

Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Just give me the ball, coach

Lenny Clements raised the bar for scoring in the early 1960s

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

The year was 1962. The Southington High School football team was riding an 18-game winning streak, and Lenny Clements made a rare defensive mistake that allowed the Croft quarterback to complete a pass for a large gain.

No matter how tough they might have been, the Croft linemen must have been nervous when they lined up for the next play. The quarterback must have felt Clements' presence as he dropped back for the pass. That poor receiver was probably worried about getting hit when he stretched out for the ball...

Clements was already returning the interception the length of the field. Lenny Clements rarely made a mistake on the gridiron. But when he did, he made you pay for it.

Hall of Fame

"We ended up 8-1 that year, but if he didn't play for us we probably would have been 1-8," said former Southington High School football coach Joe Orsene. "He was that good. He punted, and he received the punts. He kicked off, and he received the kickoffs. He played defense and offense for us. He led the state in scoring that year. He did everything."

The fact that Clements was good came as no surprise to Southington fans. After all, his father had been an all-American player in Pennsylvania at the turn of the century. Clements was the youngest of seven brothers and his older brothers had already

raised the bar for Southington football by the time that Lenny reached the high school. Football was in his blood, and Lenny was one of the best.

"All you had to do with Lenny is tell him what you wanted to do, and he'd do it," said Orsene. "I would work with the defensive ends for hours, but all I'd have to

do is tell Lenny once. Then, forget everything else. They weren't going around his end. That was it. That was the kind of guy that he was."

On both sides of the ball, Clements was dominant. He caught three interceptions in his senior season. He rushed for 1,022 yards in nine games and averaged 6.5 yards per carry. He caught seven passes and threw for three completions, including one for a touchdown.

Clements scored 18 touchdowns in 1962, and he converted eight extra point plays. He led the state in scoring with 124 points. With his combined offense, defense, and special teams, Clements accounted for 1,559 all-purpose yards. His efforts earned him a first team selection for the Class B all-state football team, and he went on to score the winning touchdown in the 1962 East vs. West all-star football game.

"He always gave 100 percent. He always gave everything that he had, and he never let anyone down," said his older brother Jerry, a star on the 1953 hall of fame team. "He had such intestinal fortitude. Joe Orsene used to always say that he wished he had 11 guys like Lenny."

And why not? Clements was a top defender. He led the state in scoring, but he wasn't just limited to football. He earned four varsity letters in basketball and one in track.

Former sports writer Art Secondo was Lenny's teammate on the high school basketball team, and he still marvels at Clements' competitiveness. Football was his primary sport,

but Clements could make any team better. He wasn't worried about looking good or collecting stats. Clements just wanted to win.

"He didn't possess the agility of a basketball player, but he was a tremendous rebounder. He was a key player in our league championship run in 1961," said Secondo. "What you saw with Lenny Clements was an old-fashioned athlete who put sports ahead of just about everything else. He demonstrated an intense desire to always do his best even though there were times on the court that he looked like a full-back blasting through the line."

Clements was known for doing whatever he could to make his teams successful, and that carried into every season. Clements just loved to compete.

"After his senior football season, he came up to me—I was the track coach at the time—and he told me if there was any way that he could help me in track to just let him know," said Orsene. "That's the type of guy that Lenny was. He was a great ballplayer and a great guy. Everybody loved him."

Clements earned a varsity letter for the track team as a state-level sprinter.

After graduation Clements carried his athleticism into a 35-year career with the Meriden Fire Department. He continued to play in town leagues and on firehouse teams, but he never pursued football at the collegiate level. Still, his competitive spirit made him an excellent fireman.

"He used to give 150 percent in everything that he did. If he

couldn't give 100 percent, he wouldn't even try," his brother Jerry said. "He would never complain. He was a fireman for 35 years, and when he went into a house, he had no fear at all. If there was somebody in there, he'd go in and get him. There were stories about him in the fire department that were just unbelievable."

Clements passed away in 2008 after a long battle with cancer, but his memory still lingers on local sports fields and in sports discussions by long-time Southington fans. He continues to be a measure for high school athletes, and it can be argued that his sports dominance in 1962 has yet to be duplicated.

Perhaps that's why the Southington Sports Hall of Fame selection committee selected Clements to be inducted posthumously into the local sports hall of fame. According to Orsene, it is long overdue.

"If he isn't in the hall of fame, I don't know who should be in it," said Orsene, a member of the Class of 2010. "I'm really glad that he's in. I think he would have loved this. If Coach [Walt] Lozowski was alive, he would tell you that he loved Lenny. We all did."

On Thursday, Nov. 14, Clements was honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf in Plantsville.

"I think it's great that he's finally getting the recognition. I'm sure that he would have loved this," said his brother Jerry. "He deserves a spot in the hall of fame, and I'm sure that everyone that knew him would certainly agree. He was a heck of an athlete."



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Inside the Numbers

July 28, 1944 - December 23, 2008

Football

- 4 Varsity Letters (1959, 1960, 1961, 1962)
 - Captain (1962)
 - Class B All-State (1962)
- Led the state in scoring (124 points in 1962).
- Scored the winning touchdown in the 1962 East vs. West All-Star Football Game.

1962—Rushed for 1,022 yards, 6.5 yds/carry, caught 7 passes, threw 3 passes, scored 18 touchdowns, converted 8 extra point plays, and finished with 1,559 all-purpose yards.

Basketball

- 4 Varsity letters (1959-60, 1960-61, 1961-62, 1962-63)
- Member of the 1961 conference championship team.

Outdoor Track

- 1 Varsity letters (1963)