

Coach Joe Gaddis and “The Penny Lady”

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on July 15, 2013)

On March 18, 2013, something that may become one of the most unusual events in Oak Ridge football history occurred with little fanfare, but if Coach Joe Gaddis has his way, more fanfare will soon return to the Atomic City surrounding Oak Ridge High School football. Gaddis accepted the offer to return to Oak Ridge to take the reins of the Oak Ridge High School Football program as Head Coach, for a second time. Coach Gaddis officially began his second term as Head Coach of Oak Ridge High School's football team on March 18, 2013.

It was 15 years ago that he left Oak Ridge in 1998 after 11 seasons with a record of 119-24. He had more wins than any coach in Oak Ridge High School history. Joe Gaddis is known to have been a coach who used unbridled enthusiasm and created excitement to produce what Mike Blakerby, writing in the Knoxville News Sentinel on March 4, 2013, has called a “fiery brand of coaching.”

Robert Holder quoted Bob Smallridge in *The Oak Ridger*, March 5, 2013, as saying, “‘In my interview and talks with him, I see pretty much the same Joe Gaddis that I saw in 1988,’ said Smallridge, who retired as school superintendent but was also back again at the time of Gaddis being hired — serving the school system as interim school superintendent. ‘He is very enthusiastic and I think he will do a super job again. I don’t see any diminution of his intensity.’”

Holder also quoted Mike Mullins, Oak Ridge High School Athletic Director, in that same *Oak Ridger* article, “During the search process, it was our goal to find somebody who could embrace and carry on the storied tradition of Oak Ridge football. Joe Gaddis is the embodiment of everything we were looking for in a head coach. He has a proven record of state championship success at Oak Ridge as a head coach. His energy, passion and charisma is going to motivate our student athletes, alumni, faculty and community.”

I met Joe when he spoke to two of the Rotary clubs in Oak Ridge. His talks resonated with joy at being able to return to what he stated as, “the best high school football job in Tennessee.” He cited Oak Ridge's enviable record of winning state championships in the '50s, '60s, '70s, '80s, '90s and observed that Oak Ridge was just eight points away from winning a state championship back in 2005. He pointed out that the current decade isn't up yet, obviously inferring that there is still time for Oak Ridge to win a state championship in the 2010 decade.

In each of his talks, Joe has stressed his style of enthusiastic coaching, his intense desire to see the Oak Ridge community “fired up” and showing what he knows is still here - a passion for football. He wants to include as many students as possible in the program. He is already reaching out to the students drawing them into what he describes as an “exciting” football program that “you don't want to miss.”

He has already spoken to the community civic organizations numerous times and has been interviewed by local media on several occasions. But most importantly he is busy building his football program from his coaching staff to recruiting players. He truly does think it is important to have a large squad and has already expanded greatly the number of players on the team.

Joe does not hesitate to express his pleasure at getting a second chance to be a part of what he considers the greatest high school football tradition in Tennessee. He openly states his intention to be here at Oak Ridge longer than he was the first time and to take Oak Ridge High School football to even greater success.

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At 60 years old, with 30 years of experience coaching high school football, he has succeeded in many schools and improved the programs in every one. However, the chance to return to Oak Ridge seems to truly be a dream come true for Joe Gaddis.

Joe fondly tells the story of “the penny lady,” knowing instinctively that such human interest stories stick with audiences and convey his intentions for Oak Ridge football better than citing statistics or making rash promises. The story tugs at the audience’s heart strings because it is so close to Joe’s heart and he is sincerely attracted to the concept of pennies being given to him for good luck.

You see, Joe, like many coaches, is extremely superstitious, as you will see when I tell you the real “penny lady” story that goes well beyond what Joe tells to his audiences. He focuses on his perspective of getting a “lucky penny” for each game. He already has one for the season opening Farragut game. It is tucked away safely in an envelope in his desk. The “Penny Lady” has already given it to him!

I hope he remembers to take it with him. Why is that so important? Well, in my research into the story of the Penny Lady, I learned of a time when Joe realized, while on the football field and right when a game was about to start, that he had forgotten the penny given him for that game...the lucky penny. It was in his office. Well, he was fit to be tied. He HAD to have that penny, right then!

He could not start the game without that penny. With much exasperation, he sent a member of his staff back to his office to get that penny. When it was brought to him, the sweat seemed to slow and he could begin to concentrate on the game. The “Penny Lady’s husband,” Jim Keen, told me this story. He said he personally watched it unfold.

Let me introduce you to Catherine (Cathe) Keen, the real “Penny Lady.” She is a jewel. Her mobility is extremely limited now because of her chronic illness, but her spirit is undaunted and her unfailing support for Oak Ridge High School football remains as high as it was when she dutifully took a “found penny” to Coach Gaddis every Thursday for years while he coached here the first time.

Coach Gaddis remembered the “Penny Lady” and asked about her as soon as he returned to Oak Ridge, never expecting to find her again. But as luck would have it, while having dinner at Dean’s Bakery and Restaurant in Jackson Square with the Laytons, he told them how much those pennies meant to him. Don and Mary Layton happened to know just who the penny lady was and at that very moment Jim Keen, the penny lady’s husband was walking out of Dean’s.

They said to Joe, “well, there is her husband.” Joe was awestruck...he had to know if she would give him those pennies again. But he did not know just how to ask. However, being the outgoing person that he is, Joe approached the penny lady’s husband anyway.

Of course, Jim knew exactly who Joe Gaddis was and was glad to see him. He told Joe as much, but he had bad news for Joe. It seems that in the years that Joe had been gone from Oak Ridge, the penny lady had become disabled with the horrible crippling chronic illness known as multiple sclerosis and was no longer mobile. But Joe insisted, he would find a way to make those lucky pennys happen again. He HAD to!

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So, Joe found out where the lady who had given him lucky pennies years ago lived and decided to go see her personally. When he went in the house the first thing he saw was that she was sitting in her chair, lovingly arranged by her husband, Jim, for her comfort. She sat directly in front of the large screen TV with a laptop computer on a lap desk. Joe immediately noticed something special to him...she was drinking from an Oak Ridge Championship cup! Her cheerful smile greeted him and she welcomed him to her home and back to Oak Ridge. Joe was delighted, he had found his “Penny Lady!”

Soon the conversation turned to those “found pennies” and Joe asked her if she would consider continuing the tradition of providing him lucky pennies for each game. She lowered her head and tears came to her eyes. “I can’t be the ‘penny lady’ anymore because I can’t bring you the pennies.” Joe quickly said, “I will come to your house each week and get them – would that be okay?” He really wanted those lucky pennies.

Cathe agreed, knowing she truly wanted to do it again, but until Joe offered to come to her, she did not know how she could do it. So the tradition continues. Cathe has already given Joe a penny for the Farragut game and even given him a shiny new penny for good luck for the entire 2013 season. Joe has both pennies in special places in his office. Now, he just has to remember to take the Farragut one with him the night of the game.

Interestingly enough the 2013 season opener is the same as the opener in 1988, Farragut. Only this one is played at Farragut. So is the second game the same as 1988, it is against Clinton. Joe thinks it is exciting to see the schedules repeat. He sees the future as bright and is anxious to get going with the season. Especially now that he has found his “penny lady” and has his lucky pennies all lined up.

Part of my agreement with Joe to write this *Historically Speaking* column about his return to Oak Ridge was to go meet the “penny lady” to get more details on her story. Joe really wanted to see that be a large part of the story.

So, I stopped by her home as was welcomed at the door by Jim Keen, her loving husband. I was immediately impressed with the look in his eyes when I asked if this was the home of the “penny lady.” I was even more excited when he escorted me into the living room where she spends the majority of her time in a special chair with things she needs placed by Jim to always be close at hand.

The room is obviously where she and Jim spend a lot of hours. The computer is there, the TV is connected to the computer. He showed me photographs of Cathe and Coach Joe Gaddis when she was “helping him coach” by giving him pennies and also, obviously, giving him her opinion about something. The photo accompanies this article and you can see she is giving the coach a piece of her mind.

I learned the real story of all those “found pennies” that had to be found face up or they did not contain the luck Coach Gaddis needed. Think on that a bit, 143 pennies, one for each game, found face up and given to Coach Gaddis. Now she is doing it again!

Here is how it really began. Coach Gaddis remembers the sentiment, the feelings he felt and the support Cathe obviously had for him and the football program, but he does not remember the details. Jim and Cathe certainly do.

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It was halftime at the Farragut game in 1988 when Jim Keen (not Cathe) gave Coach Gaddis that first lucky “found” penny. It was done quietly with no attention brought to it. Jim just handed it to the coach and said “for good luck.”

Jim and Cathe talked about that penny and they decided that Cathe would take up the practice and would be the one who searched for pennies at work. She was a nurse and it seemed that pennies just began to show up frequently, heads up! She soon had a collection of them and started going to the school on Thursday’s after work and giving a penny to the coach. She began to feel she was doing something important, I gathered from hearing her tell of the experience.

Jim had started it all, but Cathe was now taking it to a higher level of responsibility. She felt she HAD to provide that penny each and every week and she did. It was a labor of love. She would call in on the Coach’s radio program and just generally became a vocal and strong supporter of Coach Gaddis and the Oak Ridge High School football program. And most importantly, she gave the coach his lucky penny EVERY SINGLE WEEK!

Jim and Cathe had two daughters who went through Oak Ridge Schools and now have a grandson in Jefferson Middle School and two other younger grandsons. They remain ardent supporters of Oak Ridge schools.

Here is what Jim said about Coach Gaddis: “Let me tell you how much Coach Gaddis impressed Cathe and me when he first started coaching at Oak Ridge. I recall we always came early and waited outside the upper gate so we could get a good seat. It was always a rush to get and save seats. The first game he coached we were seated and chatting with some of our friends and regulars before the game when Coach Gaddis worked his way up in the bleachers chatting and thanking each fan for coming. In all my years at Oak Ridge High School Football games had I ever seen a coach that was that interested in seeing that each and every fan he greeted was made to feel welcome. He even came and greeted us in a rain storm once.”

Jim continued, “I sure hope that he can generate renewed interest in Oak Ridge High School football again. To us he was the best and we were really saddened to see him leave. When he left the Penny Lady retired even though the next coach wanted her to continue. It just wasn’t the same for Cathe and she declined.” But the Penny Lady is back with Joe now!

Some of you may recall Mary Keen, Jim’s mother, as a champion in fishing rodeos. She and her husband E. J. came to Oak Ridge in 1944. She began fishing with E. J. and really liked it. She became really good at it. In fact, she won fishing rodeos in 1960, 1961 and 1963 and brought home three shiny new fancy fishing boats!

She was written up in Evan Mean’s outdoor column as a fishing phenomenon. She wrote articles for Field and Stream magazine. But when her beloved E. J. died in 1969, she gave up fishing and all that went with it, even refusing an interview with a national magazine. That part of her life died with E. J.

So, now you know the full story of Coach Joe Gaddis’ Penny Lady. She and Jim are glad to be a part of Coach’s return to Oak Ridge. She is already collecting those “found” pennies for each game. Joe is committed to going to her house weekly to pick up his “lucky penny.” He is determined to bring the

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passion back to Oak Ridge High School football and I, for one, think he will do it...don't you? I think we are in for more winning seasons and even more championships...GO JOE!



Oak Ridge High School coach Joe Gaddis is interviewed during a recent KFOA Media Day held at the Three Ridges Golf Course in Knoxville



Coach Joe Gaddis speaks to the Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary Club creating excitement, enthusiasm and support for his passion – a winning Oak Ridge High School football program

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Cathe Keen, the “Penny Lady,” is seen speaking boisterously with Coach Joe Gaddis before a game and Joe is obviously listening!