Gridiron Glory

Club Football in the 1970s

In the fall Observer we asked readers to tell us about the above photo from our archives of a Hartford football team. Here’s what we learned.

From Martin Olesen ’66:
“There was, as I recall, a football club, in either ’64 or ’65. . . . do not see it listed in my ’66 Primus. The coach was Ralph Worth, retired varsity football coach of HPHS [Hartford Public High School]. As to who was the opposing team featured, not a clue.”

From Melissa Wooldridge Breton ’05 (daughter of Thomas H. Wooldridge ’71):
“‘Big Poppie,’ also known as ‘Big Bad Tom,’ Wooldridge reminisces about his football days at UofH as left defensive/right offensive tackle #7. The Hawks, lead by Coach Ralph Ward [sic], had a four-year record of 32-0-4.” [Editor’s note: We think that’s Wooldridge at far left in the photo.]

From Doug Dix, professor in ENHP health sciences:
“[Former Hartford] Professor Ted Maguder of the biology department was faculty advisor and coach to a club football team in the 1970s. [Last I knew] he was chair of science at a community college in Florida, although he may have retired by now.”

From Hall-of-Famer Tony Harrington ’77:
“I played in the fall of ’74, ’75, and ’76. I believe the coaches were first Murphy and Fitzsimmons, then only Murphy. I played running back and my last two years, defensive end. The field we played on was Al Marzook, but practice was on an open field on the east side of campus.”

From Mark Zamary ’86:
“I was on the club football team during the 1982-1983 season. I believe coach Cote was involved at that time, but I can’t remember the other coach’s name. In the picture it looks like we could have been scrimmaging the Central Connecticut team.” [Editor’s note: The fall 1983 season was the last for Hartford club football.]

From Jim Keener, associate athletics director at the University:
“Club football was very popular. In fact, there are six individuals in our Athletics Hall of Fame that played football here. Mark Greenberg, Tony Harrington, Joe Morley, Bill Thurston, Bob Guyon, and Bob Feld were all inducted between 2004 and 2009.”

From David Weinberg ’74:
David Weinberg ’74 had information and memorabilia from his club football days at Hartford:
“I believe this picture was taken before the 1970 season on campus. The H decal was replaced by ’71-’72. The Hawk uniform is before ’70. New jerseys were issued in ’71.

“I was a member of the University of Hartford 1972 League Championship team and a unanimous First Team offensive center in 1973.

“I played in every game from 1970 to 1973 and received a gold watch, which I still have, from the University for playing four years. Tom Wooldridge was a member of the team and a big contributor to its success. Ralph Worth was the head coach when I arrived, and he retired from the position in 1972, the year the team beat Providence College 7-6 in Providence for the league championship.

“Club football was a national association of teams, divided into leagues around the country. In 1970 we had the 10th ranked defense in the country and were #12 in offense. The year the team won its only league championship, 1972, we were members of the Eastern Collegiate Club Football Conference (ECCFC). Each team member received a University of Hartford letter jacket for winning the title. That same year we played in the Schaffer Bowl against Marist College [Hawks lost 36-6].

“We were the University of Hartford football team. We were Hawks. We were as dedicated, practiced as long, and played as well as any Division III team of the day.”

From Tony Harrington ’77:
“I played in the fall of ’74, ’75, and ’76. I believe the coaches were first Murphy and Fitzsimmons, then only Murphy. I played running back and my last two years, defensive end. The field we played on was Al Marzook, but practice was on an open field on the east side of campus.”

David Weinberg ’74 wears the letter jacket he and his teammates received for winning the ECCFC title in 1972. Today, he is a public school teacher in Leonia, N.J. After graduation, he coached high school football for 15 years, followed by several seasons as a color commentator for high school football on Cablevision and the MSG channels. He begins his 19th season as a girls’ softball coach in the spring.

Thanks to all those who wrote in. The prize of a University of Hartford mouse pad goes to Marty Olesen, who was the first to respond.
Basketball Teams Hit Stride Late in Season

As the Observer went to press, the women’s basketball team had just won the America East Championship game, while the men’s team fell just short of playing BU in the title game.

Both brought plenty of excitement to the four-day America East Men’s and Women’s Championships, presented by Newman’s Own and hosted by the University of Hartford, March 3–6.

The women’s squad rounded into form at the end of the regular season, winning eight of its final nine games. The Hawks surged past Albany and UMBC in tournament play to reach the title tilt with Boston University, which they won 65-53 in Boston.

With a 17-15 overall record, 14-5 against conference foes, the team matured greatly during the season. Hartford was forced to adapt to a new style of play after graduating two of the program’s all-time best post players, Erica Beverly and Diana Delva.

Seven different players led the Hawks in scoring during games this season, as head coach Jen Rizzotti increasingly relied on depth and balanced scoring. After a tenuous start, Hartford was the hottest team in the league in February and March, leading to its fifth America East Championship. The Hawks will be making their sixth overall trip to the Big Dance, with five conference championships and an at-large selection in 2010.

The early part of the season was also a test in patience for first-year men’s head coach John Gallagher. The Hawks lost eight of their first 10 games, with six of those setbacks by five points or less.

Yet, behind the play of seniors Joe Zeglinksi (career-high 33 points in a 74-65 win over Maine) and Morgan Sabia (27 points, 17 rebounds in a 82-74 victory over St. Francis N.Y.), the Hawks started to gain confidence in the new calendar year. Among the highlights was a stirring 59-55 win over Boston University on Jan. 21 that saw the Hawks storm back from 16-point deficits in both halves.

Entering the conference tournament as the number six seed with a 7-9 record (10-19 overall), Hartford upset Maine in the quarterfinals before a hard-fought loss to Boston University in the semifinal round. The teams went back and forth throughout the game, with 13 lead changes and neither squad owning a double-digit lead. With the ball and down by two in the closing 20 seconds, the Hawks were in a position few would have thought possible two months earlier—one shot away from an appearance in the league title game.

Hot Stove Dinner

Bobby Valentine, former Major League Baseball (MLB) player and manager and now an analyst at ESPN sports network, was the keynote speaker at the 2011 Hot Stove Dinner fundraiser held in February. Valentine played for five MLB teams between 1969 and 1979 and then managed the Texas Rangers, New York Mets, and Chiba Lotte Marines of the Japanese Pacific League. While coaching the Mets, Valentine and his team reached the National League Championship Series in 1999 and the World Series in 2000.

The event is a partnership between the Hartford baseball program and the MLB Players Alumni Association. Proceeds are split between the Hawks baseball program and the Major League alumni association’s Legends for Youth clinics. The organization runs more than 40 clinics across the country featuring former Major League players instructing youth baseball players.

Valentine was joined by a panel of former MLB players, including former Red Sox pitcher Bill Lee, who responded to questions from the guests. Silent and live auctions, featuring jerseys and autographed baseballs and photographs from current MLB players and Hall-of-Famers, raised in excess of $10,000.

Valentine will join sportscaster Dan Shulman and former MLB pitcher Orel Hershiser as the Sunday Night Baseball crew for the upcoming season.