

The New Haven Register (nhregister.com), Serving New Haven, CT

Sports

Ragone honored as state's top player

Sunday, January 18, 2009 5:53 AM EST

By Bill Cloutier, Assistant Sports Editor

EAST HAVEN — Cheshire football coach Mark Ecke knew he had someone special on his team four years ago.

That's when Billy Ragone had just entered the high school.

But Ragone, like most freshmen, spent that season with his classmates on the freshman team.

Ragone soon proved he wasn't just any other freshman and on Saturday, after three remarkable seasons with the Rams, he was named the Walter Camp Football Foundation High School Player of the Year at the Second Breakfast of Champions banquet.

Ragone, who will play at the University of Pennsylvania this fall, was honored along with New Canaan's Lou Marinelli, who was named coach of the year after guiding the school to the Class MM state title and the No. 1 ranking in the Register Top 10 poll.

Ecke kicked himself a bit for not using Ragone right from the start.

"That's how dominant he was," Ecke said. "When he came here, we were 3-7, and he single-handedly turned our program around."

Cheshire went 9-2 last fall.

"He's a special kid who gets it done on the field and in the classroom," Ecke said. "He's a great leader and ambassador for our school. I have two boys, and they want to know what Billy's doing. They want to wear his number. That's the type of role model he is. He's a kid that we're going to miss.

"He shows that you can balance the academics and the athletics."

Ragone said that's why he selected Penn.

"My parents instilled in me a long time ago how important it is to do well in the classroom," Ragone said. "I wanted to go to a school that was both strong athletically and academically."

Ragone was not surprised at how much the Rams improved during his time at the school.

"Coming up we had a lot of great talent, and coach Eke put a lot of expectations on us," Ragone said. "He got me into playing varsity football soon, and that enabled me to get better as a junior and a senior. That experience made me a better player.

Ragone was proud to help restore Cheshire to one of the best teams in the state.

"We had a mix of some of the old players from the '90s that came back to coach, and they instilled that winning attitude on us. We knew we had a lot of talent to take us back to where we were in the '90s, and that was something we were able to accomplish."

Ecke was also happy that Ragone won one of the prestigious player of the year awards. He was selected as a Register All-Stater, but the top player went to Glastonbury's Jordan Brown. Brown and Seymour's Mike Osiecki were the finalists for the Camp award.

"To win this award over those types of players is very satisfying," Ragone said. "They are great players, and we played against both of them."

Orlovsky hoping to catch on

The breakfast was presented by the Dan Orlovsky Foundation.

Orlovsky, a former Register Player of the Year from Shelton, started seven games (he played in 10) and threw eight touchdowns and eight interceptions for the Detroit Lions this season.

He threw for 1,616 yards, connecting on 143 of 255 passes (56.1 percent). Orlovsky, who was an All-Stater and Register MVP at Shelton before heading to UConn, finished the season with a passer rating of 72.6.

While those numbers are not bad, the Lions will go down as the worst team in NFL history after becoming the first team to go 0-16 for the season. They also set another dubious mark losing their home games by an average of 21.4 points.

Orlovsky's contract ran out this year, and he is hoping on catching on with a team for next season.

Orlovsky did have a couple of good games. He threw for 292 yards and two touchdowns in a 27-23 loss at Chicago. He also finished with 224 yards and two touchdowns in the season-finale loss at Green Bay. In that game, the Lions led in the fourth quarter.

It was the fourth season in the NFL for Orlovsky, who didn't see any action the previous two seasons and played briefly in two games in 2005. He was a fifth-round selection in the 2005 draft.

Orlovsky took over for Jon Kitna, who went on injured reserve during the season. The Lions also have Drew Stanton and picked up veteran Daunte Culpepper after Week 9. Stanton has three more years on his contract, Culpepper one.

The Lions also have the first pick in the NFL draft this season and many speculate that they'll use that to pick USC's Mark Sanchez or Georgia's Matt Stafford, both quarterbacks.

The Walter Camp Football Foundation lauded the efforts of Orlovsky.

"If anyone's looking for a role model, look at Dan," said Joe Barbarotta, president of the Walter Camp Football Foundation. "He's walked in your shoes."

Fulcher makes his pitch

David Fulcher, a 1985 Walter Camp All-American, also spoke at the event. Fulcher was a three-time Pro Bowl safety with the Cincinnati Bengals. He came to represent his foundation which benefits Multiple Sclerosis, a disease his wife is battling.

Fulcher had several words of inspiration for the audience.

"The first thing you have to be is a professional student," Fulcher said, "before you can become a professional athlete. You're going to have some falls in life, but what's important is how you handle those falls. Success is very hard, but you get there with determination, and the choice you make today will affect you the rest of your life."

Lifetime of work

Bill O'Brien won the Lifetime Achievement Award.

O'Brien was the first commissioner of the Southern Connecticut Conference and helped mold the league into one of the state's best.

O'Brien has also been a member of the Walter Camp Football Foundation for decades. "This is very special because it represents a long time," O'Brien said. "You do it because you love it, and what's great about this weekend is that every January New Haven becomes the football capital of the world.

"I'm proud to have played a small part in it."

Bill Clouter can be reached at bcloutier@nhregister.com.

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