

## The Streak— The Glory Days of Bronxville Football, 1963-1967

### Part One: *Village, School, Football, Spirit*

On September 28, 1963, the Bronxville Broncos football team lost the first game of the season; on October 5, they lost the second game of the season. On October 12, they won the third game. This victory must have brought some sense of relief and a little joy to the players, the coaches, and others in the school and the village who cared about the Broncos. At last they had won one! Now they could look past the early losses and forward to the next game. But not much more than that. There was no reason to think or even suspect that the victory on October 12 was the beginning of the most sensational stretch of time, spreading over five years, that Bronxville football has ever known. The streak, as the events and experiences of these years came to be known, was a magnificent time, and one of enduring importance for many of the people—coaches, players, players' parents, siblings and friends, students, fans, and villagers—who were caught up in the powerful spirit of Bronxville football during these years and experienced a closeness of community they never forgot and perhaps never experienced the like of again.

There are four parts to the story that began on October 12, 1963. The first two, intertwined but distinct, were Bronxville itself and Bronxville School. The third was head coach Bob Spenik and his assistant coaches, and the fourth was the players and the teams they comprised. All four parts had to come together in some unique and remarkable way to make the story of Bronxville's great streak a true story.

The first two parts of the story of the streak are the village of Bronxville and Bronxville School.



*The Village*



*The School*

The Village of Bronxville and the Bronxville School district are coterminous—they have the same legal boundaries. This is highly unusual, almost unique in New York State. It has tended to tighten the relationship between village and school and to intermix and strengthen the identities of both of them. The village is the school and the school is the village. Both village and school were in the 1960s, as they still are today, relatively small—about 6,500 people in the village and about 120 students in a high school graduating class. The students came from a village population that was at the time of streak largely white, Christian, suburban, professional, managerial and entrepreneurial, affluent, hard-working, high-achieving.

Bronxville School was also unusual in having all its class levels, from kindergarten through high school, in one building. By the time Bronxville School students got to high school, they had been in school with many of their fellow students almost all their lives. Many Bronxville School students had the experience of discovering when they got to high school that they had known many of their fellow students almost all their lives. And the 1960s was a time of big families, which meant that families as well as individual students went through the school, and that brothers and sisters at Bronxville School would know their friends' brothers and sisters, and that parents would get to know other parents and their children. Teachers and coaches and administrators at Bronxville School understood that they were working not just with individual students, but with whole families. Everything about the school at this time, and this was true of the entire village too, tended to strengthen community bonds.

Bronxville School students usually had good parental support and usually understood they were going to college. Coach Ron Catena, who was an assistant coach in the football program during the entire streak period, calls the Bronxville kids who came out for the football team during these years “student athletes” or “scholar athletes.” He recalls that they were good students that usually aspired to go to good universities. They didn’t, for the most part, aspire to make their way to college through athletics. Almost all Bronxville football players during these years were too small to play college football, and they didn’t need to get into and pay for college through their athletic ability. As Coach Catena remembers it, “Our kids were just kids, they’re playing for fun and they’re playing because they’re achievers and wonderful student athletes. And,” he adds, “they’re independent little suckers too.” They were, most of them, motivated and smart; they could understand the sometimes complicated instruction their coaches presented to them and execute intricate plays. And they could adjust their play quickly and effectively when the coaches found that adjustments were



*Coach Ron Catena*

necessary to counter an opponent's tactics. But they were usually, Catena discovered, too soft, and he would have to work with the other coaches to harden them up. "They were Bronxville kids," he says. "If you play in some other school, your father was a mason, and the kid worked picking up rocks, sand, digging holes. It was a tough hard-nosed kid.... Well these were Bronxville kids. They were a totally different kind of critter." The ability to win, to play hard and prevail on the football field had to come, Catena learned, not from an experience of hard physical labor, but from something else within them, an inner desire to achieve. These were the players who made up the Broncos teams during the streak years.

Bronxville provided the community to support the teams and to help them build up the spirit they needed to win. Everything about Bronxville seemed designed to bring people together into friendly or at least cordial relationship. Its small size and small population, its pedestrian scale, its vital compact downtown area, its several beautiful churches, its restaurants and shops, its many clubs and civic and social organizations, the similar backgrounds and ways of life of its people, its many stay-at-home moms who focused on their kids and the community and, maybe above everything else, its school brought people together into a community. It was a highly imperfect community, one which shared in all the national flaws of the time, but it was a community which had the cohesion to create the great football teams of the streak years.



*John Boynton*

John Boynton, who played offensive guard and defensive tackle on the 1963 and 1964 teams, reflected many years later on the nature of the community that produced the streak teams. "I can appreciate much better now that I am older," he said, "that the homogeneity of the Bronxville community I grew up in was not necessarily the best situation. The people in the village had pretty much the same backgrounds and certainly the same religion and they were all white. And you can argue that that's not always the best. It didn't register with me at the time because it was just the way it was. But this was the community that produced the highly successful football teams of 1963-1967"

Bronxville football was in the early 1960s at the center of village and school life. The fall each year belonged to football. There were other sports going on at Bronxville School, but from September until about Thanksgiving football was at the center of things and did much to shape the outline of the school schedule. "Football was so much a part of the school fall curriculum, you know, a part of the life of the school," 1963-1964 Broncos halfback Roger Haile later recalled. "Soccer wasn't a major sport then. So for me it was football." North Callahan, a halfback and place kicker on the 1964 and 1966 teams, felt much the same way. "One thing about that era—the mid

1960s,” he remembers, “was that at Bronxville High School almost all of the good male athletes played football. It was expected.”

The football season started in August and ended in early December. Players and coaches first came together for summer practice—double sessions, under Spenik’s rule, in the hot, humid summer weather. Since most of the starting players on the prior year’s team had graduated, the coaches had to put together a new team every year, and this work began at the summer practice sessions. The eight-game football season started in late September, and the last game was played in mid November. A week later came the “football dance,” where boys wore tuxedos and girls were in formal gowns, and it was, without any doubt or serious competitor, the major social event of the school season. A couple of weeks after the football dance a special dinner was put on for the football players. It was not a school event, rather it was put on by the family of assistant coach Bob McGrath. It had been created by McGrath’s father, Fred H. McGrath, in the 1940s and was intended to thank the players for working so hard to give the village its football team. It was a formal event and included, besides the players, their teachers and coaches, the superintendent of schools, the high school principal, priests from St. Joseph’s Church and Christ Church, and other community leaders. Besides honoring the players’ achievements during the football season, the dinner helped to bring Bronxville football, Bronxville School, and the Bronxville community together and to create a spirit, an identity, outlook, and emotional attachment which was shared among all of them.



*Left: The Broncos’ co-captains Rick Renner and Toby Champion, in black-tie attire, cut a victory cake at the Bronxville football dance, 1965. Head cheerleader Joan Rogliano is seated at the left. Right: The players on the 1964 Broncos varsity football team were the honored attendees of the 23<sup>rd</sup> annual McGrath dinner, held at the Hotel Gramatan. The dinner helped to bring Broncos football, the school and the community together and to create a shared spirit, identity, outlook, and emotional attachment.*

The football players were universally admired and sometimes even worshipped. Jim Fernald, a linebacker on the 1967 Broncos team, remembers how, during his



younger years at Bronxville School, he felt about the football players. "I for so many years," he said, "had looked up to the football teams, I just worshipped those guys.... Once the quarterback on the 1958 team came over to take my sister out, and I thought Christ himself just walked through the door of our house. We just all really looked up to those guys."



*Jim Fernald (upper left) with  
the seventh grade team, 1962.*

Many Broncos players, by the time they got to the varsity team, could look back on many years of playing football. They started when they were little kids, and some of them could remember scampering around and tossing the football on the high school field at halftime during Broncos games when their older brothers were playing with the varsity team. "We all played [football] from the time we were all third and fourth graders, playing in our jeans and a pair of shoulder pads," Jim Fernald remembers. "...It was just all about football back then." The young footballers started in the Bronxville School football program during their junior high years, and coaches would prepare them to join the varsity team when they became sophomores or juniors. A camaraderie among all these players, young and old, developed. "It was important that the older players were really nice to the younger ones," John Boynton said. "I remember how I felt about this when I was one of the younger players. And the cheerleaders were nice to me too when I was just starting on the team. All of this meant a lot. It was like having a family with older brothers and sisters who were kind to you and wanted you to succeed, and who you regarded with great fondness and gratitude."

All these aspects of Bronxville and Bronxville School came together during the streak years to create a very strong and supportive school spirit, one which became manifest to everyone at home games during the streak when passionately cheering fans filled the stands and overflowed all around the field, clapping and hooraying for all the Broncos players and coaches, and when the cheerleaders started crying out their cheers, arousing, stimulating, inspiring, electrifying fans, players, coaches.

The cheerleaders were the goddesses of school spirit, which they personified as a kinetic and living presence all during the games. They were a constant, thrilling inspiration to the players, assuring them they were with them and for them and so too was the whole school—students, teachers, everyone else—and the entire Bronxville community. All the cheering from the cheerleaders and from the family members, friends, neighbors and fans in the stands and on the field let the players know that everyone believed in them and was pulling for them.



*The 1964 cheerleaders. Christy Patt is on the far right.*

Christy Patt, a cheerleader for the 1964, 1965 and 1966 teams, remembers that Bronxville cheerleaders were different than those at other schools. Most importantly, their minds were always on the game and they knew what was happening on the field at every moment. "We knew the game of football so you cheered the right cheer," Patt recalls. The cheers were always appropriate to the state of play. And when the Broncos cheerleaders were cheering, they didn't drop their voices to protect from becoming hoarse, as some cheerleaders from other schools did. "...I lost my voice every single week," Patt says, "because we just screamed our hearts out." Sometimes the cheerleaders' exuberance drew them to go out onto the field. "We would get right on the field with the boys, screaming our brains out," Patt recalls. "...We were really part of the team. We were all one big family." The cheerleaders had been in school with many of the players for most of their lives, and that made a great difference. "You knew everybody," Patt remembers, "and you not only knew them but you knew them *well*. So you *wanted* the boys on the football team to win.... Football was a big thing, we were good at it, and that pumped me up, it pumped me up to watch [our players] play and win. And it pumped all our parents up, everybody.... Everyone was behind this team." The cheerleaders helped make the playing field a glorious stage for the players, on which a great athletic drama was being acted out in which they—the players—were the stars, admired by all and adored by the cheerleaders.

After a time, as the victories added up and everyone started to think about the winning streak, the cheerleaders decided to make a big banner every week bearing messages such as "Vanquish Valhalla" or "Trounce Tuckahoe." They would make the banner early in the week and put it up in the school's main hallway so all the students would see it during the days leading up to the game on Saturday. On game day, they would carry the banner out to the field, and drape it over the goal posts or draw it taut



a short distance from the posts, and the players would come running out on the field, the team captains leading the way, going between the posts and breaking through the banner. It was a glorious moment for the players, almost as if they were coming through some flag-draped medieval castle gate into the precincts where the contest would take place. If the players weren't already pumped up, this would do it.



*The Broncos come on the field, breaking through the cheerleaders' banner, 1966.*

Village, school, players, coaches, cheerleaders, parents, friends and other fans all came together at the moment when the players came onto the field. The strength and energized spirit of the entire community was urging the team onward. The players took all this to heart and were ready to meet their opponents.

Once the game started, the players and fans looked to the coaches to lead the team to victory and the question was, did the coaches have the ability, the determination, cunning and quick acuity to do it.

### *Part Two: Coach Bob Spenik*

The essential coach who brought to Bronxville the ability year after year to build a new team and teach his players techniques and methods they never imagined could belong to football and inspire them to play a highly disciplined game, was Bob Spenik.

He was born in Gates, Pennsylvania, in 1933, the son of Alex and Mary Makar Spenik. He would spend most of his adult life in and around Bronxville, but his home town in southwestern Pennsylvania was about as far away from Bronxville—culturally, socioeconomically, and in almost every other way—as it was possible to be. Gates was a coal mining town of maybe a few hundred residents, owned by the American Steel

and Wire Company. Its streets bore names like Mine Hill Road, Gravel Lane, and Coal Bucket Lane. Spenik was one of nine children in a family with an immigrant background and a strong ethnic identity. His father was from a Czech-speaking area of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, his mother was American-born but her parents were immigrants and she had lived in the empire for most of her childhood. The family made its very modest living from the mines. Spenik later remembered that his family never considered themselves poor because they always had food on the table, and he told his children when they were growing up that he never, when he was a child, felt he was poor, and didn't change his mind about that until he moved away and saw what life was like elsewhere.



*Alex and Mary Makar Spenik with seven of their, eventually, nine children.  
Bob, with a smile perhaps recognizable to anyone who ever met him, is on the far right.*

Spenik was a football star at German Township High School. In his senior year, he was offered scholarships by two colleges, Harvard and Morris Harvey, the latter in West Virginia. Harvard, he later told his children, offered him a full scholarship and a job on campus that would pay all his other expenses. Morris Harvey offered him \$20 a month. He visited both campuses and thought hard about his decision. Harvard worried him. Everyone was dressed up and the place didn't seem at all like home. "He said it felt like a different planet to him," his son, Robert Spenik, Jr. remembers. So he decided on Morris Harvey, where he majored in mathematics. He was a great football star and was inducted into the college's sports hall of fame. "He broke his nose maybe fifteen times," his son says. "It was a tough game back then."

After graduating, Spenik worked briefly for the Pennsylvania Railroad, but he didn't like the job and decided to try being a teacher and football coach. He found a



position at Poca High School in Poca, West Virginia, where he coached the “Poca Dots” during their 1957 and 1958 seasons. His teams in those two years had a combined record of fourteen wins, five losses and one tie.



*Coach Spenik with the seniors on the 1957 Poca, West Virginia Poca Dots team.*

Spenik’s life changed dramatically toward the end of the 1958-1959 school year. He was thinking seriously of getting married and, probably related to his thoughts of marriage, he decided to leave the kind of backwater world he had always known and take a job in Tuckahoe, New York, a suburb of New York City. The pay was probably much better than he had been earning in Poca, which was important at this time in his life. So in late summer, 1959, he took up his new duties as head coach of the Tuckahoe Tigers. He coached for three seasons, 1959, 1960 and 1961. His teams had a combined record of twelve wins, eight losses, and two ties.



*Coach Spenik with the 1959 Tuckahoe Tigers.*

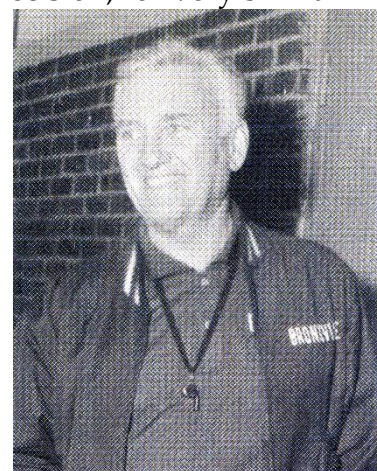
Tuckahoe was especially successful in 1960, winning six games, including a win over the Bronxville Broncos, losing none and tying one. Coach Spenik brought to Tuckahoe, as he would soon bring to Bronxville, innovative techniques, such as the Wing T formation, that challenged his players to learn new things and think in new ways. The *Bronxville Review Press and Reporter* noted at the beginning of the 1960 season that Spenik had his team playing a pretty sophisticated game. The Tuckahoe team, the



*Spenik brought his math skills to his coaching.* Spenik comes into play. The players had a real desire to play football; not just to collect the sports page glory of scoring, but playing the game fiercely and well.”

Spenik quickly gained a reputation for the quality and daring of his coaching. The athletic director at nearby Bronxville High School, Jack Fearon, who had been following the career of this intriguing new coach, offered Spenik a job at Bronxville. This was in the spring or early summer of 1962. If Spenik accepted the offer, he would be an assistant football coach at Bronxville for a year, working under Fearon, and would then take over as head coach in 1963. Spenik made the same decision, for very similar reasons, that he made when he was leaving Poca High School. He accepted the Bronxville offer. The pay was much better at Bronxville, which was important to him and his wife, who were thinking of starting a family, and the challenge of coaching the usually strong Bronxville team was undoubtedly tantalizing. “He doubled his salary when he moved from Tuckahoe to Bronxville,” his son recalls. “...It was a good opportunity for him and he took it.”

Spenik brought to Bronxville his bold and nervy approach to football and started teaching it to his somewhat startled players. They found his ideas and methods alien and hard to understand. Many of the players, used to Coach Fearon’s easier ways, had trouble adapting. When the Broncos lost the first two games of the 1963 season, there was some grumbling among the players, and maybe among their



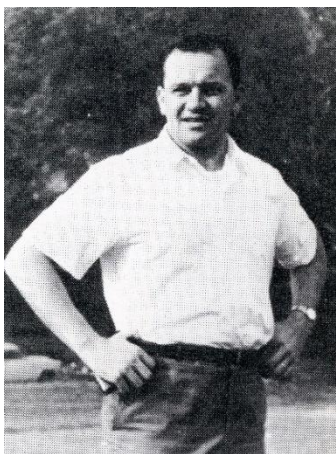
*Jack Fearon*

parents and others in the school community, about the new coach and what he was doing. Some of the players didn't like Spenik's complicated playbook, which included about a hundred plays, all of which had to be learned and practiced over and over again until they could be executed well every time. And they found Spenik's mathematical systemization of some aspects of the game, such as numbering holes in the line and also the team's running backs, difficult to put into practice. His ideas about blocking were complicated too, and there was a lot of emphasis on misdirection and deception. All these problems made Spenik's first few outings with the Broncos hard ones, and when the team lost its first two games, as Coach Ron Catena remembers, "...There was grumbling about what we were doing here. These were Bronxville kids and they didn't like all the discipline that Bob put into the program.... There was squawking."

Spenik later said that the Broncos lost the first two games of the 1963 season because he was giving his assistant coaches experience in running the team. Maybe, but it was also true that the players were having trouble adjusting to Spenik's complicated playbook and mathematical ways and demanding discipline. They were confused and sometimes angry and were not always at their best on the field.

But then, beginning with the game against Tuckahoe on October 12, the Broncos started winning, and the players gradually got used to their new coach and, as time passed and their victories piled up, they learned to love him.

"Bob was very soft spoken," Roger Haile, halfback on the 1963 and 1964 teams, said. "No histrionics, no grandstanding.... He had this kind of laid back West Virginia way. He didn't jump at things, he had a good sense of humor. It was just really easy to like him.... And so you just wanted to do the best you could." Christy Patt, a cheerleader for the 1964, 1965 and 1966 teams, felt no doubts about Coach Spenik. "I loved that man," she remembers. "...I just adored the hell out of him, he was such a lovely, laid-back, quiet man.... He had time for everybody. I remember that several of



*Bob Spenik, 1963*

the players had some hard times at home, but they could always talk to Bob Spenik. So he was more than just a coach for them." Jim Fernald, fullback and lineman on the 1967 and 1968 teams, recalls that Spenik "had a big smile, and you liked to make him smile by making a good block or a good tackle. You did not want to disappoint Coach Spenik." Although Spenik was always the boss, and all the players understood this, "he had that personal way about him too so that he wasn't removed or aloof," Fernald says. "He was always there, talking with us, and sometimes dealing with some academic problems the players had. He would sit down and have a private meeting with a player.... Spenik was for many of the players almost a second father figure. He brought out the best in us." Bob Kettle,



lineman on the 1965 and 1966 teams, agrees that “there was just something about [Coach Spenik] that made no one want to disappoint him. Something about his manner, his personality and his humor that endeared him to players. Players just loved him.” Spenik remained an enduring presence for probably most of his players, even after their playing days. “The lessons I learned from him,” North Callahan, a halfback on the 1964 and 1966 teams, recalls, “I’ve taken with me every day that I’ve lived, and I’m just forever grateful for him.”

Spenik’s approach to football was disciplined and even cerebral. He was, as one of his players, Roger Haile, said of him “drill-down analytic.” Assistant coach Ron Catena credits these aspects of Spenik’s coaching to his mathematics background. “Bob was a math man,” Catena recalls, “and his approach to football was based on math principles. He liked blocking angles, he liked outflanking his opponent by positioning with unbalanced lines.... He always tried to outflank, outman and out-position his opponent.” Rick Alvarez, a lineman on the 1966, 1967 and 1968 teams, remembers that Spenik’s disciplined approach shaped every part of the Broncos’ game. “It was for everything,” he said. “It was how you huddled up, how you broke the huddle, how you got to the line, what your gaps were, your fundamentals for your blocking assignments, for your running assignments, whatever it might be. You had to have it right and you had to do it together, and if you didn’t do it together you did it again until you got it right.” Spenik’s disciplined mind was constantly analyzing the geometry of play on the field and calculating the odds of success of different strategies; and he was devising ways of disguising his intentions and misleading his opponent into misreading an unfolding play. His brand of football was intricate, highly elaborated, and always challenging for his players and his opponents.

Spenik knew he could not depend on always having especially talented players to bring success to his teams. Bronxville was a small school and probably wouldn’t be able to produce highly talented players every year. But he believed he could teach his players, whatever their skills and abilities, to work together as a team and to achieve success through the well-coordinated execution of play on the field. “We didn’t have twenty-two super-talented athletes who were going to beat anybody we played,” North Callahan recalls. “In order for us to win, we had to play coherently and intelligently, and that was what Spenik was most talented at—teaching us how to play smart football....”



*Bob McGrath*

Spenik was very fortunate to have Bob McGrath as one of his assistant coaches. McGrath, when Spenik arrived, had been assistant coach for about six or seven years. He was the only assistant coach who wasn’t a teacher; he was a businessman, the operator of Bronxville’s only funeral parlor. He and his family had deep roots in Bronxville, which often helped him to understand the players and

their problems. His wife Bumpy recalls that “he loved coaching and he wanted to get to know the kids. That to him was everything, and the kids would come back to see him year after year, and it was the greatest thing that ever happened to him.” He was devoted to football and understood the game perhaps as well as Spenik did. The two men—Spenik and McGrath—quickly discovered a mutual respect and friendship, and a shared determination to lead the Bronxville Broncos to glory. They made a remarkable partnership. Spenik himself was hard to beat, but Spenik and McGrath together were almost unconquerable. Their friendship lasted until Spenik’s death. “Coach Spenik was my Dad’s best friend of all time,” is the way McGrath’s



*Spenik and McGrath*

son, Buzz, puts it. McGrath coached the defensive players, teaching them Spenik’s ideas and methods and practicing their implementation over and over again, for as long as it took to get it right and make it a matter almost of instinct.



*Ron Catena*

Ron Catena also worked with Spenik throughout his time as head coach. When he started he was still a student teacher, not quite out of college. He wanted to work with the football program and had quickly showed a natural ability to get along with kids. Spenik put him to work with the junior varsity team to teach them his ideas and methods so when they came to the varsity team they were not strangers to the way he did things. Catena quickly moved up to the varsity team, working primarily with the defensive players. Bob Kettle found that he “was skilled in teaching boys how to be tougher—certainly not mean, but simply more capable of pushing themselves harder than perhaps they previously thought they could.” North Callahan remembers Catena as “a tough young guy who we could really relate to because he seemed like he wasn’t that much older than we were, and he was funny as all get-out.” He sincerely cared about the players, sharing with Spenik and McGrath a sympathetic concern for the well-being of all of them, on and off the field.

“By the time we graduated,” North Callahan remembers, “I think all of the players were friends with all three of the coaches.... Everybody really wanted to play for these guys. We were highly motivated. I think we were highly motivated because we were in an environment in Bronxville where it was expected of us to be motivated

anyway, but then we carried that over into football and the coaches just perpetuated it....”

Spenik’s coaching was based on teaching his ideas and methods to his players. This teaching was part of every practice session. One of Spenik’s most effective teaching tools was the game film. He had all the games filmed. The films were developed overnight, and Spenik and his coaches and any of the players who wished to come—usually including the team captains, the quarterback, and others of the first-string players—reviewed them on Sunday. Monday’s practice session was also given over to reviewing the films, and the teaching became particularly intense at these meetings. When the film showed a player making a mistake, Spenik would stop the projector and replay the mistake, often doing so more than once, pointing out the error. Coach Ron Catena described how these film sessions would go. Spenik “would just point to the kid on the screen who missed the block, and he’d play it again and play it again, and the kid sat there with his mouth hanging open. He got the message. So that was teaching. Your head was in the wrong spot, you didn’t step with the right foot, he’d point...at the kid’s foot. Always, always, this was Bob’s approach to the game. And then the kids, after the first couple of [games], bought into it.” “...The football movies are very important,” Spenik said shortly after the end of the Broncos’ undefeated 1966 season. “If we did not have [the] football movies, we would not have had an undefeated season.”



*George Fouch, father of former Broncos player Gregory Fouch, is probably the film maker in this 1963 photograph. Spenik filmed all the Broncos’ games.*

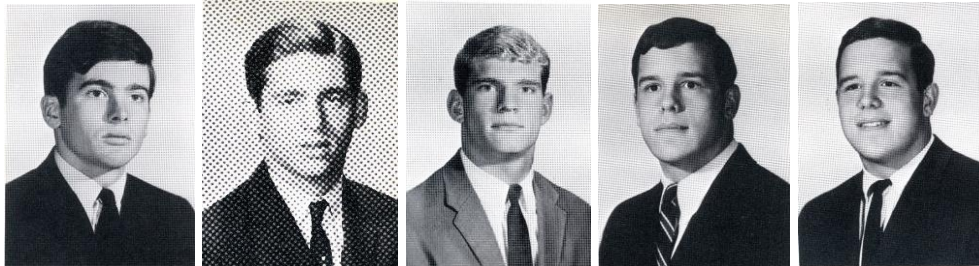


### *Part Three: Teams and Players*

#### *The 1963 and 1964 Broncos and the Emergence of the Streak*

After the Broncos' decisive 27-0 victory over Tuckahoe on October 12, 1963, they went on to win the remaining five games of the season. One by one the Broncos' opponents fell—October 19, Woodlands, 26-12; October 26, Saunders-Commerce, 14-0; November 2, Westlake, 20-0; November 9, Concordia Prep, 20-0; and November 16, Gorton, 13-6. Spenik did something highly unusual for him that was at least partly responsible for the turnaround—he raised his junior quarterback, Mike Netter, to the first-string team. Spenik was always loyal to his senior players and entrusted the team largely to them; in this instance, he turned the team over to a junior quarterback. The Bronxville student newspaper, *The Mirror*, reported after the October 12 victory over Tuckahoe, that Mike Netter was largely responsible for the win. "Fleet Mike Netter," the article said, "paced the explosive attack with two touchdowns."

In the victory over Woodlands on October 19, halfback Frank Winant emerged as one of the Broncos' leading rushers in 1963. "Frank Winant, defensive and offensive star, scored three times," *The Mirror* reported. Its article on the next week's game concluded that "the Broncos toyed with [Saunders-]Commerce and won 14-0," and the play of junior fullback Vic Chaltain was singled out for praise. He was a powerful runner who shared rushing honors on the 1963 team with Winant. The linemen were also a crucial part of the team, and *The Mirror* focused on the fine play in the November 2nd game against Westlake of "the unsung heroes of football, the offensive linemen," who opened many holes for the running backs in the game. Two of the most important players on the Broncos' line were twin brothers John and Ralph Boynton, both juniors who would be back in 1964. The victory against Westlake demonstrated the shrewd and intelligent brand of football that the Spenik-led Broncos would play all during the streak years. "...The Broncos methodically picked the Westlake defense to pieces," the *Bronxville Review Press and Reporter* noted.



Mike Netter   Frank Winant   Vic Chaltain   John Boynton   Ralph Boynton

Another feature of Spenik's Broncos was apparent in the team's victory over Concordia Prep on November 9. As *The Mirror* reported, "The Broncos rolled against Concordia's defense all afternoon. The attack stuck mostly to the ground." The

Broncos under the direction of Coach Spenik were primarily a running team, they stayed with their ground game most of the time. North Callahan remembers Spenik saying to him once, "In my opinion, for most high school teams, when you pass, something bad happens." Since the Broncos were never a fast team and always had difficulty running to the outside of the field, they had to control the middle. If their blockers could make holes in the middle of the line and their backs were quick enough to run through them, then the opposition would have to draw in its defensive line, and then Broncos runners could run to the outside and around the corner. As Coach Ron Catena put it, "...If you can go up the middle, and then that defense has to make adjustment...we can outflank 'em."

The Broncos' last game of the season was against Gorton. This team had not usually been a difficult challenger for the Broncos, but, as *The Mirror* reported, on this occasion "Gorton was a fired up ball club and it caught a slightly cocky Bronco team off guard." The action on the line was bruising and both teams had difficulty scoring. Finally, though, the Broncos' ability to control the ball through most of the game together with the powerful running of Vic Chaltain resulted in a 13-6 victory. The 1963 season ended with a six-game winning streak for the Broncos. Four of the six wins were shutouts, and the Broncos allowed only eighteen points to their opponents in the other two games.



*The 1963 Bronxville Broncos, Spenik's first team as head coach.*

When summer practice sessions started the following August, Spenik and his assistant coaches started building their 1964 team. Every year the coaches had to make a new team from the kids who showed up for summer practice. There were always

some returning players, including some juniors who had been starters on the prior year's team, but it was every year something of a mystery whether enough talented kids would show up to give the coaches a confident feeling that they could put together a winning team. Some fatal force had to bring those kids forward at the right time for there to be winning teams, and for there to be a great winning streak.

Spenik's first transition in 1964 was made much easier by the return of several juniors who were at the heart of the first-string 1963 team. Quarterback Mike Netter was back in 1964, as was fullback Vic Chaltain. Roger Haile, another junior from the 1963 team, also returned, and this year he would become a star running back. Linemen John and Ralph Boynton were both back too. The coaches were watching two newcomers, both sophomores, with special interest—fullback Buddy Nesbit and halfback North Callahan. Both showed great promise, which would be fully realized in future years.

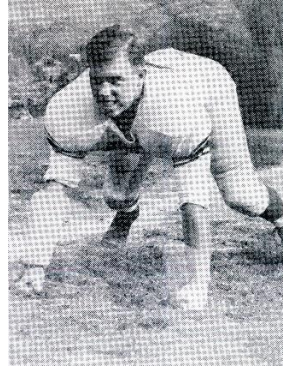
Something extraordinary had happened toward the end of the 1963-1964 school year. Mike Netter, who besides being the Broncos' quarterback was also an artist, went into the Bronxville School art room and cut a stencil for a T-shirt. It was a text comprising just three words, "Eight's Our Fate." Netter was trying, through an act of will by which he intended to frame the Broncos' play in 1964, to proclaim a destiny for the team. The Broncos, Netter was saying, were destined to win all their games in the coming season. Roger Haile, who was a good friend of Netter's, called the creation of the T-Shirt stencil "a declarative act of art." By the time the football season started in September 1964, the "Eight's Our Fate" slogan was put up all over the school. This was the real starting point of the streak. The Broncos had won six games in a row, but they were fated to win eight more games in the coming season, and presumably the forces of destiny would bring more victories after that. This was the heady feeling that was beginning to spread through the students who played and cared about football. "No one was talking about the streak until pre-season football started in 1964," North Callahan remembers. "We showed up for summer practice and the slogan, 'Eight's Our Fate,' was already being thrown around. I remember that all of a sudden it was a big thing, it just exploded. Like, 'OK, we're going to go undefeated. That's it, it's over.'"

The Broncos beat Rye Neck 19-0 in their opening game on September 26. This was the Broncos first opening game victory in six years. In a story that would be repeated many times during the season, Vic Chaltain and Roger Haile dominated the Broncos' running game, gaining 102 yards and 119 yards respectively. They were very different kinds of runner. Chaltain was physically big and he was powerful and could plunge right through a line of defenders. Haile was small, agile and fast and had an ability to cut back against pursuing defenders and find running space. "I was pretty good getting through the line," Haile recalls. "I had some moves." He and Chaltain were perfect complements to one another.

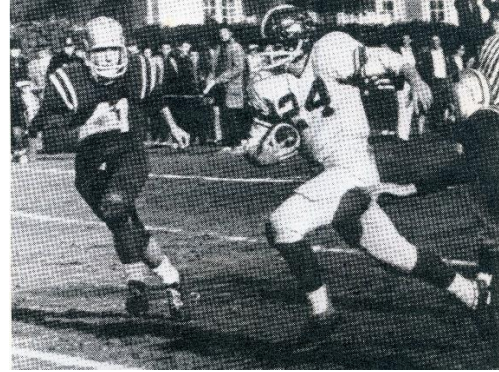




*Frank Winant avoids a tackle.*



*John Boynton on the line.*



*Roger Haile: "I had some moves."*

In a very close game against Valhalla the following week, which Bronxville won by a single point, 20-19, Chaltain gained 132 yards, Haile 108. *The Mirror* reported that "The Bronxville offense exploded in the third quarter with an 82 yard scamper by Roger [Haile], a 45 yard gallop by Vic Chaltain...and a six-point quarterback sneak by Mike Netter." On October 10, the Broncos shut out Tuckahoe, 19-0. According to *The Mirror*, "The running of fullback Vic Chaltain and halfback Roger Haile, and the line play of John and Ralph Boynton were the bright spots for Bronxville." Chaltain gained 130 yards and Haile gained 150 yards, including a 96-yard run. Haile still remembers this 96-yard run against Tuckahoe many decades later. "...When I run something so long as that 96-yard run," he remembers, "it seems like forever. And I couldn't run at full speed because I wore all these archaic pads, and it was really like running in a suit of armor. There is something about running a long run that makes you think it's going to last forever...and how many players who want to stop me are going to come from somewhere and bring me down?"

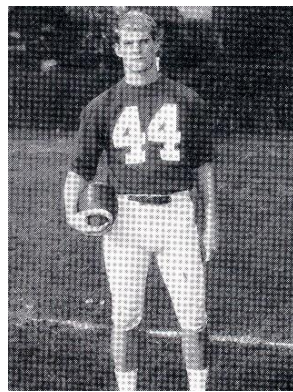
The Broncos had now won the first three games of the 1964 season, and their winning streak had grown to nine straight games.

In the game against Woodlands on "a cold, wet Monday afternoon," as *The Mirror* described game day, October 19, Chaltain and Haile continued to dominate the team's rushing and scoring. Haile scored two touchdowns, Chaltain scored one, and the Broncos won 19-6. Chaltain won the yardage contest this week with 159 yards gained against Haile's 130 yards. The Broncos beat Saunders-Commerce 26-7 on October 24. Mike Netter made a 93-yard run up the sidelines for a touchdown; Vic Chaltain made his own run up the sidelines, for 63 yards gained and a touchdown; and Roger Haile scored two touchdowns, one on a 3-yard plunge, the other by a 97-yard interception return. Haile gained 130 yards for the day, Chaltain 102. *The Bronxville Review Press and Reporter* called Chaltain "the finest fullback in the county" and quoted Coach Spenik as saying he was "the best boy I've ever seen." The Broncos were far enough ahead by halftime that Spenik sent in the second-string team for the entire

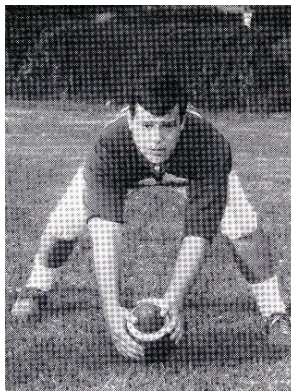
second half. This allowed sophomore and junior players to get some experience and allowed Spenik to get a look at some of the players that would lead his team in 1965.



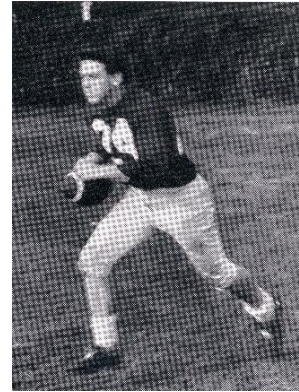
*Mike Netter*



*Vic Chaltain*



*Ralph Boynton*



*Roger Haile*

The Broncos beat Westlake 20-0 on October 31. Haile scored two of Bronxville's three touchdowns, Chaltain the third one. Concordia, usually an easy opponent, fell to the Broncos 28-0 on November 14. Sophomore North Callahan, whose stardom would come in 1966, joined Chaltain and Haile as a leading rusher in the game. Gorton was also an easy victory for the Broncos; they won 33-0. This was the last game of the year. "...We improved as each game went along until we were executing to perfection," Spenik told the *Bronxville Review Press and Reporter*.



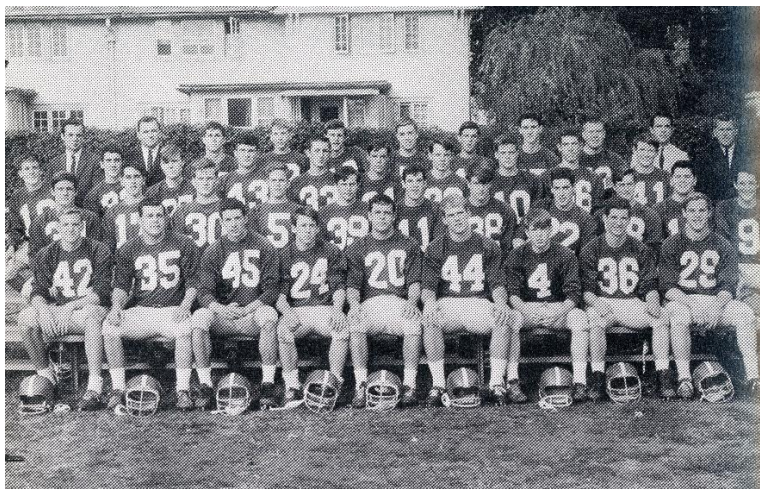
*Undefeated!*

The Broncos had now won fourteen games in a row. It was the longest winning streak the team had ever had, eclipsing the 13-game streak of 1954-1955. Beginning early in the 1964 season press coverage of the games pointed out that the Broncos were



on a winning streak. The streak was increasingly on the minds of fans and also players and coaches. John Boynton, who played on the starting team in 1963, when the streak was in its earliest days and still mostly invisible and unmentioned, and in 1964, when it was increasingly noticed and talked and thought about, recalls that the streak affected the players more and more as their wins accumulated during the 1964 season, particularly late in the season when they started to realize they might win all their games. By season's end, Bronxville's streak was getting some notice in the New York City newspapers. The players couldn't help but give some thought to it. But Spenik appeared to give it no notice, and he emphasized the importance of getting every game right, one play at a time. Coach Bob McGrath always, whether the Broncos were in the middle of a streak or not, professed to believe every Bronxville win was a miracle. He was by principle a determined pessimist, always taking precautions against the team's becoming cocky, because he felt this was the best way to keep the kids working hard, taking nothing for granted and doing their best to win.

Despite the coaches' attempts to keep the players attention on each play and each game, awareness of the streak grew and grew, becoming more intense with each victory. Coach Ron Catena thought this intense feeling helped the coaches to keep the kids working hard to play well and win. "...The players, they tensed up, they didn't want to lose," he said. "That helped us for a lotta years. They used to really want to be good kids...They didn't want to lose, to be the ones [to lose]. Because they were Bronxville kids in terms of their pride...."



*The 1964 Bronxville Broncos*

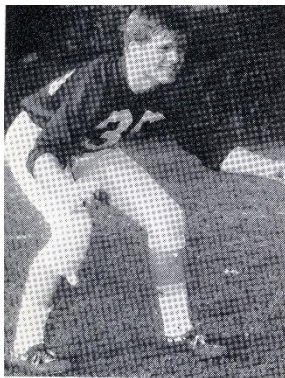
Once the streak got going during the 1964 season, the excitement of winning and the pressure to keep winning gave rise to some good-natured, even humorous, but still very serious, rituals among the players and coaches which were supposed to assure victory.



Mike Netter, who had done his best to will the streak into being with his slogan, "Eight's Our Fate," was at the center of one of these rituals. Every Saturday morning before a game—this was during the 1964 season—Netter and his teammates Vic Chaltain, Roger Haile, and John and Ralph Boynton would get together at one of their homes for a steak breakfast, and afterwards they would go to St. Joseph's Church and Netter would go to confession. His teammates would watch carefully to be sure he went into the confessional. That done, they went to the school and suited up for the game. The Broncos won every game in 1964, but if Netter hadn't gone to confession all those times, they'd probably be out of luck. At least that's how it was supposed to work.

Coach Bob McGrath was thinking the same way about what he had to do to be sure the Broncos kept winning. To him the important thing was that he wear the same clothes every game as long as the team was winning. If the team lost, then he would change clothes. But for over four years following the third game of the 1963 season the Broncos never lost, and McGrath wore the same clothes all that time. His blue shirt became a famous sign for the team of their fated victory week after week. McGrath also believed it was crucial that he chew some Dentyne gum during each game, and his daughter Mary Kate always had to buy the gum before game time; it had to be Mary Kate to make the ritual work right. McGrath gave some of the gum to Bob Spenik too, and this completed the ritual. McGrath's complex system was not quite over. He also felt it was important that his wife Bumpty give him a handful of his ulcer pills before each game, and she went along with the idea all during the streak.

The Broncos' team physician, Dr. Vincent Pascale had his ritual too. He kept peanuts—they had to be in their shells—in his pocket and he handed them out to the coaches. Maybe this made a difference, because as long as he passed out his peanuts the Broncos kept winning.



Andy Wiswell, a lineman on the 1966 Broncos team, had a personal ritual which was intended to get him psyched up for a game. "I used to always play this single, a 45, from 1965," he remembers, "a song by Barry McGuire, 'Eve of Destruction.' I used to play it at home before I would go in for a game, every game day. ...It just meant you've just got to win, you've got to put everything into it." The lyrics were about the world going to destruction, but the meaning for Wiswell was, "We're heading into this and we're going to come out a winner."

The streak had to end someday, but none of the players wanted to be the ones on the field when it happened.

*The author thanks the following people for giving him interviews (in one case, for sending an email message) that taught him everything he knows about Bronxville football: Rick Alvarez, John Boynton, Christina Butler and Robert Spenik, North Callahan, Ron Catena, Jim Fernald, Roger Haile, Bob Kettle, Bumpty McGrath and Buzz McGrath, Christy Patt and Andy Wiswell. The author is especially grateful to Buzz McGrath for introducing him to the remarkable story of the streak.*

*Raymond Geselbracht is the Bronxville Village Historian*

