "He said you've got to move on. Mike would want you to play. Let's get on out there and let's get you prepared and let's win this league championship."

"We had a team meeting on Thursday after practice to discuss what the team thought of Coach Clark offering the invitation for Greg to play on Saturday," said Everett C. Roper, a defensively lineman on the '93 team and current fast-pitch softball coach at Thomas More.

"I remember several people speaking in favor of this decision," Roper said. "I cannot remember one teammate who thought it was a bad idea. The idea of family and how we were part of Greg's family and Greg was a part of us was instilled into our team."

After a back and forth game, Thomas More stood 23 yards from Defiance's end zone. The score was tied at 18. Stofko only had two catches for 12 yards that day. He also served as the kicker's placeholder. Three previous field goals or extra points had been missed. But the coach called for a field goal. Normally a chip shot, Defiance blocked it.

"I remember hearing the kick being blocked and bodies scrambling around to recover," said Stofko. "I did not expect to recover the ball on the move, so when the ball bounced up to me, I instinctively ran for the goal line."

"As the Defiance players began to realize that the play was still live, it just became a foot race to the corner of the end zone. Both the field and ball were soaked. The ball was very slippery. I can remember the official signaling that it was a touchdown and realizing that something special had just occurred," Stofko, now vice president of sales for Cypress Pharmaceutical, said.

Mandell, who teaches film and video production at Notre Dame, writes about 115 other finishes in his book, which was published this fall.

"When it came to ranking games like Thomas More versus Defiance, each game has such a unique story behind it. It gets beyond just the athleticism of the players," Mandell said.

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