

Pitt freshman tailback Tony Dorsett in last weekend's 28-14 victory over Syracuse. He carried 27 times for 211 yards.

The Pitt football experience

With a lean freshman and a go-get-em attitude, new Pitt boss Johnny Majors is making Pitt a winner for the first time in a decade

By Rick Starr

The offensive line coach has his charges over to the house for dinner every Wednesday night. On Monday, new head man Johnny Majors gets together with all the students on campus that are interested and shows Saturday's game films, answers questions and talks Pitt football.

The Sports Information Department is under siege like a post office a week before Christmas and the students, some of them anyway, are leaving the wine behind.

It's what folks have been calling the Major Change in Pitt football. What it means is the University's football players just aren't their old selves any longer. Everybody's noticed.

These tart new Pittsburgh Panthers will be at Beaver Stadium Saturday, Nov. 24 to tangle with the Lions in a joust that should really get the cat fur flying.

Pitt sports a 5-2-1 mark, is currently ranked 20th in the AP poll and this week garnered every runner-up vote in the Lambert Trophy balloting. Unfortunately, there are still contests remaining with Notre Dame and Penn State, with Army sandwiched between.

Realistically, as Majors loves to put things, Pitt hasn't arrived just yet. But then again, as Majors also likes to put it, Pitt hasn't anything to lose.

"If Dorsett had been a sophomore and had some pre-season publicity, he would be an All-America," Irish coach Ara Parseghian has been saying all week while preparing his potential championship team for its trip to Pittsburgh today.

This, Parseghian well knows, is not the time to stumble — not with so many bowl bidders watching.

The Dorsett referred to is Tony Dorsett, a super runner who thinks like a senior and runs like a panther. The lean, compact freshman already owns one Pitt record — most yards in a season. That was set last week against Syracuse when he picked up 211 yards to boost his season's dividends to 1,139 yards, an average of 142 per game.

But Pitt isn't just a few new faces, it's the program that has been overhauled, a complete refocusing of emphasis from bigness to quickness. And Majors seems to have the program by the tail and is spreading excitement around Pittsburgh

like candy canes on Romper Room.

Witness the surge in Pitt attendance: 56,000 tomorrow for the Irish, 35,000 average overall. That's up from a sad low of 19,000 only a year ago.

Part of the reason is that the team is faster, but most of the reason is the team is winning. Honest to goodness football games.

"Last year," Pitt quarterback Bill Daniels recalls, "kids used to come to the games with a gallon of wine. Now, kids come to the game to watch it. It's nice having them behind you."

One of the most accurate measures of any team's success is the quantity of kinetic energy its Sports Information Department generates. There's no power shortage in Pitt's department.

"The difference between this year and last year is like night and day," Pitt sports information director Dean Billick explains. "I've never been so busy in all my life, but it's more fun now. We now get writers from Washington, Atlanta, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, New York, from all over the East."

Part of the task of getting the Panther student body into the act is the effort the assistant coaches make to visit every fraternity and sorority each week.

But there has also been criticism leveled at the new program, both in the papers and on a Pittsburgh TV station.

Billick denies there is any brutality on the practice field and points to the fact that every session is open to the media.

Ohio U. is also progressing, however...

Many of the football experts, who praise Ohio State, will laugh at Penn State's game against Ohio U. A closer look, however indicates the Bobcats are on par with most of Ohio State's opponents; including Iowa, the Buckeye's foe on the same day.

Coach Bill Hess' Bobcats have victories over Northwestern, Western Michigan and Bowling Green. The only two losses suffered by Ohio in their last five games were close contests against highly regarded Miami, Ohio (6-10) and South Carolina (22-38).



AP wirephoto

"There have been three negative stories and all three were done by young men who had never been to a practice session," Billick said. "No one who has covered practice ever has come away with a negative attitude."

"The stories done were totally distorted, totally not Journalism, libelous, slanderous, and completely inaccurate. I'm a journalism major and I can judge that."

"Majors has turned Pitt around 180 degrees. He has changed the whole image in just six months time. Now we're respectable, aggressive."

A good share of Pitt's new aggressiveness is generated by quarterback Daniels who seldom thinks once about tucking it under his wing and trying to pedal the ball downfield a few stripes. Although he admits, "when the real big horses start coming, I usually slip."

Daniels also commented on the brutality trial in the papers.

"We know the only way to get anywhere is to work hard, but if it was as hard as they said it was, I couldn't do it myself."

I'm no superman. Coach Majors put us through hard stuff, but if I'd have known then where we would be today, I'd have worked a lot harder.

"We've been down so long, even the littlest reward — like the tie with Georgia — gave us so much satisfaction."

Daniels also noted the blocking of what was supposed to be a very unspectacular offensive line.

"We have three seniors and two juniors on the line, and every Wednesday our offensive line coach, Joe Avezzano, cooks dinner for the whole line. They used to stay after practice when we were still at Johnstown and run up the hills. He instilled pride in the unit."

Daniels said he got the reward for the work during the Navy contest. "Against Navy," he said, "we played very poorly, but the fans never gave up — they stuck with us even after we fell behind with three minutes remaining. They just stood up and cheered."

"Majors came here with the idea of building a national champion in the future," Billick said. "And right now, we're headed in the right direction."

Carolina.

"Our players have named the last five games our 'second season'," revealed Hess.

Of course, none of the Bobcats' opponents could be classed with Penn State. It would be interesting to hear the pep talk Hess uses to make his players believe they have a chance against the Nittany Lions.

But it won't match the one Paterno will give the Lions to make them believe the Bobcats have even the slightest chance.

—Fred Brewer