

60TH Anniversary of Oak Ridge High School's first state championship (As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on May 8, 2012)

The series of stories I am about to bring you comes courtesy of Jack Bailey. He approached me a few months ago asking if I realized there was a significant Oak Ridge 60th anniversary coming soon? Of course, I had no idea what he was talking about, but I knew if Jack was bringing it to me it would be good! It is! You are about to celebrate the very first Oak Ridge High School state championship.

This first in the series is written by Bobby Copeland.

"The 1951-52 school year was the first for students at the current high school, and it was the first year for a Wildcat team to win a state championship in any sport. Coach Ben Martin pulled a major coup when he persuaded the TSSAA to hold the state track meet on the recently completed ORHS cinder track. Martin was not even certain the track would be in good enough condition to hold such an event when he was awarded the meet.

"Martin was not only optimistic about the upcoming track season, when training began in late winter of 1952, he was enthusiast and stated with a smile, 'We have a host of returning lettermen in the track and the weight events. Our strength will be in the relays, the 440, and half-mile and mile runs, but we expect a lot of points in the dashes, as well as the javelin and the broad jump. Some help may come from newcomers in the high jump and the hurdles. If everything falls in place, we could have a good team.'

"Martin's words proved to be prophetic. Of course the talent was there, but it was up to Coach Martin to train and select the athletes best fitted for the events to make up a winning team. Martin was always partial to the relays, and his choice of participants for these events proved to be perfect. And team could not have had better leadership than that provided by co-captains Gene Gardner and Jack Horton.

PAVING THE WAY FOR A CHAMPIONSHIP

"The Cats showed signs of what was to come when they easily overpowered the visiting Knoxville Fulton squad 81-51 in their first meet. Despite early morning showers and a brisk wind, the home team posted some good times, while winning all the relays. Other winners were David Griffith (100 yard dash), Gene Gardner (440), Jack Horton (half-mile), Richard Reece (mile), Don Lynch (javelin), Dick Spears (shot put), Jimmy Adams (pole vault), and Don Lynch (javelin).

"A short time later, the team overpowered several opponents to capture the prestigious Knoxville Relays at Evans-Collins by tallying 32 points – almost double that of its nearest opponent. Paving the way for victory were wins in the 440, two-mile, mile, and medley relay teams, Dave Griffith was the leading scorer with a win in the 100 yard dash and a participant on the three relays.

"The next meet was at night – the first night meet to be held at Blankenship field. The Cats showed vast improvement as they pounded Knoxville East by nearly a 60 point margin of victory. Griffith was the leading scorer capturing two first places, and a third. He was followed by Don Lynch with two first place finishes. Gene Gardner tied his own school and track record, and the mile relay team also bettered the track record.

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"Coach Martin, seeking stiffer completion, sought to enter the team in the highly-acclaimed Baylor relays in Chattanooga. But he was turned down because the TSSAA high school teams are not allowed to compete with prep schools because of the eligibility of graduates.

"Unsuccessful at getting into the Baylor Relays, Martin decided to take the team to Kingsport in, what was supposed to be, a triangular with Kingsport and Johnson City, but the latter was a no-show. The meet was not even close as the Cardinal and Grey posted a 95 ½ - to 36 ½ win.

"The sensation of the meet was All-American grid performer Dave Griffith, who sprinted the 100 yard dash in 9.9 seconds. Teammate Sam Clinton related an interesting story about Griffith's time. Clinton was told that the starter began timing by the sound of the gun rather the gun's smoke, which would probably have added a couple of tenths to Griffith time. Regardless, the 9.9 still stands as an ORHS record.

"Griffith and Lynch were again the leading scorers. The mile relay team led by Jack Horton, Sam Clinton, Frank Blackistone and Gene Gardner posted its best time of the season, as did the two-mile relay team composed of Clinton, Richard Reece, Bobby Parsons and Ronnie Davis.

"By the fourth meet (a triangular meet with Chattanooga Center and Knoxville East), the locals were in rounding into peak physical condition and rolled over their opponents by some 50 points. Griffith reached his highest total of the season by scoring 15 ¼ points, and in the process set a new track record in covering the 100 yard dash in 10.1 seconds. Lynch continued to win mastery of the javelin and broad jump.

With the Regional looming near, Coach Martin received some distressing news when he learned ace half-miler Richard "Footsie" Reece would miss the Regional and the State meet because of a conflicting date with a more pressing matter. Reece had posted one of the state's best times in the half-mile; he also anchored the two-mile relay team. Losing Reece was a severe blow to the team and forced Martin to reshuffle some events.

"The Wildcats took nearly every honor possible at Evans-Collins field in Knoxville as they swept to a landslide win at the East Tennessee Regional meet. It was the first Regional victory in the school's short history. Fourteen teams participated in the event.

"ORHS won seven first places, one in the dashes, three in the field, and three relays, out-scoring the second and third teams combined. Individual first place winners were Lynch (javelin and broad jump), Gene Gardner (440) and Bob Hazlett (discus). The Cats also captured three relays: 880 (Frank Blackistone, Lowell Wilson, Freddie Carter and Dave Griffith); mile (Jack Horton, Sam Clinton, Frank Blackistone and Gene Gardner); two-mile (Bobby Parsons, Sam Clinton Max Kirtland and Jack Horton).

THE STATE CHAMPIONSHIP

"It was not a good day for man or beast, and certainly not a good day to hold a state track championship: heavy rains and high winds knocked out the electric service at the high school and cut power to the public address system until late afternoon. The resulting soggy track also slowed the runners considerably, and made the field event hazardous. The gloomy sky cut down the expected size of the crowd, though many turned out later in the day. Still it was the largest crowd (some 2000) ever to witness a state meet.

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"Even with the horrible weather, and competing against the state's premier track athletes, the Wildcats were undaunted and set out in workmanlike fashion in search of the state title. When the meet ended the locals had amassed 38 points in a runaway victory. The closest competitor (Memphis Whitehaven) only tallied 22 points.

"All the local athletes performed admirably. The Cats took five first places, including three relays, three second places; one third, tied for another; one fourth place and tied for another. The winning 880 – yard relay team had Lowell Wilson, Frank Blackistone, Freddie Carter and Dave Griffith. The mile relay was composed of Jack Horton, Sam Clinton, Blackistone and Gene Gardner. The two-mile relay featured Bobby Parsons, Clinton, Max Kirtland and Horton.

"Gene Gardner accomplished what he set out to do – break the state record in the 440 dash. The race was close for awhile, but once on the straightaway, the speedster sprinted away from his competitors and breasted the tape in 51 seconds flat. No doubt, but for the sloppy track, the mark would have been under 50 seconds.

"The only other individual winner was Don Lynch with a broad jump of 21 feet, $\frac{3}{4}$ inch. Lynch also added a second place in the javelin to become the Wildcat high scorer. His failure to win the javelin was the biggest upset of the day. He had previously thrown the spear some 12 feet more than the winning toss. Irritated at losing his favorite event, Lynch proclaimed to one and all that he would win the broad jump – he was true to his word.

"Lynch was spurred on by assistant coach Jake Methvin when the coach pulled out a \$5 bill and placed in the pit and said, 'Son, if you hit this you'll be the winner.' To which Lynch replied, 'Coach I'll do my darndest.' Lynch did hit the \$5 bill and Methvin let him keep it.

"Obviously, because of stricter TSSAA regulations, the \$5 bill could not be placed in the jumping pit today, and certainly an athlete cannot be monetarily rewarded.

"Others scoring points for the Ridgers that day include Clyde Nunn, Jimmy Adams, Bill Grubb, Ronnie Taylor, Bob Hazlett.

"Upon receiving the large championship trophy the Wildcat squad reacted with jubilation, and a proud Coach Martin beamed, "I've worked for the last eight years for this to happen."

"Even after being crowned champions, it was probably some years before it really dawned on the athletes that they were part of the initial state championship of any kind for the Oak Ridge High School Wildcats.

"Here are some quotes from team members:

"Gene Gardner: 'The thing I remember about Coach Martin most was his drive to win and if you didn't then resolve to win the next time you faced the same team or opponent. He hated mistakes--small or large. He searched for anything that would give him an edge over his opponents. I liked Coach Martin very much -- he was a good man, in every way.

'We won every meet in 1952 because we had a lot of good athletes. Going into the state meet, I was very determined when it came to the 440. I had finished 2nd my sophomore and junior years. I wanted to make sure I won it in my last shot.

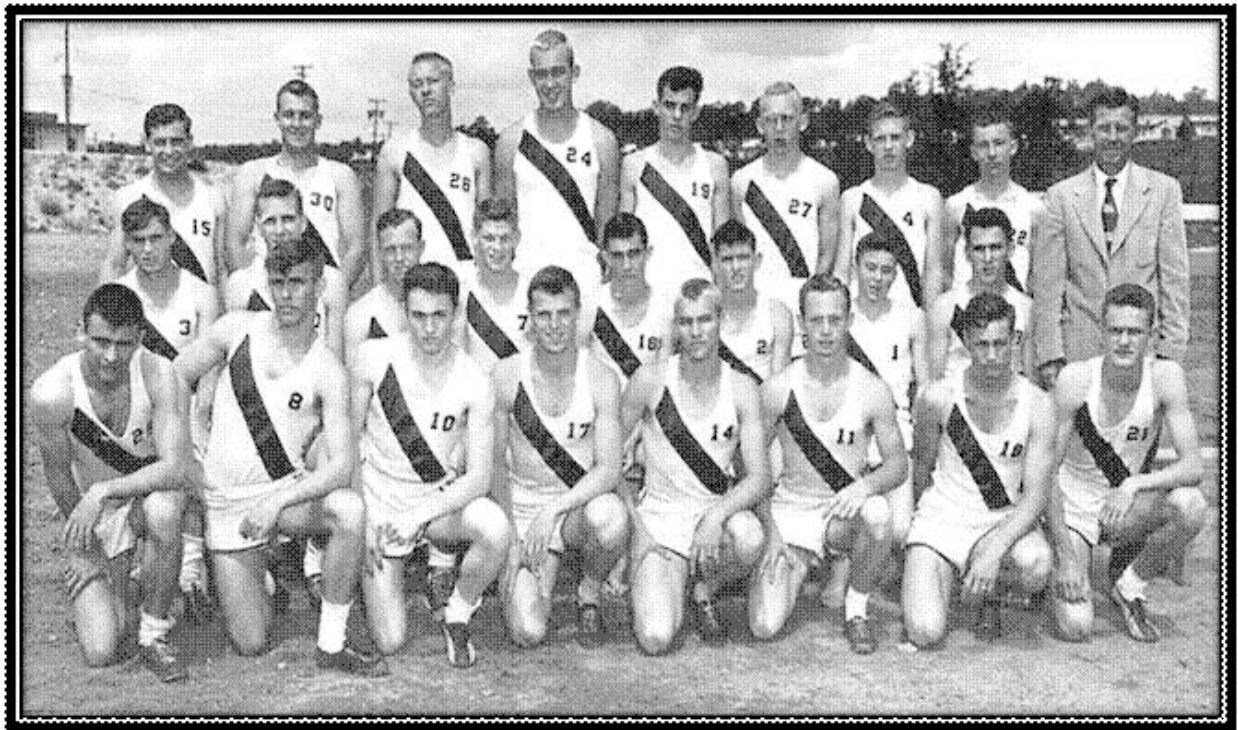
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"Bobby Copeland 'I had the greatest respect for Coach Ben Martin. He was a gentleman, and one of the most respected coaches and teachers to ever work at ORHS.

"1952 was my first year on the team. Unfortunately, my fourth place finish in the Regional high jump did not qualify me for the state meet but I do recall that, after the team's performance in the Knoxville Relays, I knew we were a force to be reckoned with in Tennessee high school track. However, because it was early in the season, I don't think any of the athletes had given a thought to winning a state championship. Although I did not get to participate in the state meet as an athlete, I did get to officiate the high jump.

"My thanks goes to Sam Clinton, Gene Gardner, Bobbie Martin (Don Lynch's niece), Jack Bailey, and the late Bill Greer for their help with this article. – Bobby Copeland

Thank you Bobby for an excellent recap of that phenomenal first Oak Ridge High School state championship in any sport!



Coach Ben Martin's first of seven championship teams

Front row (from left): Gene Gardner, Lowell Wilson, Jack Horton, Dave Griffith, Don Lynch, Freddie Carter, Bobby Parsons, Ron Taylor;

2nd row: Bill Grubb, Frank Blackistone, Wes Delaney, Jim Adams, Bill Talley, Bobby Copeland, Howard Moon, Bryce Hammes;

Back row: Lonnie Grubb, Dick Spears, Frank Wright, Bob Hazlett, Richard Reece, Sam Clinton, Ronnie Davis, Max Kirkland, coach Ben Martin.

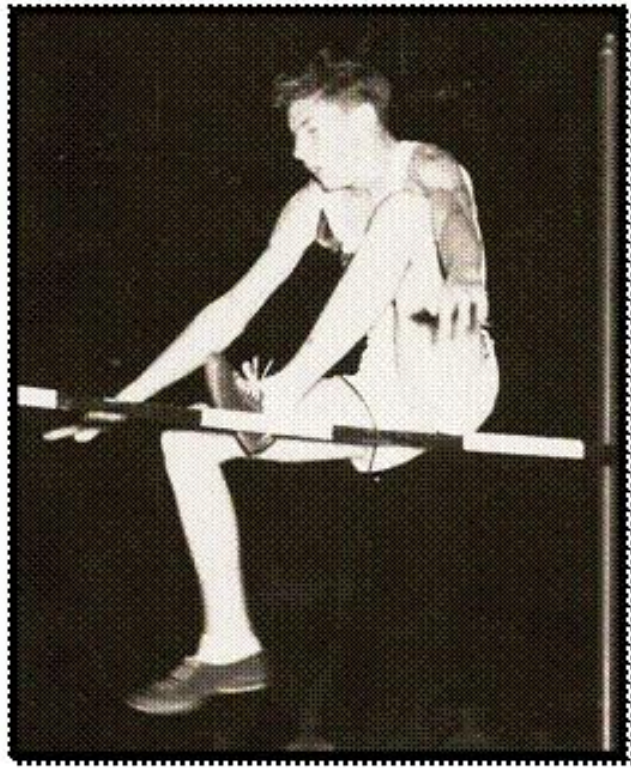
(Now deceased: Dave Griffith, Bobby Parsons, Bill Grubb, Freddie Carter, Bryce Hammes, Frank Wright, and Coach Ben Martin.)

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Gene Gardner anchors the winning mile relay.
Earlier he had broken the state record in the 440 yard dash

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Bobby Copeland – ORHS vs. Knox. East 1952 –
the first night meet ever held at Blankenship Field.