

## **A Football Coach for Life**

Today I got word that my high school football coach -- Coach John Meadows -- had passed away. He was 94 years old, and was facing several health issues. When I heard the news, a flood of memories went through me, and I felt like writing down a few thoughts... When I was in high school, I was on the team through my Junior year. I tried hard, but -- bless my heart -- it just wasn't meant to be for various reasons. But still, Coach Meadows had a huge impact on my life in so many ways -- ways I'm sure I do not completely fathom.

As of this writing, I am 54 years old. I haven't played football since my Junior year in high school. Yet, to this day, I occasionally have "football dreams" that are usually tied back to my days of being on the high school team. Usually in these dreams, for whatever reason, I am wearing regular clothes, but I am being called on to get into the game... Coach Meadows or some other coach yells, "Mills, get in there!" Everyone is waiting on me as I scramble in the dream to find my helmet, shoulder pads, cleats... and by the time I get it halfway together, I wake up. Obviously high school football made a big impact on my mental state!

When I entered the 10th grade, it was the first year of the consolidated Lincoln County High School (LCHS). "Consolidated" meant that all of the other high schools in the county had been combined into one big high school. LCHS had 10th, 11th, and 12th grade classes only. It was a strange time -- and perhaps a strained time -- for the county. Some resented the new high school and always seemed to be complaining against the idea wanting to go back to the way things used to be. Others took a more "wait and see" attitude about LCHS. This new consolidated high school was uncharted territory for all of us! One of the exciting features of the new LCHS was that they hired a successful football coach who had just retired from Butler High School in Huntsville, Alabama -- some ~55 year old guy named John Meadows.

When I first saw John Meadows, I could not help but think how much he reminded me of Bear Bryant. We found out later that Coach Meadows resembled the Bear in other ways as well -- he believed in hard work and in winning! It didn't take long for Coach Meadows to start building enthusiasm for the new football program at LCHS. He was great at telling stories of real people in his past who had succeeded -- oftentimes against great odds -- to be successful at football and at life. I was nearing the end of my 9th grade year when I first met him, and it wasn't long before he was encouraging all the 9th grade guys who were interested in playing football at LCHS to work out at home in the summer to get stronger. I remember he wanted me to do 250 push-ups ever other day -- 50 regular, 25 wide, 25 inside, 25 inverted... then repeat all of these as finger-tip pushups! I thought he was crazy, but I did it over that entire summer!

That first Fall (1979) we had well over 100 players report for football practice! There were some guys out there who barely knew what a football was! At first we had enough players to have a JV team. However, it wasn't long before the less-committed players started dropping out -- usually after some hard angle-tackling drills and a good number of wind sprints. I made some good friendships with guys from all over the county during this time -- guys I probably would never have met otherwise. We got closer together as we endured the blazing hot practices in August

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and early September, the near-perfect weather days of late September and early October, and the bone-chilling (and often wet) days of late October and November.

Our first-year team was a team just beginning to take shape. We could tell there would be bright days ahead for LCHS -- if we would just stick to Coach Meadows' plan. The next year (Fall 1980) the team was a little better. The off-season workout and conditioning program was beginning to help the team a little. The third year (Fall 1981), the team seemed to jell a little more. And of course, in the fourth year (Fall 1982), LCHS won the state championship! Other great teams followed in the 1980s, and LCHS had one of the most successful football programs in the state!

On a personal level, I played football through my Junior year at LCHS. Honestly, I didn't play much -- I was the long snapper on punts and field goals, and I played some linebacker -- usually after we got ahead by 35 points). I decided after Spring practice my Junior year that I would be better-served to get a job and be a fan in the stands my Senior year. However, I vividly remember the many practices, team meetings, off-season workouts, bus rides, and game nights during the time I was on the team.

And I remember Coach Meadows right there in the middle of it... tobacco juice dribbling down his chin... clip board stuffed down his pants. He would lean over into the offensive huddle during practice: (spit, spit, spit) "Let's run 20-Quickie... No wait, (spit, spit, spit) let's run Wham-Right, and we'll keep running it till we get it right!" (With each 'spit' I'm pretty sure I could feel a little fleck of tobacco juice land somewhere on my face.)

Many called him "Off-Tackle John" because he loved to run the off-tackle play. I distinctly remember him drawing Wham-Right (i.e. an off-tackle tailback run to the right side) on the chalk board -- describing in detail what each player's responsibility was -- and then saying: "If everyone does their job on this simple play, it will score every time!" He was right... and it often did.

He absolutely loved the game of football! And he gave me a life-long appreciation for the many nuances of the game as well. He also taught me about the value of hard work... if there is anything in life that is worthwhile, you need to be willing to work hard for it -- and if you work hard, you can achieve it!

Thank you, Coach Meadows, for being an important part of my life... both then, and now!

(Originally written: August 15, 2018)