

# Detroit Free Press

---

## HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS

# DeWitt's first football state championship was many, many years in the making

**Mick McCabe** Special to Detroit Free Press

Published 4:14 p.m. ET Jan. 24, 2021 | Updated 5:27 p.m. ET Jan. 24, 2021

The final game of the longest season in the history of Michigan high school football history was finally finished and the DeWitt players danced around the field at Ford Field.

If you think this season, with all of its starts and restarts, mixed in with illogical pauses, took a long time, DeWitt's 40-30 victory over defending Division 3 champ River Rouge to claim the school's first state title was years in the making.

And then some.

***[ Order Mick McCabe's new high school sports book! Here's how to do it ]***

Try going back to when these seniors were in the fourth grade.

"That's when we all started playing football together," said senior linebacker Grant Uyl.

"That's 'when we really came up with a goal that we wanted to win a state championship by the time we were done in high school.

"Tonight the dream was able to come true after nine long years of a lot of hard work and a lot of tough times, but it was good to finally get over the hump and get the win."

**JEFF SEIDEL:** Why Michigan fans are going to love West Bloomfield's Donovan Edwards

Truth be told, it started even earlier than that, when Uyl and some of his buddies were camped out in chairs on the field behind the end zone closest to the tunnel where teams enter and leave the field.

"A couple of years before that, we started coming down to Ford Field with my dad," said Uyl.

"That's always a goal that we had for ourselves that we wanted to be the game down here on Saturday night and not just watch everybody else play."

Uyl's dad is Mark Uyl, executive director of the Michigan High School Athletic Association, but we will get into that later.

When I asked Grant how many of the guys on the team now were teammates in the fourth grade he just looked around the field and opened his arms.

"It was all the same guys that were out here on the field today," he said. "A lot of the sophomores and juniors helped us out a lot."

### **FROM SATURDAY:**

Grand Rapids Catholic Central rolls in Division 5

Edwards stole show, but West Bloomfield's defense seals the deal

Julius Garza dominates in New Lothrop's Division 7 title win

They were all of the same guys because DeWitt is a closed district. Every player on the DeWitt team lives in DeWitt and in this school of choice era, not many teams in the state can claim the same thing.

"It's unbelievable, but I think the greatest part about it is this is such a great group of kids," said DeWitt coach Rob Zimmerman. "I'd been saying that all year long. The character is unbelievable, the motivation, the drive, the leadership.

"If there's a group of kids that deserves to win a state championship it's this group."

Perhaps the players are like that because they were born and bred on DeWitt football.

The Panthers (12-0) have been good for decades. They haven't had a losing season since 1999, Zimmerman's first, and they have gone a remarkable 222-45 in his 22 seasons.

Zimmerman is something of an offensive genius and he tweaked the game plan to keep the Rouge defense guessing. Junior quarterback Tyler Holt completed 12 of 16 passes for 177 yards and four TDs. He also carried the ball 15 times for an additional 118 yards and a touchdown.

"We gave them a few things running-wise tonight that they had not seen, that we hadn't run since real early in the season," Zimmerman said. "And Ty ended up keeping an awful lot of the option game that was a variation and they struggled with that."

Holt has thrown for over 2,000 yards this season and the passing game is the centerpiece of DeWitt's offense. But against Rouge, the running aspect of Holt's game was crucial.

**MICK MCCABE:** Mona Shores star Brady Rose comes up huge in Division 2 final win

“We felt we had the matchup advantage in the passing game going into this because our receivers are very, very good,” Zimmerman said. “Obviously Ty is good, so we felt like we could throw the football. We just had to be able mix in the run well enough to be able to take some shots without them playing pass the whole time like they did against King.”

With Gov. Gretchen Whitmer and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services being too vague on its starts and pausing of athletics, coaches and players around the state had no idea if the playoffs would ever be finished.

“There was definitely some days where it was a little bit tougher,” said Uyl. “But I always had faith in my dad and the MHSAA that they were going to find a way, any way possible, for us to play and play safely. So I’m just glad that we were able to finish this the right way.”

As he watched his son surrounded my media members, Mark Uyl couldn’t help but flash back to watching the middle of his three kids sitting quietly during the state finals.

“He was a 6-year-old and he sat in that corner and watched hundreds of kids walk by the last 10 or 11 years,” he said. “They were chasing their dream and for him and his group to end up here it’s just incredible because he’s the kid who’s done all the right things.

“It’s really cool sometimes to see the good guys kind of get to finish first.”

Despite its best efforts, the MHSAA has virtually no communication with the governor’s office or the MDHHS.

The MHSAA did not receive even a heads-up before Whitmer made her latest decision last Friday opening restaurants on Feb. 1 yet delaying the beginning of contact sports like boys and girls basketball, hockey and wrestling until Feb. 21 at the earliest.

## **FROM FRIDAY:**

Montague rolls by Clinton to win Division 6 state crown

Detroit Country Day blanks Cadillac in Division 4 final

Centreville shuts out Ubyly to win Division 8 state title

Some delusional basketball coaches have turned it into a football vs. basketball issue, claiming Mark Uyl cared only about finishing the football season because his son played for DeWitt and doesn’t care if there is a basketball season.

“I’m about all kids, it’s about all programs,” Mark Uyl said. “My God, we had a plan ready to go to play our basketball finals this summer, from last year. For people to say that, it’s for folks who really have no idea what’s going on.”

One especially disgusting tweet came from Birmingham Brother Rice basketball coach Rick Palmer, who tweeted Saturday afternoon: “I hope river rouge wins by 1000 today.”

Well, Rouge didn’t win and Grant Uyl, who had 10 tackles, handled things better than some adults.

“People are just going to say that and those are just people that really don’t know what they’re talking about, to be completely honest,” Grant said. “He was fighting for all kids to play and it just so happened that we had a really good group of kids and coaches we were able to win this the right way.”

By the way, Grant also plays hockey and baseball.

Even better, Mark’s wife, Marcy, is the varsity assistant basketball coach at DeWitt.

So basketball coaches, please grow up!

*Mick McCabe is a former longtime columnist for the Detroit Free Press. Contact him at [mick.mccabe11@gmail.com](mailto:mick.mccabe11@gmail.com). Follow him on Twitter @mickmccabe1. Save \$10 on his new book, “Mick McCabe’s Golden Yearbook: 50 Great Years of Michigan’s Best High School Players, Teams & Memories,” by ordering right now at [McCabe.PictorialBook.com](http://McCabe.PictorialBook.com).*