

Moments in Time - Legendary Coaches in Early Clay Schools: 1876 to 1967

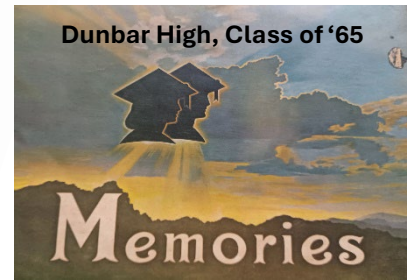
By Dr. Cheryl Seals Gonzalez

Clay County District Schools was officially established in 1876 with Green Cove Springs High School, now firmly



rooted as Clay High School, the County's first high school. When it came to educating children, growing pains were experienced.

Orange Park Normal and Industrial School was founded in



1891 as a private school for all students, but it failed. Meanwhile, Paul Laurence Dunbar High School and Clay High School possess significant history, some of which is dichotomous. Both institutions evolved from offering elementary-level classes to providing education up to 12th grade. During the segregation era, students attended these schools based on their racial background, regardless of their place of residence in the county. Dunbar High School was established in 1896 specifically for black students. Furthermore, both Clay High and Dunbar High are believed to have existed before their official establishment dates. Historically known as the “Flashes” in the 1920s, Clay High School is known today as the Clay High “Blue Devils.” The Orange Park Normal and Industrial School (OPNI), founded by the American Missionary Association (AMA), shuttered its doors in 1917 due to a series of lawsuits and policy changes. Despite winning the final legal battle, the AMA discontinued operations. Could OPNI have become a university if it had stayed open? Many colleges and some universities were once “normal” schools or “institutes” in the early 20th century. Originally established in 1918 as the Florida Normal and Industrial Institute, Florida Memorial University, similar to OPNI, was a private coeducational institution. According to the Clay County Historical Archives, OPNI was the first integrated school in Florida, located at the current site of the Orange Park Town Hall.

During the 1930s to the 1940s, the former grade schools in Clay County “grew up.” Gone but not forgotten was Dunbar High School, named after Paul Laurence Dunbar, a renowned novelist, writer, and poet, by its principal, Professor R.C. Bannerman. Though the endearing name is nearly gone or known about anymore, many schools still bear the historic, prominent name throughout the country, including in Fort Myers, Florida. Dunbar High School alumni fondly speak of the Green Cove Springs Dunbar Panthers - a strong community memory.

During exercises of research and community inquiry, it was also found that education and sports yielded conversations about beloved coaches from times past. It is mind-boggling that the Clay County Crescent newspaper's September 27, 1956, edition reported on the Board of Public Instruction's meeting about the need for another high school. Was the Board aware of something? Could it have predicted the number of today's numerous high schools, middle, private, virtual, and charter schools? The growth since that time is remarkable. Similarly, sports and coaching leadership show significant increases. With this growth, questions arise, particularly about legendary athletic coaches. Clay County has many things to think about.

Research and community inquiry revealed discussions about education and sports, highlighting beloved coaches from the past. The September 27, 1956, edition of the Clay County Crescent newspaper reported on the Board of Public Instruction discussion on the need for another high school. This foresight is impressive given today's numerous educational institutions. Similarly, the growth in education and sports, since then, is notable, raising questions about sensational coaches of the past - legendary athletic coaches.

An interview ensued with John Bowles about his father, Claude Broadus "CB" Bowles, who was recruited from



Blountstown (Calhoun County) by Clay High to start a football team and teach in 1930. “Coach CB” quickly transitioned from coaching to teaching to administration, becoming principal in 1933. By 1939, he was appointed and, by 1940, elected Superintendent of Schools, serving until 1952. He worked with the Department of Transportation until 1953 and served as the Green Cove Springs City Manager from 1954 to 1960. From 1960 to 1972, he owned the Bowles Amoco Service Station. Throughout his life, he was civic-minded, a member of the First United Methodist Church of Green Cove

Springs, a Mason, Rotarian, and more. Clay High honored him through the CB Bowles Football Stadium. Calhoun County lauded him similarly with the naming of Bowles Field.

Historically, Clay High's female athletes were called the White Flashes and male athletes were the Blue Flashes. Today, the "Blue Devils" mascot sways to the motto, "Once a Blue Devil, always a Blue Devil." Coach's spirit continues in his sons John and Don, his late children Buddy and Rita, and through his grands and great-grands. When mentioning the name Bowles during a conversation, it prompts the question, "Which one?"

Many structures, where Dunbar High School stood, still stand on the block bordered by MLK Boulevard, Belle Avenue, and Lemon and Forbes Streets. Within walking distance of the former Clay High buildings now used by the School Board adjacent to the Historical Triangle, Dunbar is home to AMI Kids, a daycare, food bank, Westbrook Baseball Field, pickleball courts, Thomas Hogans Gymnasium, and the Theresa Redmond Marie Cafetorium, known collectively as the Augusta Savage Arts and Community Complex, and the home of the Augusta Savage Mentoring Center.

Dunbar's award-winning basketball coach, the late Thomas G. Hogans Jr., began his legend there. During desegregation in the mid-1960s, he helped students and student athletes transition to Clay High School after Dunbar closed in December 1966 to meet Federal expectations. Coach Hogans, was also a barber, confidante, and surrogate parent to many. There were other coaches at Dunbar, but Hogans distinguished himself from the pack. Today, the Thomas G. Hogans Jr. Memorial Gymnasium honors his local contributions and his tenure as the only Dunbar basketball coach to use that gym. His son, Anthony Hogans, recalls his father's belief in action-based principles. He said that many people fondly knew his father from school to working in his 24/7 laundromat. He laughed and said, "Even my wife, Stephanie, was coached by him as a basketball player!" His father was the first black Clay High varsity basketball coach after Dunbar High School closed. "He was known for winning!"



Records and information from newspapers, Clay County Archives, the Clay County Historical Society, former students, teachers, family members, and community residents recount the days of Coaches Bowles and Hogans. The legacy of the next coach, Ron Riddle, is complemented by readily available public records and testimonies about his coaching impact. He also has the distinction of coaching when opportunities for athletes were more plentiful. During a Dunbar High School Alumni Christmas event in December 2023, he was full of excitement and very jovial. The organizing committee honored him for 37 years of teaching and 40 years of coaching. His many experiences are reflected in his book, "An Awesome Journey."



Coach Riddle was and remains a one-of-a-kind coach and mentor. From his early years at Clay High as a teacher and the first black junior varsity football coach hired at Clay High School, his passion and success grew, fueled by students who have played professional football and those who have excelled in business and other professions. Perhaps speaking for coaches in general, when asked what he had learned from students and student-athletes as a coach, his response was, "Foremost, humility!" He explained, "Students and players came from all areas. Their challenges were different. Some needed encouragement to play sports. Others needed money to eat or clothes to wear. I helped them out no matter their race or gender or social status." He continued, "I'm a blessed man and people acknowledge me all over."



Left to Right: Clay High 1967 coaches: Jack Jackson, Thomas G. Hogans, Ron Riddle, Jim Gainey, Larry Odom, Bill Setser, and Rodney Nelson

"CB" Bowles, Hogans, and Riddle were influential coaches in their time. Historical records and existing memorabilia show that as schools grow, so does the prominence of coaches and committed educators, who work together to build and strengthen educational institutions and the communities where they live.

Cheryl is retired. She enjoys research, writing, and community volunteerism.

