The Turkey Bowl [1]



A Hollenbach family football game on Thanksgiving morning around 2016. A tradition unlike any other.

The Hollenbach Family Football game (the Turkey Bowl) was first played on Thanksgiving morning 1968 in our backyard on Cascade Drive in Berkeley Missouri. The game started small, just my brothers and myself. Although no official records exist, there is some grainy video showing that the team of Tim (12 years old in ‘68) and Kevin (7) handily defeated the team of Mike (9) and Bryan (6). As I recall it was a thrashing.

From these humble beginnings, the Thanksgiving Turkey Bowl football game grew.

[1] Some of this is true.

By the 1970s my brothers and I no longer played against each other on Thanksgiving morning; we became a team. We competed first against other kids in the neighborhood. We always won. I, of course, was the quarterback, possessed with a rifle arm, a quick release and uncanny play-calling ability. My brother Mike was our tight-end/slot receiver who never dropped a pass or missed a block. Kevin was my primary receiver, the fastest player on the field, able to get open against either man-to-man or zone coverage; even when double-teamed, using his patented 'down-out and down' pass route. Bryan, not yet a teenager, was the fullback, handling all of the short yardage situations, picking up the blitzing linebackers while intimidating opposing players, some now with facial hair. He never backed down.

On Thanksgiving 1974, having thoroughly dominated the kids from the neighborhood, our Dad moved us up in competition. In our young teens by then, we were challenged to compete against our uncles, men in their 30's and 40's. We destroyed them, 63-0. Our uncles, ashamed, and both physically and mentally hurt, retreated to the sanctuary of their mother's house where they all still lived. At that night's Thanksgiving dinner, they complained to our mom; crying that we had 'beat them up'. Our dad caught hell from the rest of the family for arranging the game.

That was the last time we played our uncles.

As the '70's moved into the '80's the game exploded. The Thanksgiving Turkey Bowl became a yearly matchup against our arch-rivals, the Carr brothers. In the classic, now legendary, 1981 matchup, the Carr's, seniors in high school at the time, brought members of their state-championship winning high school football team with them to play against the Hollenbach's and our friends, now in our twenties. The Carr brothers were cocky and confident, calling us 'old men'; shouting that we were 'has-beens' and past our prime.

The Carr's never knew what hit them. We steamrolled their ass.

Now running the groundbreaking and oft-copied ‘Cascade offense’ (a forerunner to the 1999 St. Louis Rams ’Greatest Show on Turf’), we had our way with the Carrs. We were unstoppable, all at the peak of our HOF careers. I threw for 436 yards that day. Mike caught two touchdown passes, Kevin four. Bryan gained 185 years on the ground, ran for two touchdowns, and even threw for one on an option play.

Now we were the ones doing the taunting. Mike hit one of the mouthy kid linemen so hard, he left the game crying. Mike just walked away. Kevin, after beating his defender so bad that the kid broke his ankle, turned around and caught the ball running backward. Bryan, after crashing into the end zone with three Carrs on his back, got up, looked back at the players on the ground and told the biggest one, “Son, you’re not playing high schoolers anymore” and then spiked the ball at his feet.

That was the peak of the Hollenbach brothers football legacy.

We all got older, took jobs, married and had children. There was no time to practice. Thanksgiving became the only day of the year we played football.

However the Turkey Bowl continued. We still won about 1/2 the Turkey bowls from 1981-1995, but the now infamous 1996 Turkey Bowl brought the Carr brothers their revenge and ended our reign.

On the first play in the ’96 game, the Carr brothers blitzed and my brothers failed to pick it up. They threw me on the ground like a rag doll and spat in my face. Very slow to get up, and most likely concussed, my 39 year old body ravaged in pain, I clearly remember my brothers hanging their heads in shame because of what they had let the Carr brothers do to their brother. It was a classic case of ‘look-out!’ blocking.

It got worse. They dominated us in all aspects. I could not make a throw; wasn’t even sure I was on the field. Without a passing game, Mike was triple teamed and pummeled at the line. Kevin, now just the third fastest player on the field, was blanketed in coverage. Only Bryan, the youngest of us, kept us alive. Using every dirty trick he knew, and snarling like a junkyard dog who had missed his

dinner, he was able to injure two of the Carrs. But it was not enough. We were soundly defeated 13-7.

As I got into my car after the game, I passed out and drove my car into a ditch. My brother Mike drove by me on his way home, but failed to stop. It was that kind of day.

But the Turkey Bowl continued.

In the 2000s we still got together and played football on Thanksgiving mornings. As we got older, our kids joined us. Our brother-in-laws, son-in-laws. And more recently, my grandsons.

The original Hollenbach brothers no longer dominate the competition. I had rotator cuff surgery in 2015, and can no longer throw a tight spiral more than 40 yards. After some health issues, Mike no longer handles the double team like he used to. Kevin, now is his sixties, is only the 4th fastest on the field. Bryan, however, is still pretty much the same. Snarling at the players, spiking the ball, playing dirty, and taunting the opposition, especially the younger kids.

This Thanksgiving, we are all scattered to the winds, but somewhere I'm confident, that even if it's only in a backyard, Hollenbach's will play football.

And the legend of The Turkey bowl will continue.

That's all I'm sayin'

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