Scarboro 85: Elevate the Game Event – The 1975 Oak Ridge Wildcats: Champions on the Field and in History

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of November 23, 2026)

Did you enjoy the first Fireside Chat that was a breakfast last year? If so, we have another one planned now, but this time it is a lunch.

The Scarboro 85 Monument Foundation is proud to provide yet another exceptional opportunity to recognize an important milestone in Oak Ridge history. The FIRST integrated team at Oak Ridge High School to win a State Championship!

The 1975 Oak Ridge Wildcat Football Team did just that…and now members of that talented team will return to celebrate that accomplishment. You do not want to miss this experience. Plan now to come join the legends and enjoy reliving that year of winning football games.

The next fireside chat with Oak Ridge Sports Legends will have the 1975 Football State Championship team featuring players: Craig Freeman, Dean Nichols, Bob Pullen, Tim Strunk, George Mead, Alfred Stephens, and Brian Roebuck.

This was the first integrated Football team at Oak Ridge High School to win a state championship. The event will be held at Calhoun's here in Oak Ridge. This time it will be a lunch instead of a breakfast. The lunch time for the event will be 11:00am until 1:00 pm on Thursday, 12/3/2026.

Fifty-one years ago an Oak Ridge High School football team accomplished something that deserves an important place in both Oak Ridge history and the history of Tennessee high school athletics. The 1975 Oak Ridge Wildcats won the Tennessee Class AAA state football championship. But this was no ordinary championship season. The team was integrated, and it is remembered as the first integrated high school football team to win a state championship.

The significance of that accomplishment extends well beyond the football field. Oak Ridge had been ahead of much of the South in public school desegregation. In September 1955, Oak Ridge integrated Oak Ridge High School and Robertsville Junior High School, with the enrollment of the Scarboro 85. That historic event placed Oak Ridge at the forefront of public-school desegregation in the Southeast.

Yet integrating classrooms and building a successful integrated athletic program were two different challenges. It took time for students, families, coaches, and communities to establish the kind of trust and teamwork necessary to compete together. The 1975 Wildcats provided a memorable example of what could happen when young athletes came together with a common purpose.

The team was coached by Emory Hale, who had taken over the Oak Ridge program and built a championship-caliber squad. The 1975 team finished the regular season with an impressive 9-1 record, including three victories in the state playoffs.

The road to the championship was not without a setback. Oak Ridge lost a close 7-3 game to Knoxville Central during the regular season. Rather than allowing that defeat to define the season, the Wildcats regrouped and entered the playoffs determined to finish what they had started.

The championship game was played in Murfreesboro, and the victory ended a 13-year wait for another Oak Ridge state football title. The previous championship had come in 1962.

Earl Nall provided some historical information about that team:

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- Oak Ridge regular season record was 9-1, with only loss to Knoxville Central 7-3 (Central lost four games that season). TSSAA had three classes of football A, AA, and AAA and Oak Ridge was in AAA. Eight teams made the playoffs.
- Oak Ridge's round one playoff game was against Sullivan Central (from upper east Tennessee). They were undefeated and had given up 34 points all season. Oak Ridge beat them 35-0. (If I remember right the second half of that game was raining - could be wrong).
- The next game was against McMinn County 11-0) at Oak Ridge. Of note Knoxville Central was Oak Ridge's and McMinn County's common opponent. Oak Ridge lost 7-3 and McMinn County won 15-14.
- McMinn County's first playoff game was against Chattanooga Baylor with legendary coach Red Etter. Baylor was consensus #1 in the state and undefeated. However, Baylor and McMinn County had both played Bradley Central. McMinn beat them 34-7, and Baylor beat them 34-12.
- Still considered an upset when McMinn County won, but looking back I don't think it was THAT big of an upset.
- McMinn County had a big running back, Hubert Simpson (6'1" 205lbs) , that went on to play at University of Tennessee. Oak Ridge led at halftime 14-0 and widened the lead to 21-0 and ended winning 28-14.
- That set the stage for the championship game at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro. Maplewood was 9-1 regular season and had defeated Lawrenceburg (29-0) and Memphis Hamilton (45-7) to get to the finals. Maplewood lost their opening game of the season to Father Ryan, a game that was played at Vanderbilt's Dudley Field before a huge crowd - 14-6. They had been untouchable since that game, winning the rest of their games by 42,37,28,28,40,46,24,18,28,29, and 38 points.
- I forgot Maplewood's big-time player (Preston Brown?) but Maplewood had no answer for the triple option that Dean Nichols ran -- and if I remember right, fell behind early but came back to win 46-22 and the Maplewood defense was just grabbing air trying to stop the Oak Ridge offense.

The victory was more than another entry in the Wildcats' championship record. It represented the progress of a community whose schools had begun the process of desegregation two decades earlier. The young men on the 1975 team had demonstrated that athletic achievement, discipline, and a shared commitment to winning could bring teammates together across racial lines.

It is important to recognize that the achievement did not happen in isolation. Oak Ridge's experience with integration had its challenges. The early Black students who entered Oak Ridge High School in 1955 faced obstacles that went beyond the classroom. Participation in extracurricular activities and athletics was also part of the struggle for full inclusion. The experiences of earlier Oak Ridge athletes helped establish the path for later generations.

By 1975, the Wildcats had reached a milestone that deserves recognition alongside Oak Ridge's other important historical accomplishments. Perhaps the most important legacy of the 1975 team is that its members helped make integration a shared experience rather than simply a policy established by school administrators.

Oak Ridge had already made history in 1955. Twenty years later, its football players made another kind of history. Their accomplishment demonstrated that the promise of integration could be reflected not only in classrooms but also in the competitive spirit, friendships, and common goals of young people.

Today, when we remember the history of Oak Ridge, we rightly celebrate the Manhattan Project, the scientific achievements of Y-12 National Security Complex, K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, and even the booming nuclear renaissance happening now, as well as the city's

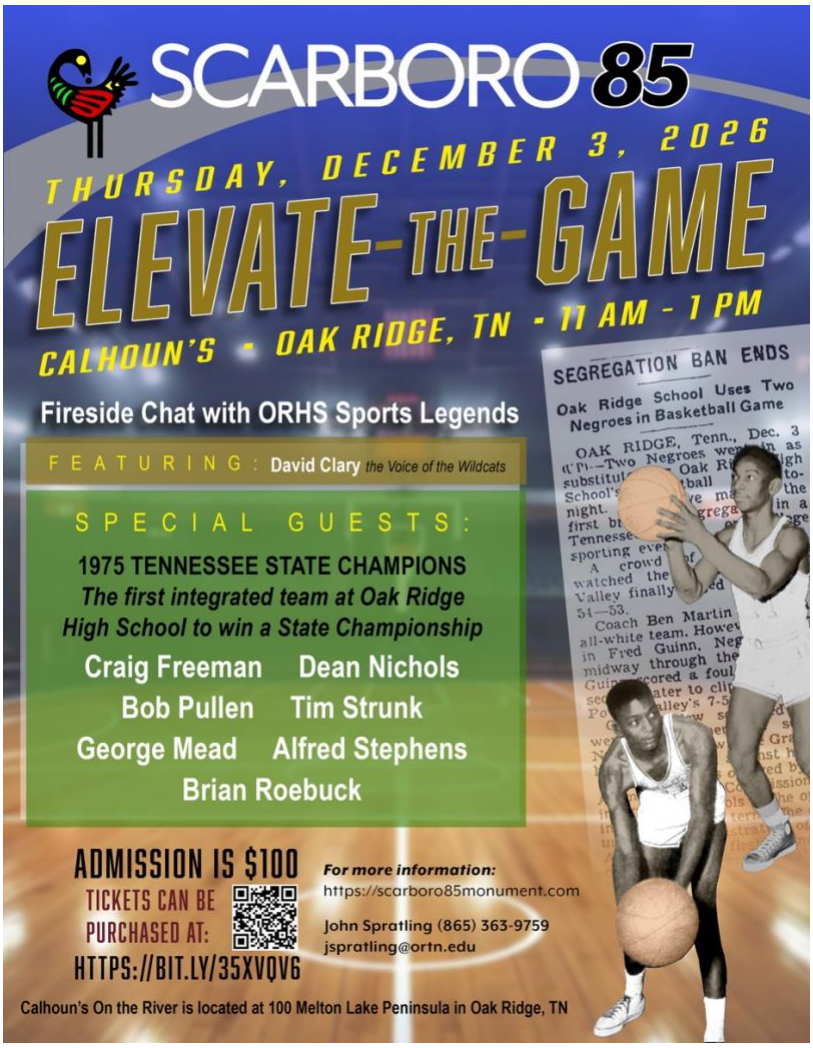
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early role in school integration. We should also remember the 1975 Oak Ridge Wildcats and their special accomplishment.

They were champions on the football field, but their place in Oak Ridge history is about something considerably larger than a final score. Sometimes the most important victories are measured by more than the points on the scoreboard. They are measured by the culture created by succeeding generations.

Come join the Scarboro 85 Monument Foundation as we celebrate with these champions!



Flyer for the event on 12/3/2026, at 11:00 AM – 1:00 PM, at Calhouns Event Center