It was a much simpler time, 50 years ago. Fort Collins was a sleepy but growing town of 43,000 – roughly one-fourth its current population. Gas cost 35 cents per gallon. And the average household income in the U.S. was $8,550.

The world was mesmerized by what was happening some 238,000 miles away in July 1969. American Neil Armstrong had just become the first human to set foot on the moon, and suddenly everything seemed possible. It was a time of protest, of discovery and growing pains.

About the time of Armstrong’s triumphant stroll, a bunch of undersized football players at Poudre High School started to practice for the 1969 season. Not much was expected from the Impalas that year – especially after they were manhandled 34-8 by Arapahoe High School – in their second game of the season. They were coming off a rather lackluster 5-4-1 campaign in 1968 and, despite returning a number of players, were not supposed to challenge for the Northern Conference title, let alone state supremacy.

But three months after their humbling defeat against Arapahoe, the Impalas were holding the state championship trophy. That same bunch of undersized and largely unknown boys from Laporte, Wellington and northwest Fort Collins had shocked the Colorado football world, reeling off four improbable consecutive playoff wins and overcoming long odds to do so.

“We were the hicks from up north, and nobody in Denver expected us to do anything,” said Mike McGraw, a junior tight end/linebacker that season. “We were true underdogs – the Rodney Dangerfields of Colorado high school football. We were smaller than every other team, but we had a ton of heart and character. That’s what really made it special.”

Even midway in the season, a state championship was about the last thing anyone outside the Impalas’ locker room was thinking about. They had upset conference favorite Loveland 23-20 in Week 4, but the following week needed a heroic effort and a break or two to eke out a 14-14 tie with crosstown rival Fort Collins.

They were 3-1-1 and needing to pretty much win out to achieve their goal of reaching the playoffs.

“It takes a special series of breaks to win a state title, and we had a lot go our way,” said Bruce Clatterbaugh, the team’s star tailback. “Fort Collins had a lot of good players, and they were every bit as good as us – if not better. We had some luck that allowed us to tie that game. After that, we just sort of took off.”

While catching a few breaks certainly played a role in the title run, the Impalas had a few things going for them that had nothing to do with luck.

First, the coaching staff. Ron McClary, head coach since Poudre opened in 1964, was highly innovative and made sure his teams were always in shape and prepared. The Impala offense, which blended the triple option with an effective passing game behind quarterback Jerry Pedersen and a solid group of receivers, was extremely difficult to defend.

And McClary surrounded himself with an excellent staff.

“We really had great coaches,” said tight end Brad Jenkins, one of several juniors to play a key role in the title run. “Our offense was eclectic – a smattering of several different things. And McClary was a master at putting kids in position to succeed.

“The other coaches were excellent, too. I coached 25 years of high school football, and Keith Shader was as good a scout as any I’ve ever seen. The scouting reports he put together for us each week were phenomenal. We were always prepared for what the other team was going to do.”

Another key aspect of their success was talent. Sure, the Impalas were small – tackle Dave McGraw, all 205 pounds of him, was the biggest player on the team – but they had great team quickness and grit. Several Impalas went on to play college football, including McGraw and younger brother Mike (Wyoming), running back Rod Blackford (CSU), Clatterbaugh (Tulsa/Northern Colorado) and Jenkins (Nebraska), while Mike McGraw and Jenkins were both NFL draft picks.

Finally, a big key to the season came long before the first game. Pedersen, Blackford and Clatterbaugh – the team’s senior leaders – convinced their classmates to make a pact to swear off the party scene until the last playoff game ended. The seniors then got the juniors and sophomores to take the same oath.

“As far as I know, nobody ever broke that promise,” Pedersen said.

“We were like a band of brothers,” said Terry Danielson, a center and defensive lineman who was injured for much of the season but contributed when he could. “We had a bunch of characters and a lot of practical jokers, but we had confidence in ourselves and in each other that we were always going to find a way to win.”

The tie with Fort Collins was the final blemish on Poudre’s record that season. Eight consecutive wins followed, each more impressive than the previous one.

The playoffs opened with a home game at old Colorado Field on the Colorado State University campus against perennial powerhouse Cherry Creek and legendary coach Fred Tesone. The Bruins, ranked No. 1 in the state for much of the season, were heavy favorites but Poudre pulled out a shocking 28-17 win.

“Everyone knew Cherry Creek, and nobody thought we were going to beat them,” Jenkins said. “After we won that game, we thought we could beat anyone.”

The Impalas didn’t have to wait long to find out what the rest of the state thought of their victory. When the weekly top 10 poll came out the following week, Cherry Creek was *still* ranked ahead of Poudre.

“That really ticked us off,” Jenkins said.

Next up was Arvada, the team that replaced Creek atop the poll. Arvada had several huge linemen, included a tackle and a nose tackle checking in around 250 pounds. Poudre had never faced that kind of size – but the coaches figured out a way to get their team prepared.

“The coaches went to band practice to talk to this big kid and convinced him to come out to practice,” Clatterbaugh recalled. “This kid had never played football, but he put on the gear and he took everything we could dish out without complaining. He was a real hero.”

In an interesting twist to the Poudre tale, the Impala marching band won the CSU Band Day competition that fall – emblematic of the state championship. So, that heroic kid who volunteered to help the football team had a hand in two state titles that fall.

The Impalas managed to pull out a 14-7 win at Arvada on a dirt field that had been spray painted green. The Denver media dubbed Poudre the “giant killers” as the rest of the state finally started paying attention to the kids from up north.

Next up was a semifinal battle with Pueblo Central in Fort Collins. Pueblo Central was known for having great team speed, but the Impala defense dominated in a 21-6 victory. The key play was vintage McClary – Blackford threw a halfback pass to Pedersen for a long touchdown that changed the momentum.

The Impalas, who had been picked to lose in each of their playoff games, suddenly were one win away from the school’s first state title. They would have to travel to more than 300 miles to the western edge of the state to face Grand Junction to make it happen.

They would not go alone. Poudre football was the talk of the town – Jenkins recalled that a local concrete company had its cement mixers painted with “Go Impalas,” and the iconic El Burrito Restaurant served meal after meal to the team. When it was time for the title game, and more than 20 buses filled with fans headed west to cheer on their heroes.

“I’ll never forget the scene when we got to the stadium,” Pedersen said. “The crowd was overflowing, and most of them were from Fort Collins. The stands were completely full, and our fans were standing all around the field. It was like a home game for us.”

The Impalas jumped out to an early lead and held on for a 29-20 win. Pedersen, who had his worst game in the win over Arvada, saved his best for his final competitive football game, picking apart the Grand Junction secondary and running the option to perfection.

“Jerry was not the kind of quarterback who was going to have a big college career, but as a high school quarterback you couldn’t ask for anybody any better,” Clatterbaugh said. “Jerry was excellent in the championship game. That was the great thing about our team – somebody always had an excellent game when we needed them and pulled the rest of us along.”

 After the game, the team headed back to their Grand Junction hotel and took advantage of the unusually warm November day with a pool party. Players tossed several of the coaches into the pool – many of them fully clothed.

“It was an amazing scene – so much fun,” Danielson said.

When the team returned to Fort Collins the day after the game, cars lined the road from I-25 to the high school, honking and cheering as the buses passed by. A bonfire that night at the school was attended by most of the student body.

Reid Pope, Poudre’s longtime principal, laughed at a favorite memory. He announced at the bonfire that Monday classes were cancelled so the school could celebrate the state title.

“The only problem was that the state didn’t allow us to just cancel classes,” Pope said, still chuckling 50 years later. “But once I made the announcement, there was no way those students were coming to school the next day!”

Many of the players – particularly those who still live in Fort Collins – remain close friends. Most of them marvel at the fact no city team has won a state championship in 50 years.

There have been reunions in the past, but this one Friday night will be special. There’s a golf tournament earlier in the day, followed by a team tailgate at French Field prior to the game that night. Fittingly, Poudre will play Fort Collins, its oldest rival.

“I love those guys that I played with,” Jenkins said. “When you’re the underdogs all the way and accomplish something special like winning the state title, you develop a very strong bond. I’ll never forget those guys.”

Pedersen, who retired after a long career as a teacher in the Jeffco School District, never did play college football so he truly ended his playing career on top. He said he thinks about those days often.

“Want to hear something funny? I still get chills when I hear that Poudre fight song,” he said with a chuckle. “When I look back, I’m still so proud of our team and what we accomplished. We didn’t have any stars but we played for each other, and that’s what made it so special.

“It’s hard to believe it’s been 50 years, but I already know what it will feel like when we get together: It will feel like we were never apart. We’ll have that same team unity. I love that about our team. Honestly, there’s no greater feeling than being part of something like that.”