

Oak Ridge High School Wins Its First State Football Championship in 1956 (2016 marks 60 years since the first championship)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on November 4, 2016)

This recap of the first state football championship in Oak Ridge High School history was supplied by Jack Bailey. Jack has previously provided stories about minor league baseball in Oak Ridge (1948 Oak Ridge Bombers and 1954 Oak Ridge Pioneers), ORHS State Champions basketball season of 1961, ORHS State Champions basketball season of 1963 and the Track and Field Dynasty of Oak Ridge High School and its seven State Champion seasons of 1952, 1953, 1956, 1957, 1958, 1961 and 1962, as well a story about his own extensive sports memorabilia collection. The link to the Historically Speaking column about Jack's collection is: <http://smithdray1.net/historicallyspeaking/2009/6-23-09%20Jack%20Bailey.pdf> Other stories from Jack can be found at: <http://smithdray1.net/historicallyspeaking/archive.html>

If you want to follow up on this story, Jack can also be reached at jbaileyjr@aol.com

Many thanks, also, to Larry Richardson (ORHS Class of 1957) who provided copies of newspaper accounts from the 1956 season and much, much more. Pictures were taken from the 1957 Oak Log, the ORHS annual yearbook.

Here is Jack's recap:

Oak Ridge High School fielded its first football team in 1943. The team played four games, lost them all and failed to score a single point. The very first game was played on November 10, 1943, and ORHS lost to Clinton HS by a score of 20-0. Oak Ridge had a very young team. Only six senior boys in the graduating class of 1944 and only three of them played football.

From that inauspicious debut season, Oak Ridge gradually developed into a state power. Ferris Bynum was the first head coach and he was called into military service as soon as the 1943 season ended. Ben Martin served as his assistant and then served as the head coach from 1944-47. Martin was elevated to Athletic Director after the 1947 season and Buist Warren, a former Tennessee Vol, succeeded him as coach for the 1948-51 seasons, compiling a record of 30 wins, 10 losses and 2 ties.

Another former Vol, John Francis, was the head coach from 1952-54 and further elevated the program with a record of 23-3-3.

Jack Armstrong, a native of Lenoir City who played for Tennessee in the late 1940's, was an assistant coach under Francis and became the new head coach for the 1955 season. Armstrong, along with Assistant Coach Don Bordinger, still another Tennessee Vol, took the ORHS football program to new heights. Armstrong was the head coach from 1955-1968 and compiled a record of 105-28-5, winning state championships along the way in 1956, 1958 (and a mythical National Championship), 1961 and 1962.

The 1955 team, Armstrong's first as head coach, paved the way for the great success that was to follow in 1956. The 1955 team finished the season at 8-1-1, losing only to Nashville Isaac Litton. Oak Ridge lost only one game each season from 1952-55 and three of those losses were inflicted by the Isaac Litton Lions. It was Oak Ridge's greatest rivalry in the early to mid-'50's.

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One of the stalwarts of the 1955 team was Don Stephens, who was the wingback in the Wildcat's single-wing offense. Tennessee head coach Bowden Wyatt reportedly commented that if Oak Ridge would move Stephens to tailback for the 1956 season, they could have a great season. With the graduation of tailbacks Carlos Brooks and Devane Chapman, the 1956 season opened with Stephens at tailback. Stephens was selected as Team Captain and Gerald Bryant was the Alternate Captain.

The first game of the season was played at Blankenship Field in Oak Ridge against LaFollette. The Owls were overwhelmed, 46-2. Stephens opened the scoring with a brilliant 64 yard run in the first quarter. By game's end, seven different Wildcats had scored---Stephens, Jackie Pope, Sam Weir, Bobo Herring, Gene Berkau, Mike Simmons and David Fitchpatrick.

Next up was Knoxville East, again played at Blankenship Field. Oak Ridge dominated once more, winning comfortably by a score of 34-6. An estimated 6000 fans were in attendance on a warm September night. Oak Ridge's superior depth wore down the Mountaineers and Oak Ridge broke open the game in the second half.

Junior wingback Bobo Herring had an outstanding game, scoring one touchdown and having two others called back, one by penalty and one by going out of bounds on his way to the end zone. Don Stephens took the second half opening kickoff 83 yards for a td and fullback Jack Shelton had a touchdown scamper of 62 yards to end the third quarter.

Oak Ridge then played its third straight game at home, this time blanking Knoxville Fulton, 34-0, in front of an estimated 4,500 fans. Fulton was supposed to be the class of Knoxville teams but as so often happened when Oak Ridge played Knoxville teams in the 1950's, it was not even close.

The Wildcats showed improved blocking in the line and a stiffer defense than in previous games. Don Stephens had a standout night, throwing four touchdown passes and running for another score. Oak Ridge maintained its #2 ranking in the state.

The Wildcats traveled to Athens, TN, for their first away game of the year. The 'Cats thoroughly outplayed the McMinn County Cherokees, winning easily by a score of 49-6. An estimated crowd of 4,000 saw the visitors dominate on both sides of the ball.

Senior Tackle Leland Jones played a brilliant game on defense, particularly in the second half. Oak Ridge outgained McMinn County in total yardage of 490 yards to only 115 yards for the home team. Don Stephens had the longest touchdown run of the evening, going 63 yards for a td early in the third quarter. McMinn County's only score came on a 1-yard plunge by Jim Cartwright, later a teammate of Don Stephens at The University of Tennessee.

Next up was another away game against vaunted Isaac Litton of Nashville. By the time the game was over, Litton was convinced that Oak Ridge had the best team in the state of Tennessee. The Wildcats overpowered the Nashville squad, 46-13, before a crowd of approximately 7500. Tailback Don Stephens put on a dazzling passing performance, throwing for 242 yards and four touchdowns.

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David Fitchpatrick caught one td pass and Gene Berkau hauled in three scores for the 'Cats. Mike Simmons picked up a Litton fumble and returned it 72 yards for another score. It was Litton's worst defeat since 1950. The game marked the Wildcats' 5th straight win of the season and 8th in a row since their loss to Litton midway through the 1955 campaign. Isaac Litton coach Bill Harris was quoted as saying, "They'll have to prove to me that Oak Ridge isn't state champion. They certainly convinced me. I don't believe I've ever seen a high school offense as good as they had tonight." Oak Ridge coach Jack Armstrong added, "We're not that big but we've got good speed and the kids like to hit. And, this Stephens is a great boy."

At this point in the season, only three mediocre Knoxville schools and Chattanooga Central stood in the way of Oak Ridge claiming its first state championship in football.

The following week, Oak Ridge returned home to host Knoxville West. On a muddy Blankenship Field, Oak Ridge raced to a 33-0 lead at halftime and went on to record a 47-0 shutout. According to one newspaper account of the game, the score could have easily been 94-0! Coach Armstrong pulled most of his starters after the first quarter and let reserves play the rest of the game.

Don Stephens scored on the first offensive play of the game with a 59-yard touchdown run. Sophomore tailback Jackie Pope gave an indication of things to come in 1957 and 1958 by scoring three times and Paul Huray scored on a 42-yard punt return.

For game #7, Oak Ridge traveled to Knoxville to take on the Young High School Yellowjackets. In a Knoxville News-Sentinel column by noted sports writer Frank "Red" Bailes, Coach Armstrong was quoted, "I think this is probably the fastest team we've had in the five years I have been at Oak Ridge. We are blessed with good versatility and have more speed man for man than any team I've seen.

We can run or throw from the left or right. I think that's the answer to what success we've enjoyed." (ed. note: Oak Ridge was fortunate to have two left-handed wingbacks--- Bobo Herring and Bailey Pullen---who could run left and pass or run depending on the situation.) He went on to compliment Assistant Coach Don Bordinger, who played on Tennessee's National Championship team in 1951, "

We've had some good breaks come our way but I feel we've made most of them. Don has those linemen tackling viciously. They're doing a great job up front."

Oak Ridge drubbed Young by a margin of 35-0 before a capacity crowd estimated at 4500, with seemingly half of them from Oak Ridge. Because of inclement weather the game was moved from Friday night to Saturday. Sam Weir and Freddie Ware led the defenders and Skippy Brinkman, Ray Whited, Leland Jones and David Fitchpatrick had outstanding defensive games, as well. Young slowed

down the Wildcats' passing attack but wingback Bobo Herring scored twice on wingback reverses. Stephens had 166 yards rushing and added a 47 yard punt return for a td.

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Facing perennial rival Chattanooga Central on Blankenship Field in week # 8, the Wildcats found themselves trailing early in the game but fought back for a 21-14 lead at halftime. Oak Ridge tallied two more scores in the fourth period to top the Purple Pounders by a final score of 34-14.

The win all but wrapped up the 'Cats first state championship in football as well as their first undefeated, untied season. Only heavy underdog Knox Rule HS stood in the way. The crowd for the Chattanooga Central game was about 6,500, and they witnessed the most exciting game of the year.

The game saw three lead changes during the first half and Oak Ridge finally went ahead for good with only 39 seconds left in the second quarter when tailback Don Stephens connected with end Mike Simmons on a 63-yard pass play.

Central, led by famed coach "Red" Etter fought valiantly but Oak Ridge's superior conditioning paid off in the 4th quarter and put the game out of reach. Coach Etter's son, Gene Etter, was the Purple Pounder quarterback and later another teammate of Stephens at Tennessee.

In the final game of the season, Oak Ridge hosted Knox Rule and completely overwhelmed the visitors, 48-0. It was the fourth shutout of the season for the vaunted Oak Ridge defense. Don Stephens went 55 yards for one score, Bailey Pullen covered 49 yards for another score and Jackie Pope scored three times. When the game ended, the players carried coaches Armstrong and Bordinger off the field on their shoulders in celebration.

The poll that counted in that era was the Litkenhous Title, by Dr. E. E. Litkenhous of Nashville. Oak Ridge (power rating 113.8) was selected as state champion by a wide margin over Nashville MBA (Montgomery Bell Academy)(104.4) and Cookeville (97.7) in the final poll. As stated earlier, it was the first state football championship for Oak Ridge. The only other prior state championships won by Oak Ridge were in Track and Field in 1952, 1953 and 1956.

Since that first title, Oak Ridge has gone on to win state football championships in 1958, 1961, 1962, 1975, 1979, 1980 and 1991. Oak Ridge has an impressive 42 state championships overall in all sports, boys and girls included.

Tailback Don Stephens recorded 926 rushing yards and 929 passing yards for the 1956 season. His 16 touchdown passes were the most ever for a single wing tailback in ORHS history. Sophomore tailback Jackie Pope added 513 rushing yards and 198 passing yards.

In post-season honors, Stephens was named All-East Tennessee, All-State, All-Southern and All-American. The Wigwam Wisemen of America named Stephens as a member of its National High School All America All-Stars. Wigwam was a highly respected organization and it was a very prestigious award for Stephens. Earlier Wildcats who were accorded the same honor were Jim Grubb and Gale Helton.

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Sam (Sambo) Weir was named second team All-State. Weir had a terrific season, playing fullback on offense and tackle and linebacker on defense. He also handled the extra point kicking duties. All-State Honorable Mention went to Ends Gene Berkau and Mike Simmons, as well as to Guard Fred Mitchell.

Six players on the 1956 squad were recognized as being in "The Top 100" players in Oak Ridge High School history, based on columns in the now defunct *The Oak Ridge Observer* by writer Mike Blackerby in 2008.

They were as follows:

- # 90---Skippy Brinkman (1956-58) who later played for Ole Miss
- # 59---Don Stephens (1954-56) who later played for Tennessee
- # 41---Howard Dunnebacke (1956-58) who later played for Kentucky
- # 34---Larry Richards (1956-58) who later played for Tennessee
- # 18---Mike Brady (1956-58) who later played for Brigham Young University
- # 1---Jackie Pope (1956-58) who later played for Tennessee and Middle Tennessee State University

All six of the ORHS legends are in the Oak Ridge Sports Hall of Fame , as are Head Coach Jack Armstrong and Assistant Coach Don Bordinger. The Senior Class of 1956 compiled a won-loss record of 26-2 for their Sophomore-Junior and Senior years. The Senior Class of 1958 compiled a record of 27-2 for their same three years.

"Let's Roll, Wildcats, Roll!!!"

Thanks Jack, for another great reminder of the historic first championship football team of Oak Ridge High School!

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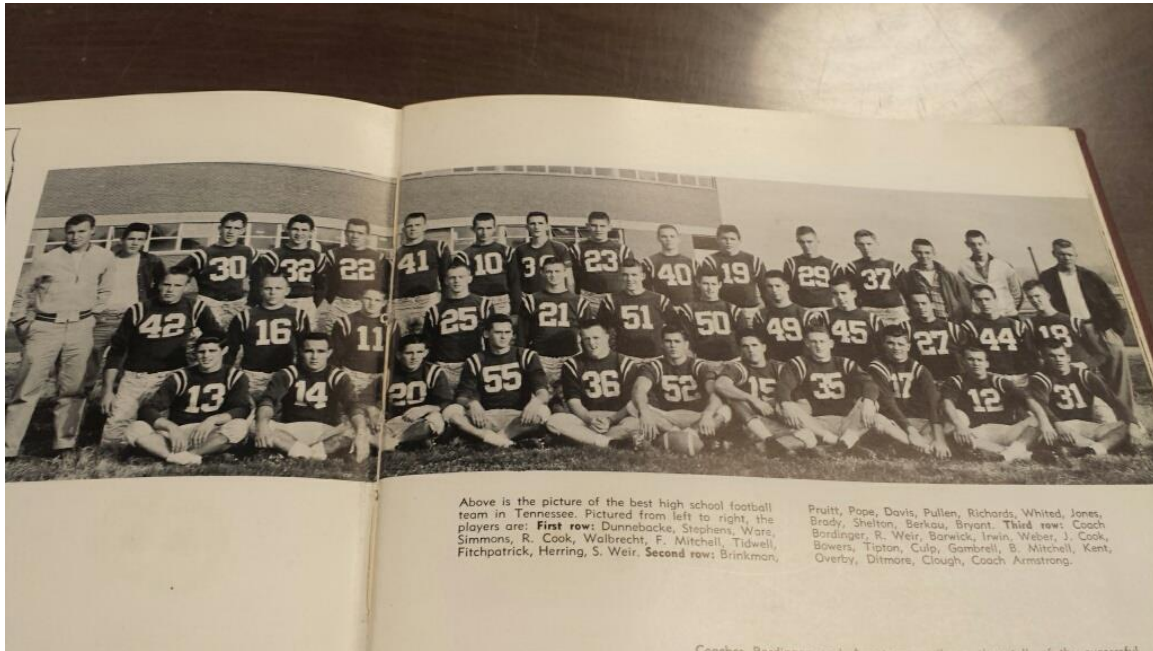
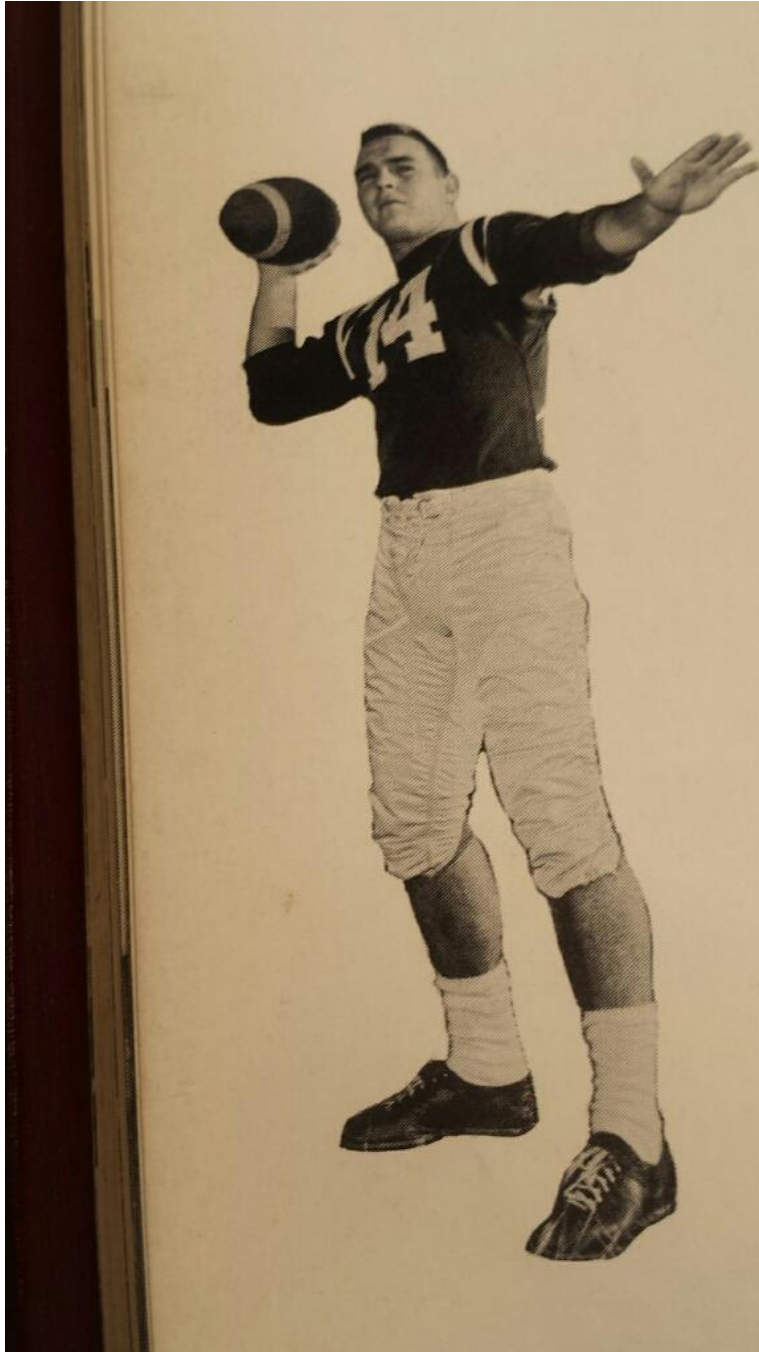


Photo of the 1956 Tennessee State Championship Oak Ridge High School Football Team

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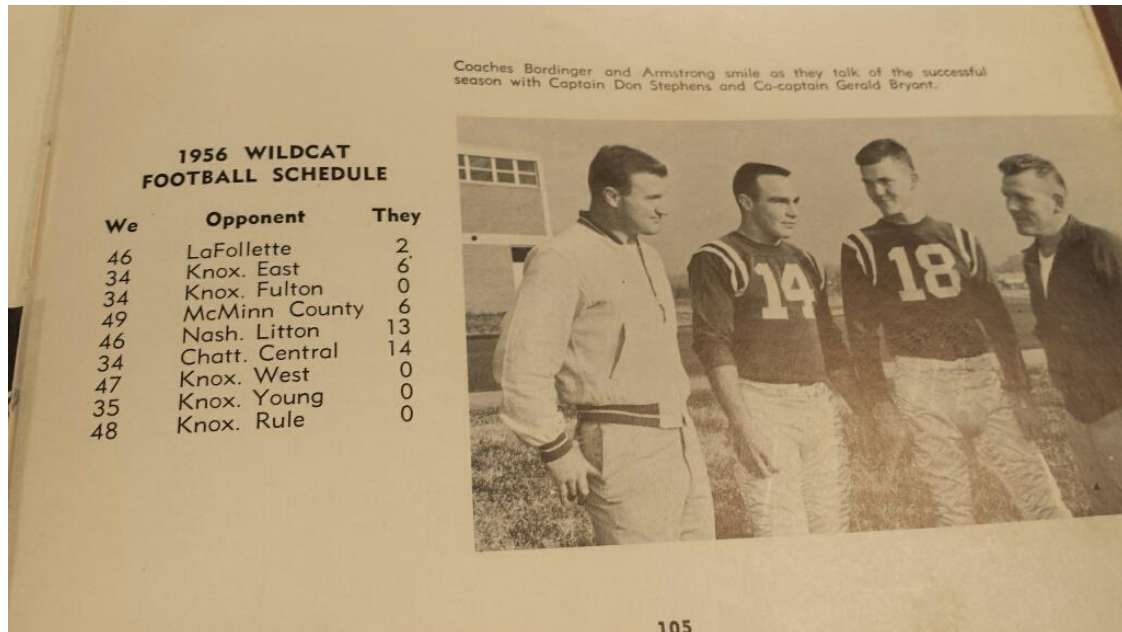
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Oak Ridge High School Football Team Captain Don Stephens

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Coaches Don Bordinger and Jack Armstrong shown with team captain Don Stephens and co-captain Gerald Bryant