

10 Years Ago This Season

Colgate's first Patriot League championship

1997

(7-5, PL 6-0)

Coach: Dick Biddle

Captains: Tim Girard,
Blair Hicks, Dan Rivera

7	Richmond	23
27	Fordham *	14
44	at Cornell (OT)	38
61	Lehigh *	28
44	at Lafayette *	6
28	Princeton	31
27	at Army	35
42	at Holy Cross *	7
34	Towson *	3
24	at Navy	52
48	Bucknell *	14
28	at Villanova #	49

* Patriot League Game

NCAA Division I-AA Playoffs

Andy Kerr Trophy, Offensive MVP

Daymon Smith, Ryan Vena

Hal W. Lahar Trophy, Defensive MVP

Matt Domyancic

By Jim Leach

Mud-encrusted and jubilant, index fingers pointed skyward, the 1997 football team crowds around Fred Dunlap – who is smiling ear to ear and hugging the Patriot League football trophy – in a photograph that defines their season.

When Dick Biddle was named head football coach prior to the 1996 season, he talked his friend and mentor Dunlap (head coach from 1976-87) into coming out of retirement to join the staff as offensive coordinator and quarterback coach. It was one of many astute decisions that Biddle made on his way to turning around a program that was coming off the first winless season in its 105-year history.

Biddle & Co. struggled at the outset of that '96 season, losing four games to extend the Raiders' string of consecutive losses to 16 before the team coalesced around freshman quarterback Ryan Vena. Vena came off the bench to start against Brown in game #5 and led the team to victory in his first six starts. But for a tipped attempt at a two-point conversion in overtime at Bucknell, in the final play of the '96 season, Biddle's team would have delivered the Patriot League championship in their coach's first year at the helm.

So there was something to prove in 1997, and with their confidence back intact Biddle's team swept the Patriot League 6-0 to win the league's first automatic berth in the I-AA playoffs, finishing 7-5 overall and winning a slew of team and individual post-season honors before sending a happy Dunlap back into retirement.

Not that the season was without its challenges, the first of which was the University of Richmond at Andy Kerr Stadium. The Spiders sacked Vena nine times and intercepted twice on the way to a 23-7 win, Colgate's lone TD coming on a completion from Vena to wide receiver Corey Hill. Punter Erich Kutschke had 36 of Colgate's 106 yards rushing when he improvised after an errant snap, and 11 yards passing when he threw for a first down after faking a punt. (Citing a punter's offensive numbers is not usually a sign of a good day.)

Fordham's Rams came to town the following week and butted up against a Colgate defense that featured two interceptions by cornerback Brandon Tinson, one interception by free safety Jesse Boyd, and a punt deflected by freshman Randall Joseph. Sophomore tailback Ed Weiss, in his first start, carried 25 times for 165 yards and two TDs. Senior fullback Daymon Smith rushed for 118 yards on 14 carries. Behind great protection by the offensive line, Vena ran for a 25-yard TD and connected with RJ Gregory on a 45-yard strike for another. 27-14 Colgate.

Against Cornell at Schoellkopf Field the Raiders and Big Red traded scores to a 38-all tie in regulation. Colgate elected to start overtime on defense. After Cornell failed in attempts at three passes and a field goal, Colgate took over and Vena ran around the left end on a triple option to score the winning touchdown.

Back home against Lehigh, Vena connected on a TD pass to Hill, Weiss scored on a 17-yard run, and Smith scored from the one to put Colgate on top 21-0 in the first 7:28 of play. Smith scored three more times before Biddle cleared the bench early in the second half. Colgate set a team record with 678 yards in total offense. Junior tailback Brian Owens' 51-yard TD run in the fourth upped the Raider total to 61 points, the most scored by a Colgate team since 1941. Lehigh finished with 28.

At Lafayette the Raiders continued to dominate, scoring on their first five possessions to go up 41-0 at the half on the way to a 44-6 victory, their first in a decade at Fisher Field.

Six turnovers and 11 penalties for

93 yards proved the Raiders' undoing at home in a 31-28 loss to Princeton. Princeton scored with 1:03 remaining in the fourth quarter, then intercepted a Vena touchdown attempt as time ran out to close the deal.

Army handed the Raiders their second consecutive defeat, 35-27 in a hard-fought contest at Michie Stadium. Down 14-0, Colgate came back with three touchdowns to go up 21-14 in the third quarter. Army, which failed to complete a pass all game, answered with three touchdown runs. Owens' one-yard plunge put the Raiders within eight and the game was still up for grabs until Army recovered Colgate's on-side kick.

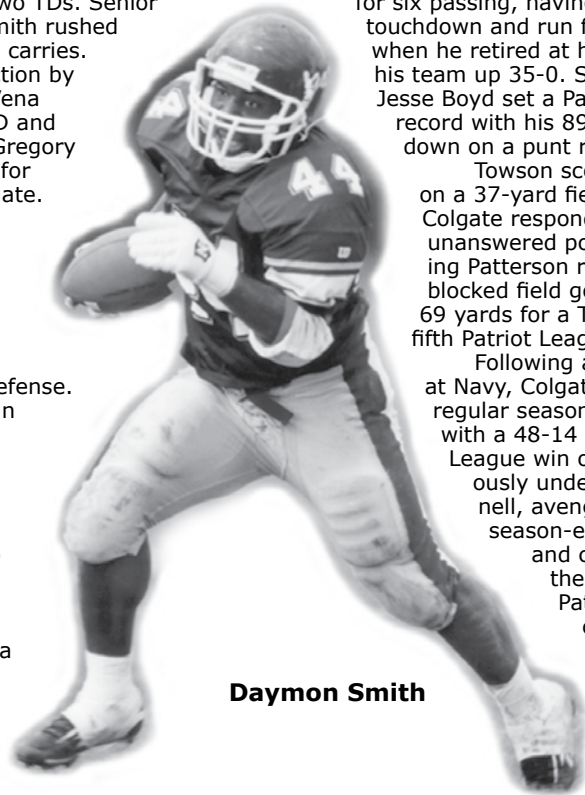
At Fitton Field, Colgate's defense recorded six sacks and held Holy Cross to 163 yards (nine rushing) in a 42-7 Raider victory, ending the Crusaders' 15-year domination. Vena was six for six passing, having thrown one touchdown and run for another when he retired at halftime with his team up 35-0. Sophomore Jesse Boyd set a Patriot League record with his 89-yard touchdown on a punt return.

Towson scored first on a 37-yard field goal, but Colgate responded with 34 unanswered points (including Patterson returning a blocked field goal attempt 69 yards for a TD) for their fifth Patriot League win.

Following a 52-24 loss at Navy, Colgate closed the regular season at home with a 48-14 Patriot League win over previously undefeated Bucknell, avenging the '96 season-ending loss and completing the Raiders' first Patriot League championship season 6-0. The defense set the tone when it stopped Bucknell

inside Colgate's five-yard line on the first series of the game.

In Coach Biddle's words, Colgate played top-ranked Villanova "eyeball-to-eyeball" in the first round of the NCAA playoffs. Vena connected with Hill for an 11-yard touchdown and Adam Federico's extra point put Colgate up 28-27 at the end of the third quarter, but a long return and a 15-yard penalty on the ensuing kickoff seemed to ignite the Wildcats, who scored three times unanswered in the fourth quarter to end the Raiders' season. "We played our hearts out," said Biddle.



Daymon Smith