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Ex-Jets recall success

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The boys called their leaders "Coach" one more time last Saturday as members of perhaps the most productive athletic class in Birmingham city schools' history met 45 years after the fact.

Banks High School's first senior class ever, the seniors of '61, not only won the Birmingham city football championship, but also claimed the basketball and baseball championships to boot.

This group of men, coach Shorty White said, "provided the foundation for all the success that followed."

White should know. He was a young, firebrand assistant coach working for head football coach Jimmy Tarrant in the 1960 season. White, Tarrant, Dewell Crumpton and basketball coach Albert Morton were all on hand Saturday as a nucleus of some 30 to 35 former players met at their old high school to talk about old times.

"Players came from as far away as Minnesota, Maine, Maryland ... they came from all over," said basketball, football and track standout George Morris. Morris, who went to Georgia Tech on a football scholarship, earned All-State honors in the fall of 1960 as an end on the Jets football team. He also earned All-State honors in basketball and was a city champion in the hurdles.

White remembered that young bunch. He wasn't much older than most of them himself.

"When they opened Banks High School, there were no seniors. It took three years before we had a senior class," he said. "A lot of the boys we had playing football in 1960 were kids who didn't make the team at Woodlawn.

"You know what, though? These boys went out and played Woodlawn that season and beat them (6-0). That was an incredible upset, I think."

Banks went on to also tie Robert E. Lee of Montgomery, considered the top team in the state, 7-7, in Montgomery, but lost to Ensley in the final game of the regular season 33-28.

"We then had to turn around and play Ensley in the Crippled Children's Clinic game at Legion Field two weeks later - on Thanksgiving Day," Morris said. "And we beat them 27-0."

More than 27,000 fans crowded into the stadium for the afternoon game highlighted by quarterback Jimmy Sidle's 81 yards rushing and 85 yards passing. Sidle, who went on to star at Auburn, is now deceased.

The Yellow Jackets managed only 55 total yards and lost five fumbles in the shocker.

No longer high schools:

Banks and Ensley are no longer high schools, the latter merging with Jackson-Olin this year to form the

new school on the west side. Banks has been a middle school for more than a decade.

White would later become the head coach at Banks - leading the Jets to two straight Class 4A state championships (1972 and 1973) - and earning the title of top prep football team in the nation. The stars were many in later years like brothers Jeff and Gary Rutledge and Johnny Musso, to name a few.

Nevertheless, the band of brothers in 1961 were the boys who paved the way.

The players Saturday thanked their coaches for the time and interest they took in them.

One former player, Woody Wolleson, said basketball coach Morton was "like a father to me."

Wolleson, who now lives in Germantown, Md., said he grew up without a father figure in his home, and Morton took him under his wing and developed him.

"There's nothing in this life I have accomplished that didn't come from what I learned from Coach Morton and the other coaches," he said.

"I was part of that senior Banks High rush to glory and most notably as a starting member of that basketball team that set some major records my senior year," he said. "I did not have an active father in my life as I was growing up, including my high school years.

"Al Morton was the first real male role model and father-type figure in my life. I have indeed been blessed with a wide range of awards and accomplishments throughout my entire life. Whatever I have done or accomplished, I owe a great deal of gratitude to Coach Morton's vital influences. Many of his lessons became invaluable later in life."

Attitude, heart:

Wolleson said Morton was "a stern disciplinarian on the court with an equally caring and warm attachment to both me personally and all of his boys. He instilled the essential concepts of basics, basics and basics. He creatively engineered a path that focused on attitude and heart.

"Whatever the challenge, we were taught to take it on directly and to be the very best was the only option. He would accept no substitute for self control, respect for others, and sportsmanship. He would tolerate no deviation in any manner from proper conduct, both on and off the court."

Wolleson, a financial services executive with Execunet, received the coveted United States Small Business Administration "2006 Financial Services Champion" award at special ceremonies last May in Washington. The award recognizes his significant contributions and advocacy of financial services to advance small business.

He also has been a national Tae Kwon Do champion in his age group and said he recently began competing in the shot and discus in state and national competition.

Morris said the athletes on that first senior squad "have stayed in touch through the years. Most have gone on to be very successful. We're still a very close group."

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