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Fierce Rivalry

DeWitt-Haslett Area's Top Matchup

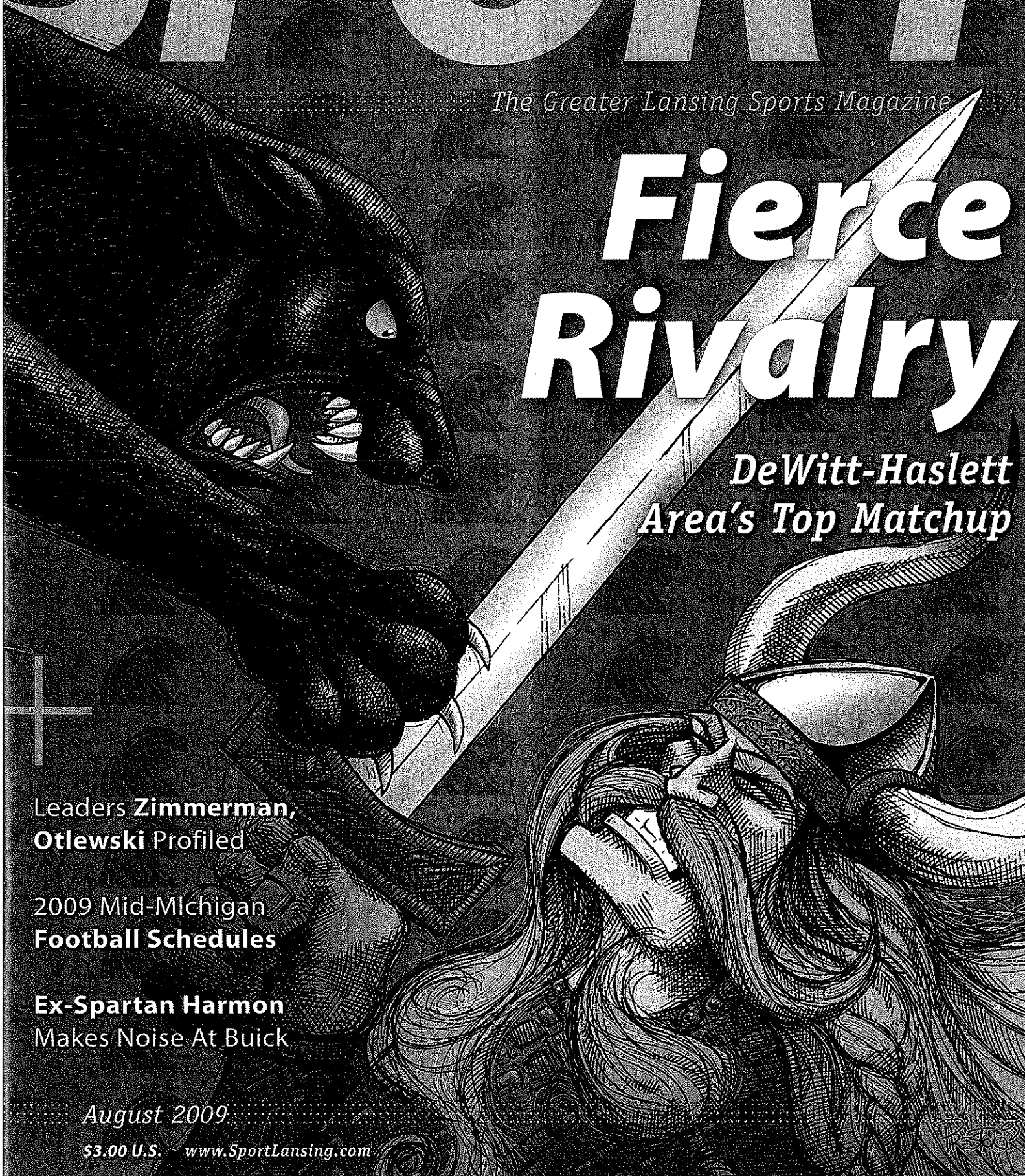
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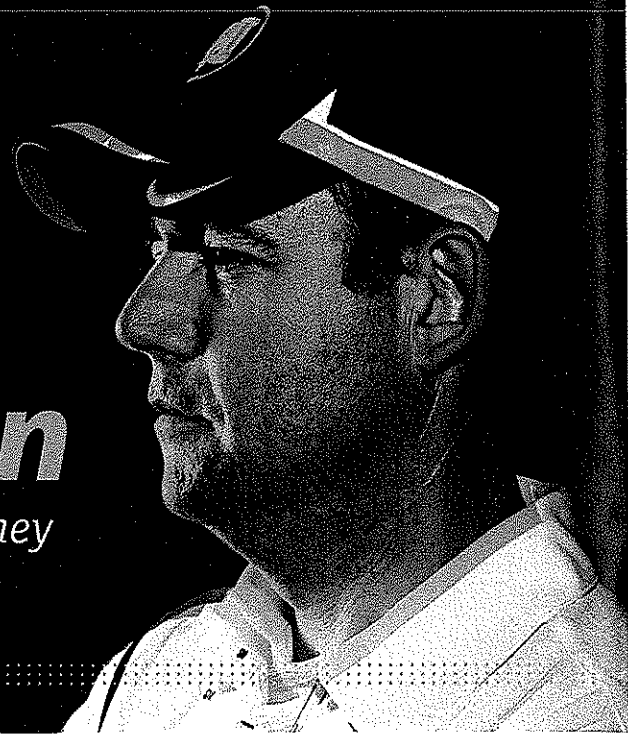
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Preparation & Celebration

Otlewski, Haslett Know Success Is A Journey

BY SHANNON SHELTON



Jay Lyon had visions of Camp Tapico as a tranquil place where he and his fellow Haslett Vikings would spend a week enjoying the outdoors while easing into football season.

Not quite. Head coach Charlie Otlewski didn't plan for it to be a vacation.

"I was kind of looking forward to being with my friends," said Lyon, a senior defensive lineman. "But it was tough. It was grueling. That was the sorest I've ever been."

At least Lyon knew what he'd experience when he made his return visit in 2009. Offensive lineman Eric Vering, a sophomore in his first year with the varsity, could only imagine, based on the stories he'd heard.

"Well, I guess I'm looking forward to it," Vering said a few days before the team's departure.

Since 1994, the year Otlewski arrived at Haslett, the Vikings have kicked off pre-season practice with a trip to a Northern

Michigan Boy Scout camp, save for a three-year period from 2004-06 when scheduling conflicts forced the Vikings to stay closer to home and camp at Michigan State.

Chad Stripling was one of the few to miss out on the Northern Michigan experience. Now a sophomore offensive lineman at Alma College, Stripling played for Haslett when the Vikings worked at MSU.

"Everyone I talk to says that they came back as a team more than anything," Stripling said, almost regretful that he never had the chance to fight off insects, go through three-a-day practices and sleep in makeshift cabins under the stars.

Otlewski, 43, jokingly compares the experience to "The Junction Boys," the book and movie about legendary coach Paul "Bear" Bryant's preseason training camp in the sweltering Texas Hill Country when he took over at Texas A&M in 1954.

With Camp Tapico, located just south of Kalkaska, there's one exception.

"Unlike the movie, there's no one going and getting bus tickets," Otlewski said. "There's no bus to take."

The only buses are the ones the team has chartered, and they aren't going anywhere until Thursday afternoon. A handful of players have called their parents and asked to be rescued. But most have stuck around – and returned the next year.

A native of Cheboygan, Otlewski played

high school ball from 1980-83 for legendary coach Irv Sigler, who opened preseason practice by taking his players to a camp near Traverse City each year. Otlewski took Haslett's players there until 2004, then moved to Tapico in 2007.

It's one of the traditions he thought would benefit his program and provide players from a much larger area like Meridian Township with an experience they might not have.

"It's a unique thing," Otlewski said. "It's hard to describe what it's like because you get them away, and the coaches get to know the players better. The players get to know each other better."

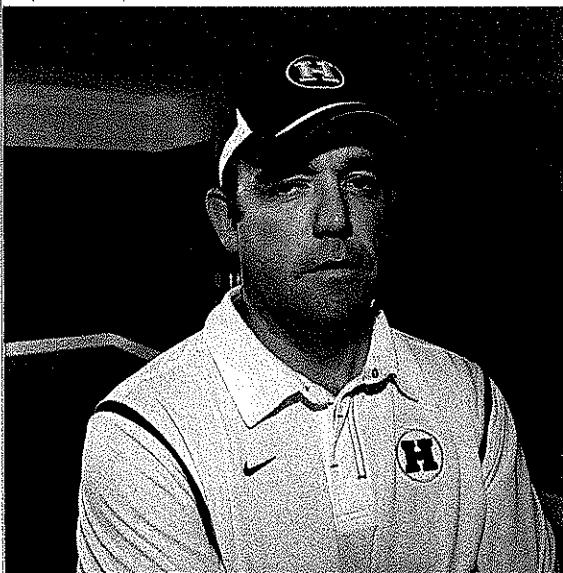
Nothing bonds a football team like filling holes in the ground with kerosene to kill bees that might sting players and coaches during practice. Or sleeping in dwellings he calls "tree houses," with decking material connecting the cabins.

This year, a practice area has been added for the few football teams that use the facility for preseason camp. In past years, practices took place in a general open area on the 3,000-acre property.

"I grew up Up North, I like the outdoors, and I like to get our kids away from – cement," Otlewski said. "There's not a lot of cement out there. It's kind of a throwback place. You hope that whatever you accomplish there, you try to carry it over. Sometimes teams have. Some teams haven't. But I think we're always further ahead chemistry-wise."

Otlewski's 139-54 record in 14 seasons at Haslett shows there might be something to his theory. He's never had a losing season as the Vikings' coach.

"We're going to be young," he said of his team's 2009 prospects. "We only have 15 seniors coming back. But we have a very



☐ **Charlie In Charge** Otlewski pushes his players to be all they can be.

talented group of underclassmen, so I think we'll be very good."

Ionia, Charlotte and Fowlerville should also be in the mix in the CAAC Gold Division. But any discussion of titles begins with Haslett's longtime rival, DeWitt.

"It always seems to come down to the two of us," Otlewski said.

Before coming to Haslett, Otlewski played college ball at Adrian from 1984-88, then worked as a graduate assistant at Central Michigan. His first head coaching job was at St. Ignace, the hated foe of his old high school.

"It's kind of like Haslett-DeWitt - a heated rivalry," he said. "I was the traitor."

Although he was living close to home, Otlewski knew it would always be difficult for St. Ignace, a school of about 300 students, to be successful against schools like Gaylord, Petoskey and Sault Ste Marie, Northern Michigan's larger programs.

He decided to seek a new challenge. His wife, Wendy, was an MSU graduate. During his past visits to mid-Michigan, Otlewski

remembered that there was a high school "by the mall," not far from the MSU campus.

"That's all I knew," he said. "Then, a guy I went to high school with - his dad was my coach - had just finished being a grad assistant for Lloyd Carr at Michigan. We talked about it. He gave me the idea of applying. And that's all it took."

Although the Haslett job would become Otlewski's dream gig, the initial move was difficult. He and Wendy were living just 20 miles from where they grew up and had just had their first child, Breyanna. She was 2 months old.

"I wasn't very popular with my mother-in-law," he said, laughing. "It took me 15 years."

In those 15 years, the Otlewskis have added two more members to their family - daughter Mariah, a seventh-grader, and son Nathan, a fourth-grader. Breyanna is now 15, a sophomore at Haslett. And her dad has become quite popular in his adopted hometown.

Otlewski's competitive nature and drive to bring out the best in his players has transformed Haslett into one of the state's top

programs. In addition to his football duties, he teaches history and weight training and has coached boys and girls track the past four seasons.

"There's pressure playing here, but I think it's a good pressure," Otlewski said. "Fifteen years ago, there wasn't any pressure. We didn't win very often, so our kids didn't expect to win. Now, our community expects our kids to be successful."

"It's like anything. If (MSU coach Mark) Dantonio gets to Year 15, people are going to expect, 'We're supposed to win the Big Ten, supposed to do this, supposed to do that.' It doesn't always work that way. But I'd much rather have it where there's expectation and pressure than none at all."

The Haslett players expect that Otlewski will push them to reach their full potential.

"He does not like to lose," Stripling said, emphasizing the word "not."

One of Stripling's most vivid memories came in 2007, when Haslett played an undefeated DeWitt team and lost 41-18.

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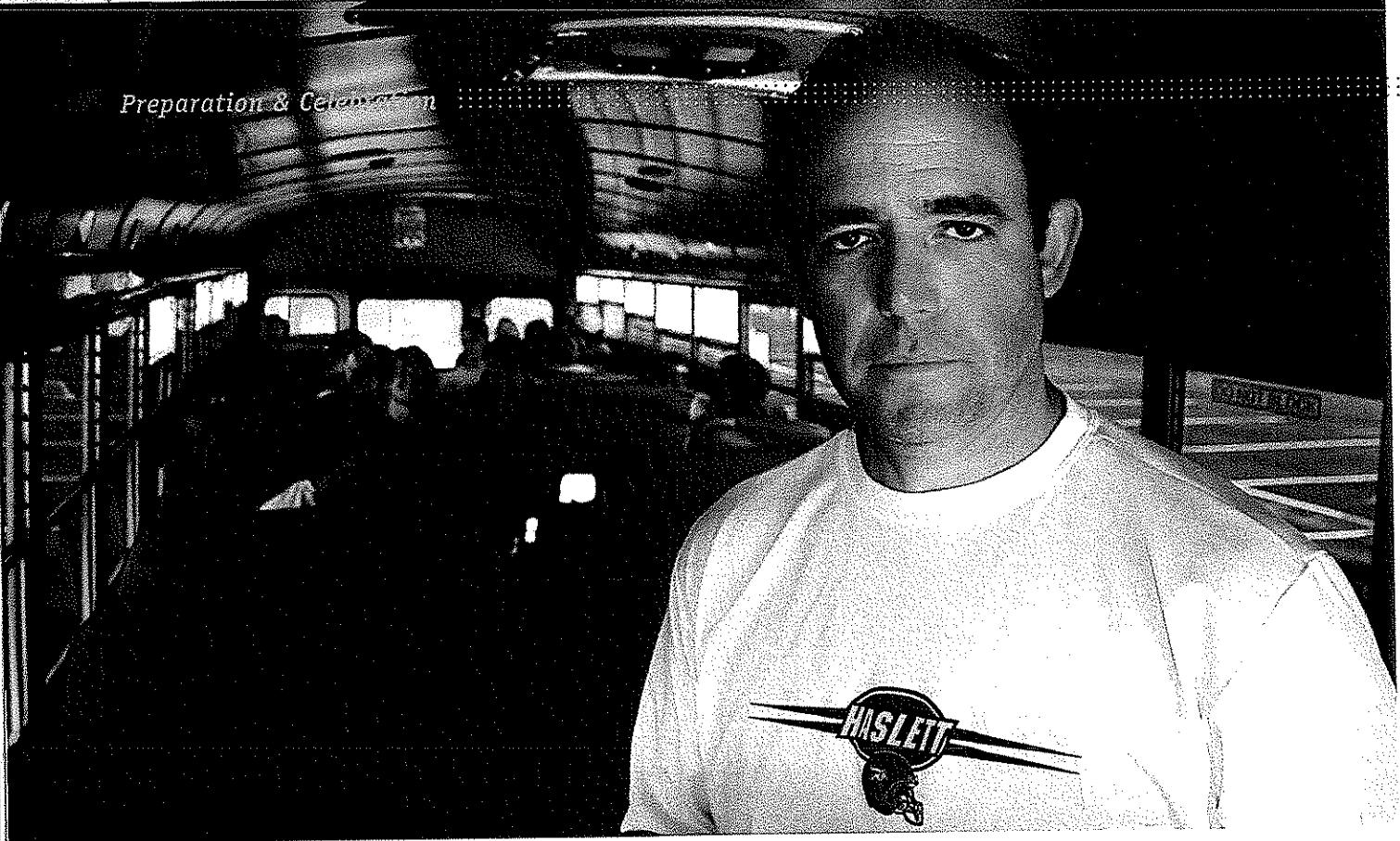
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☑ Riding To Victory Otlewski's Vikings carry the lessons of football camp with them on Friday nights.

Otlewski was not amused. Not only was the margin of defeat embarrassing, the Vikings had lost to their hated rivals. He channeled that energy into getting his players ready for the playoffs, where they would once again face the Panthers.

"Coach O" focused on lifting his players' spirits, while acknowledging how poorly they had played. He noted that they were still going to postseason play and that they needed to make what could be their last game one of their best efforts.

"Although he was mad, he got us very fired up," Stripling said.

The Vikings didn't beat DeWitt in that rematch. But the result was much closer - 14-10.

As one of seven children, Otlewski said he learned if there was something that he wanted, he would have to compete with others for it. Card games with his grandmother, father and uncle became strategic battles. The idea of playing for "fun" was a concept he just couldn't grasp.

Even on a coaches retreat, which he'll also hold in Northern Michigan, or a fly-fishing trip to Alaska with a few coaches and family members, he'll find a way to turn a friendly outing into a competition.

"I hate getting outfished," he said. "I have a group of coaches that I flyfish with a lot. And when we go to Alaska, every day is competitive. We were catching tons of fish. But I didn't want to get outfished."

The Vikings see that competitive nature daily during the season. Newcomers get their first glimpse during their August trip to Northern Michigan. A typical day has players waking up at 6:15 a.m. and beginning practice at 7.

The first session lasts until 10 a.m. After a four-hour break, the Vikings go at it again from 2-5 p.m. A final practice takes place for

how much talent you have," Otlewski said. "I think chemistry is a huge factor. How well they play for each other is more important than what their 40 time is or how big they are or which colleges are recruiting or not recruiting them. I think that's way overblown in today's high school athletics."

When the players leave - both the camp and Haslett High in general - they might

"It'll be the best food that they'll eat in four-and-a-half days, but it'll be the hardest that they've worked."

- Charlie Otlewski

an hour, usually from 7-8 p.m.

The latter practice usually consists of a team-building exercise, such as a ropes course or an archery competition. When the players are back home during the pre-season, the final practice period might involve watching a movie - usually with a football theme.

Haslett football is known for its ground-bound approach and execution. While some have called it "football in a phone booth," there is plenty of deception. And when a master like former quarterback Nathan Turner is handing off or faking and keeping, the Vikings can be an announcer's nightmare.

"At least at our level, it's not always about

look back and curse the second they stepped onto the bus to visit Camp Tapico. Then, they'll remember the fun times they spent with their teammates, the good food that Otlewski's wife and mother prepared for the teams and the winning records at the end of the year.

"It'll be the best food that they'll eat in four-and-a-half days, but it'll be the hardest that they've worked," Otlewski said. "I think our players over the years always talk about what camp was like and how hard it was. At the same time, they can look back and have unique memories about it."

They learn, at Camp Tapico and in life, there's no free lunch. It's Otlewski's Law: Players and people eat what they earn. **S**