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commentary



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Summit Academy doing things right

They arrived at Shady Side Academy in their formal school attire, wearing navy blazers emblazoned with the school crest, collared shirts with red-and-blue striped neckties, khaki pants and penny loafers.

Not the home team, but the visitors.

The Summit Academy Knights are a team of court-adjudicated young men (read: juvenile delinquents) sent to the reform school in Herman, Butler County. So, their trip to Shady Side Academy, a prestigious prep school in Fox Chapel, on Friday night wasn't just 34 miles but a world away.

In the Allegheny Conference, Shady Side (5-2, 4-1) stood in the way of Summit (3-4, 3-2) qualifying for the WPIAL Class AA playoffs for the first time since the school opened in 1996.

Making the playoffs would have everything and nothing to do with Summit's mission: to place students in a positive, productive environment, one which fosters success and nurtures the self accomplishment which naturally follows.

It's not about football.

For all of Shady Side's and Summit's differences — and they are vast, especially the academic and socio-economic



Christopher Highsmith scores on a 38-yard run against Shady Side Academy

JAN PAKLER | FOR THE TRIBUNE REVIEW

backgrounds — the schools share some similarities. It's not just the formality of their uniforms (Summit has a stricter dress code than Shady Side) but the emphasis on discipline and structure.

And their costs are comparable. Where tuition at Shady Side is about \$35,000 a year for boarding students, taxpayers spend \$99 per day on Summit students.

Summit Academy is housed in a 125-year-old brick building that once served as St. Fidelis Monastery. The campus is situated on 125 acres divided by a rolling country road, with the school on one side and athletic fields on the other, next to

cornfields and a pond.

Sam Costanzo, a Blawnox native who's founder and CEO of The Academy System schools, sees it as the ideal setting for a reform school: No locked doors. No bars. No handcuffs. What Summit Academy has, he said proudly, is structure, structure, structure.

"This is a prep school. It's a privilege to attend," Costanzo said. "Shady Side Academy is the most beautiful campus in Western Pennsylvania, but we've got a heck of a campus, too. Shady Side looks more like us than any other high school. Now, we don't have an ice rink. The main thing they'll see different at Shady Side

is girls. We don't have girls."

Summit Academy also doesn't have any arsonists, murderers or rapists. That's non-negotiable, as Costanzo doesn't believe those convicted of such crimes can be treated effectively. Its student body consists of juvenile delinquents, including some arrested for drug, gun and violent crimes.

"They probably know we committed a crime or whatnot, but we play hard," said Summit Academy running back Chris Highsmith, who scored his 15th touchdown of the season on a 38-yard run in the first quarter Friday. "Most teams respect us, but if we beat them,



they don't like it."

Summit is a year-round re-form school. It has programs for anger management and drug sellers, as well as an in-patient drug and alcohol program. It has 10 trade programs, from auto mechanics to carpentry to food service to graphic design. It has a beautiful 400-seat auditorium.

"When I first got here, I thought it was something totally different," said Onyx Robinson, a senior from Philadelphia. "I expected chains, bars, locked doors. When I got to my room, it was like college."

Summit's administrators serve as coaches and counselors. School director Steve Sherer, a Garfield native, also is the football coach. New

Kensington native John McCloud is athletic director and defensive coordinator.

The school has a philosophy: catch a kid doing something right.

"This is how we say this, because I say it an awful lot to the kids: When you come here, you need to make changes, not do time. If you do time, the cycle will repeat itself. And the cycle is in and out of institutions and jail," Sherer said. "You have to become a better decision-maker, more responsible and willing to educate yourself."

"All of our kids want to be successful. They just don't know how. They're products of their environment."

The football team faces the challenge of constant turnover. Of the Knights' 33 players, only two were on the team

last year. Many of them never played organized football before, which explains why Highsmith has had seven touchdowns negated by penalties this season.

"They're at a bit of a disadvantage because they've only got them for a year," Shady Side Academy coach Dave Havern said. "But they're the greatest kids to play against — all 'yes, sir; no sir' — and they always play us tough. They've been worthy opponents."

The Knights proved worthy again last night, trailing by one point after three quarters. Then, they lost a pair of fumbles in the fourth, both leading to Shady Side touchdowns, before ultimately suffering a 43-20 defeat.

When the game ended, the schools lined up at midfield and shook hands, players from two academies with different designs but the same mission. On this night, win or lose, we caught kids doing something right.

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