

ORHS football team was best in nation in 1958

As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of April 18, 2022)

The Oak Ridge High School football team has a rich, colorful 76-year history, capped this year by former Wildcat Tee Higgins' performance in making notable catches that helped the National Football League's Cincinnati Bengals win the conference championship and play well in the 2022 Super Bowl. But for many long-time high school football fans and historians in the state, Oak Ridge High School, which has had eight state football championships, is best remembered for the performance of several of its teams in the 1950s, especially the one in 1958. That was the year of the racially motivated Oct. 5 bombing of nearby Clinton High School, which had been integrated two years earlier.

On Feb. 23, an Oak Ridge Institute for Continued Learning (ORICL) class heard evidence that the 1958 Oak Ridge Wildcats had achieved national championship status in a tie with a football team in Wichita Falls, Texas. Oak Ridge was ranked best in the nation in total offense and rushing (gaining yardage while running with the football toward the end zone).

Carolyn Krause presents here a summary of the ORICL talk by Earl Nall, director of technology for the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association (TSSAA) for 15 years and a former software developer, mathematician and statistician at the Oak Ridge government plants.

"In the past 100 years, Tennessee has had 27,000 high school football teams," said Earl Nall, former director of technology for the TSSAA in a talk to an ORICL class at Roane State Community College's City Room. The attendees included Woody Barwick, Skippy Brinkman and Sam Owen, who played on the 1958 Oak Ridge Wildcats, the best football team in Oak Ridge High School history. "Only three Tennessee high school football teams have had a verified mythical national championship: Bristol, Chattanooga Baylor and Oak Ridge." (There was never an annual Super Bowl for the nation's two best high school football teams!)

Nall then tried to make the case that the 1958 ORHS Wildcats team "was the most noteworthy team in Tennessee high school football history." And he argued that perhaps the most noteworthy game in the state's high school football history was the contest in which ORHS defeated Chattanooga Central 14-6 at Blankenship Field at the end of the season.

The players on both teams were so good that Nall found photographic evidence that Bear Bryant, the renowned University of Alabama coach, was viewing the ORHS home game from the Blankenship bleachers. (Nall later noted that two Heisman Trophy winners who joined NFL teams had played on the Oak Ridge field at other times: Paul Hornung and Steve Spurrier.)

Another 1958 game that received coverage on the front page of the sports section of the state's largest newspaper, the Nashville Tennessean, was Oak Ridge's defeat of Nashville's Montgomery Bell Academy by a whopping margin of 56-0!

The 1958 team was notable also because it had all-Americans such as Jackie Pope, who averaged over 17 yards per carry as a running back; seven players who won football scholarships to major universities and many players who later pursued successful careers in science, medicine, engineering, business management and education.

"This team was the smartest I ever coached," Don Bordinger, co-coach of the 1958 team with Jack Armstrong, was alleged to have said, according to a member of the ORICL class. Both coaches were former players with the University of Tennessee football team.

One of the smartest players on the 1958 team called himself "the worst player on the best team" in an article on the UT website. He suffered a season-ending broken arm on the field, attracting a sympathetic girl who left the bleachers to find out who the injured player was. She became his wife in 1962.

ORHS football team was best in nation in 1958

As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of April 18, 2022)

His name was Paul Huray, who died last year. He was a tailback on the team. He earned degrees in physics from UT, taught physics there and conducted magnetic studies at Oak Ridge National Laboratory where he learned about supercomputers. As a result, he chaired a White House committee on computer applications and encouraged interagency networking (Internet, for short) to improve communications between government agencies and make agency operations more transparent to the public. His leadership helped steer the creation of the Internet for public use.

Nall and his colleagues sought documentation to verify that the ORHS Wildcats of 1958 had achieved national championship status. What was confusing and mysterious was that in one official high school poll, a school in Jefferson, Ore. had been listed as the 1958 champion.

With the help of a sportswriter with the National Sports News Service, Nall received a June 1981 newsletter with a list of football teams ranked as national champions between 1952 and 1980. Oak Ridge and Wichita Falls, Texas, were listed as co-champs in 1958.

Additional proof came when Oak Ridge's Bobby Copeland, author of B-western novels and books on Oak Ridge history, asked Jack Pope in a Nov. 1, 2010, email if he had any documentation that "Oak Ridge was named national champs." The next day Pope replied, "I do have Scholastic Magazine's article about our team leading the nation in total offense and rushing – Jefferson was second."

The 1958 Oak Ridge team won the state championship by defeating Chattanooga Central, which was so powerful that only Oak Ridge and just a few other Tennessee teams would play the school. As a result, both Tennessee schools played out-of-state high schools, such as the team in Louisville, Ky., on which Hornung played.

The 1958 ORHS team "had the best offense and defense in the state," Nall said, noting that for the 10-game season it had scored 438 points while allowing its opponents only 26 points.

Nall asserted that the game between Oak Ridge (ranked first) and Chattanooga Central (ranked second) during the 10th week of the 1958 season "was the biggest in the state and probably had more glamor, excitement and attention than any other high school game in Tennessee history."

To make his case that the game was truly unique, he noted that for the first time in Tennessee high-school football history, this game was attended by more than 10,000 people (including Bryant and Edward Litkenhous of Vanderbilt University, who determined high school football team ratings); was announced for the first time on local radio (by Art Metzler, who became a famous sports announcer in Louisville, Ky.) and this broadcast was picked up by at least seven other radio stations; was filmed and replayed the next day (Saturday) on WATE-TV; was bet on by the Chattanooga mayor and Oak Ridge Mayor A.K. Bissell; and was covered by the Nashville Tennessean, which "probably never before had covered a game between two teams that were not in Middle Tennessee," Nall said.

Because of limited parking spaces, many local fans had to get to the game by walking or taking one of the buses the city made available. The crowd noise was so loud that the press box shook. Another unusual occurrence: UT lent ORHS its tarp to ensure that the field stayed dry. In 1957 Oak Ridge had lost 6-0 to Chattanooga Central on its field, which had been covered with six inches of water!

Probably the most moving pregame event in 1958 was experienced during the game between Oak Ridge and Clinton on Oct. 9, four days after the bombing of Clinton High School. "Clinton got all the publicity from the national media that week," Nall said. "They didn't come over to Oak Ridge where the schools were fully integrated. That wasn't news, even though Oak Ridge gave the Clinton students use of Linden School for the rest of the school year."

ORHS football team was best in nation in 1958

As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of April 18, 2022)

Before the game, Mike Brady, ORHS student body president and football team captain, addressed the 870 Clinton students at the game, saying, "We regret the circumstances under which you come here but we welcome you."

At the ORICL class, it was also moving to see the attendees associated with the 1958 team greeting and hugging each other—sort of like a family reunion. There were funny stories and jokes. While a few people in the class reminisced about the great runs of several ORHS halfbacks, fullbacks and tailbacks over 60 years ago, one elderly man simply said, "I played way back!"



Earl Nall, wearing a Wildcats state and national championship jacket

ORHS football team was best in nation in 1958

As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of April 18, 2022)



Jack Armstrong



Don Bordinger

ORHS football team was best in nation in 1958

As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of April 18, 2022)



University of Alabama Coach Bear Bryant in the Blankenship bleachers during the 1958 games in which Oak Ridge defeated Chattanooga Central 14-6, winning the state championship.



ackie Pope averaged 17 yards a carry as a running back for the 1958 Oak Ridge Wildcats



Paul Huray was a tailback on the 1958 team. He became an advisor for two U.S. presidents – Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

ORHS football team was best in nation in 1958

As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of April 18, 2022)



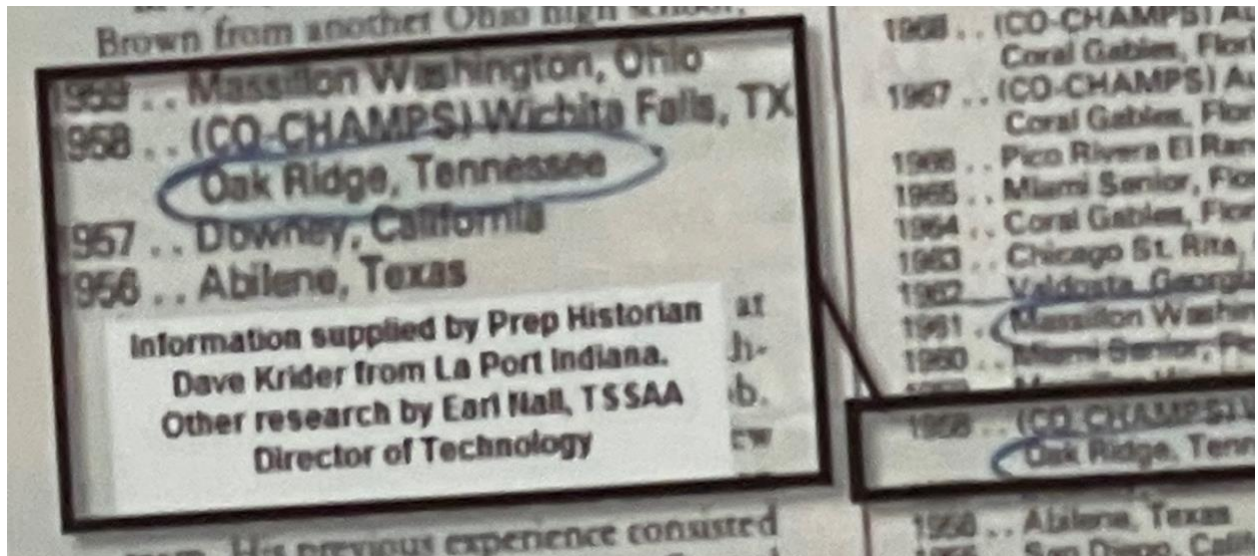
1958 ORHS WILDCATS—First row: Woody Barwick, Skippy Brinkman, Larry Richards, Mike Brady, Roland Henderson; second row: David Galluch, mgr., C. M. Laycock, James Wyatt, David Graw, Phillip Ashcraft, Sam Owen; third row: Coach Ira Green, Coach Don Bandinger, Wilson Mills, Mark Jones, Phillip McLaughlin, Jerry Dillon, Lewis Lomax; fourth row: Eddie Jones, Bob Benson, Lynn Coleman, Robert Pullin, Jack Thratt, Bob Rutledge



Photos of the 1958 Oak Ridge Wildcats, which had 47 players. Seven seniors won major college football scholarships to what is now Division 1 schools and six seniors signed with Southeastern Conference universities.

ORHS football team was best in nation in 1958

As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of April 18, 2022)



Published proof that Oak Ridge was a national co-champion in high school football in 1958