

1958---THE GREATEST SEASON

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of October 9, 2018)

This series of articles is brought to you by Jack Bailey, a 1962 Oak Ridge High School graduate. Jack is also a member of the Oak Ridge Sports Hall of Fame. He has written this series to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the greatest season in Oak Ridge High School history.

He has written articles previously in "Historically Speaking" about the ORHS 1956 State Champion football season, ORHS 1961 State Champion basketball season, 1963 ORHS State Champion basketball season, ORHS Track Dynasty (State Champions in 1952, 1953, 1956, 1957, 1958, 1961 and 1962), as well as articles about minor league baseball in Oak Ridge (1948 and 1954) and his own extensive sports memorabilia collection. Jack may be reached at 865-310-5754 or jbaileyjr@aol.com

Much of the information for this series was obtained from The Oak Ridger files and ORHS Oak Logs at Oak Ridge Public Library, Knoxville News-Sentinel files at McClung History Museum, Oak Ridge Observer and other information saved by the author through the years.

1942. Rural East Tennessee. Manhattan Project. U.S. Army Brigadier General Leslie Groves had just completed his most recent project—building the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.—and was now being tasked to oversee a top-secret government project, named the Manhattan Project, to help win World War II. An area in East Tennessee, which came to be known as Oak Ridge was the site selected.

In order to attract the best and brightest scientists and engineers, General Groves, School Superintendent Dr. Alden Blankenship and other leaders knew they needed to provide outstanding schools, community programs and other amenities for their families. The bar was set and it was set high.

That line of thinking spilled over to Oak Ridge High School sports programs, as well. Under the able leadership of Athletic Director Ben Martin, sports teams were formed and began to compete with other area schools.

Progress was slow in the early years. Ferris Bynum was the first football coach, but he was drafted into the U. S. Army and left in December after the first season (0-4) was completed. Ben Martin was serving as his assistant and took over the head coaching responsibilities and coached from 1944-'47, compiling a record of 23-14-1.

Buist Warren, a former Tennessee Volunteer football player (1938-40) became the head coach in 1948 and compiled a record of 30-10-2 from 1948-'51. John Francis, another former Tennessee Vol player (1941, 1946-'47) succeeded him and achieved a sparkling 23-3-3 record from 1952-'54.

In 1955, young Jack Armstrong, a Lenoir City native and a Tennessee football player (1946-'48), was named as the new head football coach. Don Bordinger, still another former Tennessee Vol player (1949-'51) and a member of the UT National Champion team of 1951, was named as assistant coach.

Under Armstrong's and Bordinger's leadership, the program really began to take off and reach new heights. Oak Ridge became one of the top programs in the state of Tennessee, as it continued to play top opponents in Tennessee, NC, AL and KY.

The 1956 team went undefeated and was declared State Champions, the first of eight in Oak Ridge's long and storied history. In a 25 year stretch from 1949-1963, Oak Ridge never lost more than two games in any one season.

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Many of the Sophomores on the that 1956 championship team were now Seniors heading into the 1956 campaign. They had experienced winning, they knew how to win and they were hungry to be a championship team again.

The stage was set for 1958---THE GREATEST SEASON IN ORHS FOOTBALL HISTORY

Enthusiasm was high around the city of Oak Ridge as the Wildcats began preparation for the 1958 football season. From 1949 to 1956, the 'Cats had not suffered more than one loss each season and they reached the top of the state rankings in 1956 with an undefeated season.

They dipped slightly in 1957, losing only to the eventual State Champion Chattanooga Central Purple Pounders and Johnson City. Even with two losses, the Wildcats finished third in the season ending state rankings.

Preliminary meetings with players were held on August 4, 8, 11 and 15. Fall practice began in earnest on August 15. The coaching staff was made up of head coach Jack Armstrong and assistant coaches Don Bordinger, Ira Green, Ben Martin and Jake Methvin. Coach Armstrong was quoted in The Oak Ridger saying, "We hope to dress out between 45-50 boys for the home games." A season ticket for all six home games was \$7.00. Individual game reserved seats were \$1.50 and general admission tickets were \$1.25 each.

A new organization, the Oak Ridge Quarterback Club, long needed to support ORHS athletics, was formed and some of the notable backers included Recreation Director Carl "Rabbit" Yearwood, The Oak Ridger Publisher Don McKay, J. C. Penney Store Manager Keith Funkhouser, Coach Nick Orlando, Coach Ira Green and OR Police Captain Artie Addison. Organizational efforts were led by Frank Snyder and Gene Connor was elected the first president of the group.

The purpose of the club was to stimulate interest in local athletics---to back the ORHS football team and support area athletics in general. Coach Jack Armstrong was scheduled to be the speaker at the first meeting on August 28.

After a week of to-a-day practices, the 'Cats played a scrimmage game against the LaFollette Owls on August 23. The running attack was highlighted by tailbacks Jackie Pope and Larry Mason, fullback Howard Dunnebacke and wingback Bobby Mitchell (Co-captain.) Defensive standouts were Captain Mike Brady, Larry Richards, Eddie Alexander and Richard Ulm. Several players were in new positions and pass defense appeared to be a problem area.

Gene O'Bleness was a sports writer for The Oak Ridger and wrote a regular column entitled "After the Ball." He noted in an early article that the Wildcats would be an interesting team to watch because they had the same explosive scoring punch as the 1957 squad. How right he was, as you will see as the season unfolds!

As pre-season preparations continued, Coach Armstrong was asked about leadership on the 1958 team. He responded by saying the captains were "the best we've had since I took over in 1955. Center and Captain Mike Brady is an outstanding player and student and the best conditioned player on the team." Co-captain Bobby Mitchell was described by Armstrong as the "most determined player and hardest tackler."

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The newly formed Quarterback Club hosted the team at Davis Brothers Cafeteria with a "kick-off dinner" on September 10. Gus Manning, University of Tennessee Sports Publicity Director, narrated a film of the 1957 Gator Bowl, in which Tennessee defeated Texas A & M, 3-0. It was the last game Paul "Bear" Bryant coached at Texas A & M before returning to his alma mater, The University of Alabama.

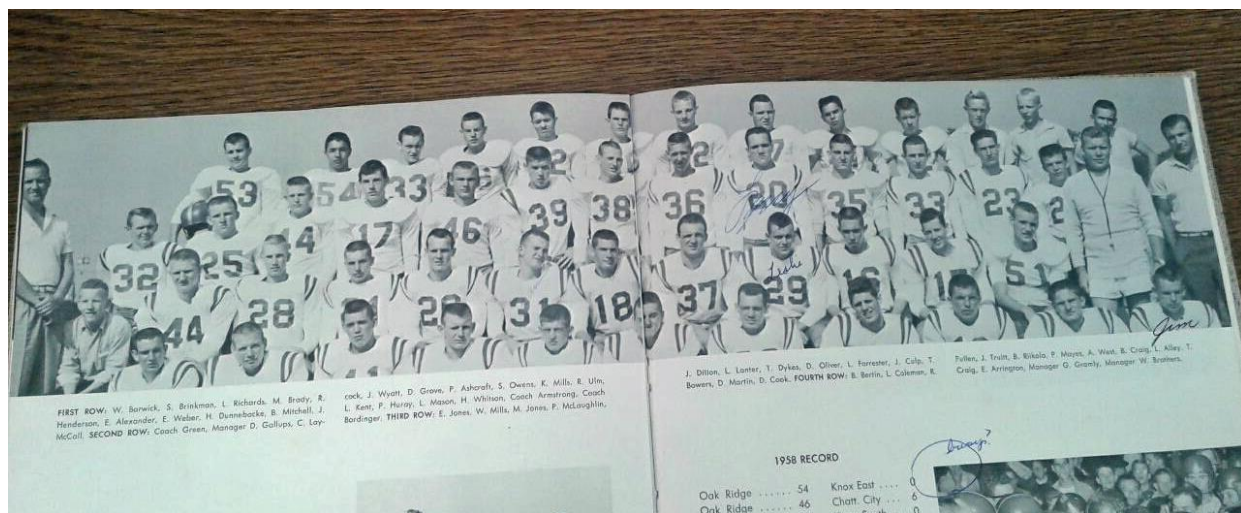
In final tune-ups for the opening game of the season vs. Knoxville East, Coach Armstrong expressed concern over the kicking game and the loss of first-string blocking back Jim McCall, a transfer student from Clinton, who was declared ineligible. Blankenship Field was in great shape and a new concrete ticket booth at the south end of the field was ready. A new scoreboard clock would not be ready until the second home game of the year. 7000 fans were anticipated for the home opener.

The backfield combo of tailback Jackie Pope, a returning All-East Tennessee back from 1957, and fullback Howard Dunnebacke was considered the best 1-2 punch in the state of Tennessee.

Inexperience at blocking back, ends and left guard would determine the team's success, according to the coaches.

----Next week, we will look at the first five games of the 1958 season----

Thanks Jack! What an amazing history of one of the sports in Oak Ridge Schools! Be looking for more of this series in coming weeks.



1958 Oak Ridge High School Football Team