

Champ Talks Recruiting

By Mark Adair

The Cortland State football program experienced the best season in school history this past fall when the Red Dragons won the Stagg Bowl and the Division III National Championship.

"The season was an interesting ride," coach Curt Fitzpatrick said. "It wasn't all pretty. Coming into the season, we knew we had a very talented team but we needed to grow and get better."

After opening the season with a pair of wins, the Red Dragons hosted Susquehanna in Week 3.

Despite holding a 35-21 lead entering the fourth quarter, Cortland surrendered 17 points in the final quarter and lost 38-35.

"We learned a couple of hard lessons," Fitzpatrick said. "Don't look ahead. Focus on the current play, and do the absolute best you can on each play."

The loss served as an "attention-getter" and the Red Dragons did not lose again.

"We got better every week," Fitzpatrick said. "We really peaked at the right time."

After losing to Susquehanna, the Red Dragons reeled off 7

straight wins to close the regular season, including a 38-28 win over arch-rival Ithaca in the annual Cortaca Jug game. They scored at least 38 points in each of those games. The Dragons beat Morrisville 52-15, beat Utica 56-3 and beat Hartwick 73-7.

Cortland State simply unstoppable.

"I give a ton of credit to our players," Fitzpatrick said, "because they are the ones that made it happen."

After opening the tournament with a hard-fought 23-17 win over Endicott, the Dragons pulled out a 25-24 win over Grove City College.

"We got a big play by Zac Boyes at the end of the game," Fitzpatrick said.

With just 1:23 left in the game, Jaden Alfano-St. John bulled into the end zone to pull the Dragons within 24-23.

Boyes then tossed a 2-point PAT pass to Omari Kendrick to give the Red Dragons the win.

"We felt like we were finding our stride," Fitzpatrick said. "We stopped focusing on trying to play a certain style. We just played with each other and for each other."

In the Stagg Bowl, Cortland State beat North Central, Illinois 38-37 to win the national title.

The Dragons stopped a 2-point PAT with just over a minute to play to preserve the win.

"We won the national championship by 1 point," Fitzpatrick said, "but you only have to win by one. Just find a way, and our guys did."

Cortland is the first NYS team to win the national championship since Ithaca College won the title in 1991.

"That's a long time ago," Fitzpatrick said. "Thirty-three years is a long time. Obviously, those Ithaca teams were

outstanding, but we think we're pretty good, too."

Fitzpatrick, who is from Fulton, NY and played at St. John Fisher, is immensely proud of being able to point to Western and Central NY, as having the best players in the country right now.

"There were a lot of people that thought no New York team would win on that level again," he said. "We proved a lot of people wrong."

Fitzpatrick also gave a nod to WNY, pointing out that

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Photo by SUNY Cortland

Cortland coach Curt Fitzpatrick led the Red Dragons to the Division III National Championship with a victory in the 2023 Stagg Bowl.

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players from WNY played big roles in winning the national title.

"WNY has been great for us," he said. "We don't have the volume of kids that a school closer to Buffalo might have, but we have got some really good student athletes from that area. We are going to continue to recruit Buffalo hard."

Boyes, who graduated from Kenmore West in the spring of 2020, was named an All-American this season. Center Ryan Bitka, a graduate of Amherst HS, was named an All-Conference player.

"We have kids from St. Joe's and Canisius," Fitzpatrick said. "We have a few kids from Buffalo and Rochester."

Fitzpatrick was named Cortland's head coach in February 2020.

"I got to Cortland," Fitzpatrick said, "and three weeks later, we had the Covid Pandemic. That was a challenge. We couldn't go anywhere, we couldn't meet with any players."

But, the Dragons survived the shutdowns and have been on a tear ever since.

Through three seasons, Fitzpatrick's teams are a combined 34-4, with three Empire 8 titles, three NCAA tournament appearances, and now, a national championship.

In 2021, Fitzpatrick led Cortland to an 11-1 record to tie a school record for wins in a season. In 2022, Cortland finished 9-2 overall and made the NCAA playoffs.

Fitzpatrick also said that, partly due to the Covid shutdowns, the recruiting cycle has shifted on the calendar.

"The last couple of years, we started our recruiting cycle in May," Fitzpatrick said. "We used to start in December, now we start in May. We build relationships with players earlier, recruits are making decisions sooner. Everything is moved up now and starts earlier."

Cortland coaches are now visiting players when they are still juniors in high school.

"The rules just changed as to when we could visit recruits in school," Fitzpatrick said. "We couldn't visit them until the start of their senior year. Now we can visit them in school after January 1st of their junior year."

The result is that colleges are now done recruiting when, in previous years, they were just starting.



Cortland QB Zach Boyes is a graduate of Kenmore West.

"Right now, we have our whole class committed," Fitzpatrick said. "We have 32 freshman committed right now and 15 of them were committed before Christmas."

Fitzpatrick also has a ton of tips for players hoping to be recruited.

"My biggest advice is to control what you can control," he said. "Have your junior-film highlight tape ready to go. Every coach will want that."

Fitzpatrick also says that high school players should not wait for schools to contact them.

"Be proactive and reach out to schools that you want to attend," he said. "If a school has your major, go ahead and reach out to their coaching staff."

Fitzpatrick also says that including your high school coach is important.

"Your high school coach is going to be the main person through this whole process," he said. "We won't recruit any player unless he is recommended by their high school coach."

And, Fitzpatrick said, the high school coach can guide kids away from unrealistic expectations.

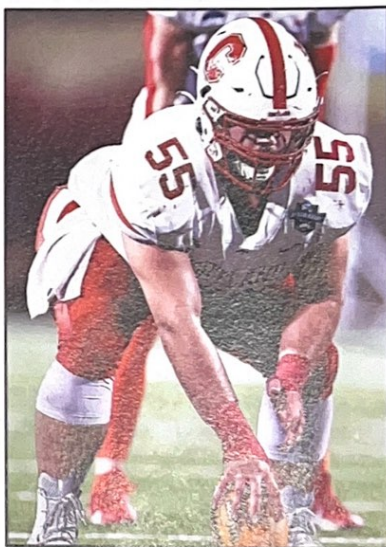
"Coaches need to be honest with their players," he said. "A lot of kids look for D-1 schools, but no one has the heart to tell them they aren't good enough to play D-1. Your high school coach will know where you can realistically play. Not your dad, not your 7-on-7 coach. Work with your high school coach."

Fitzpatrick also said there is a sure-fire way to tell if a school wants to recruit you.

"At the end of the day, the colleges will tell you what school you are looking at," he said. "If a school is communicating with you, they are interested. If a school is not communicating, they are not interested in you. Be proactive and do not get your feelings hurt. It's rarely personal."

Fitzpatrick also said that the recruiting process is all about finding the "right fit."

"Maybe a college has your major," he said, "but maybe they don't have a roster spot for you. They may have a roster spot for you, but don't offer the major you want. It's all about finding the right spot for you and that may or may not be at the place you had as your first choice."



Cortland C Ryan Bitka is an Amherst graduate.

WNY Recruiting Watch List

Newfane

Pos... Player (Ht, Wt, yr)

WR-DB... Bryan Annalora (5-11, 180... 2025)

SB-RB-LB... Ayden Buttery (6-0, 175... 2025)

Quick Hits: 2-year starter; team captain;

Also: Wrestling; 7th at NYS Championship

Interest from: Brockport, Buff State, Alfred

QB-DB... Mac Capen (6-3, 210... 2026)

OL-DL... Jack Cole (6-1, 220... 2025)

Quick Hits: 3-year starter;

Also: Track (Throwing);

Interest from: Brockport, Buff State, Alfred

SB-DE... Aiden Cronkhite (6-1, 190... 2026)

OL-DL... Devin DeNardo (6-1, 220... 2025)

Quick Hits: 3-year starter;

Also: Baseball;

Interest from: Brockport, Buff State, Alfred

OL-DL... Colin Doney (6-1, 175... 2026)

Quick Hits: 2-way starter as soph; 1st-team all-league

Also: Wrestling;

Interest from: Brockport, Buff State, Alfred

SB-DE... Richard Doney (6-1, 185... 2025)

Quick Hits: 3-year starter;

Also: Wrestling;

Interest from: Brockport, Buff State, Alfred

SB-LB... Isaiah Gerstung (6-0, 170... 2026)

OL-DL... Khalill Golden (5-9, 200... 2025)

Quick Hits: 3-year starter;

Also: Wrestling; Track;

Interest from: Brockport, Buff State, Alfred

Niagara Falls

Pos... Player (Ht, Wt, yr)

LB... Jaden Robinson (5-10, 200... 2025)

Quick Hits: D1AA/2; 110 tackles; 90-plus academic avg;

Also: Wrestling

QB... Michael Taylor (6-0, 205... 2026)

Quick Hits: D1/AA; soph starter; 90-plus academic avg;

Invite to Elite 11 in Columbus, OH;

Also: Basketball

Interest from: Syracuse, UB, New Hampshire.

WR-FS... Dylan Hinks (6-1, 195... 2025)

Quick Hits: D1AA/2; team captain; 40-dash time of 4.4

Also: Track

G-NT... Dwayne Dodson (6-3, 280... 2025)

Quick Hits: D1AA/2; Transfer from Fresno, Cal.

Also: Boxing

Niagara Wheatfield

Pos... Player (Ht, Wt, yr)

LB-RB... Dylan Pringle (5-10, 175... 2025)

Quick Hits: D2/3; 3.7 GPA; 1st-team all-league

Also: Wrestling

OL-DL... Tristan Fox (6-5, 250... 2025)

Quick Hits: D2/3; 3.7 GPA; 2nd-team all-league

Also: Lacrosse (Goalie); Basketball

OL-DL... Christian Turner (6-1, 250... 2025)

Quick Hits: D2/3; 4.0 GPA;

Also: Basketball

DE... Roman Doyle (6-1, 185... 2025)

RB-LB... Mason Meissner (5-9, 180... 2026)

QB-S... Chase Richards (5-11, 170... 2026)

Olean

Pos... Player (Ht, Wt, yr)

LB... Noah Gallo (5-6, 155... 2025)

Quick Hits: Sprint Football Prospect

Also: 3.5 Academic Average; Def. POY, 80 tackles, 3 QB sacks in 2023, Track

Interest from: Alfred

QB-FS... Joe Mest (6-2, 180... 2026)

Quick Hits: 90-plus Academic Avg; Off. POY, started as a freshman, 23 career TD passes in '22 & '23

Also: Basketball, Baseball

Orchard Park

Pos... Player (Ht, Wt, yr)

QB-P-DB... Brady Ciano (6-0, 155... 2025)

Quick Hits: D1/AA

Also: 3.5 Academic Average; AA Off. POY, 1,719 passing, 14TDs, 340 rush yds

Interest from: Yale, Colgate, NHamp, Wagner, Merrimack

WR-DB... Jack Ciano (6-0, 160... 2025)

Quick Hits: D1/AA; 3.5 Academic Avg; 7 INTs

Interest from: Yale, Colgate, NHamp, Wagner, Merrimack

RB-DB... Carter Switek (5-11, 185... 2025)

Quick Hits: 3-yr starter, 3.5 Academic Average

OL-DL... Aiden Guadagno (5-11, 275... 2025)

WR-DB-P-PR-KR... Jherek Breske (5-8, 155... 2026)

OL-DL... Gavin McWhirter (6-2, 325... 2026)

LB... Zach Nalawadi (5-10, 205... 2025)