

STILL GOING STRONG AFTER 80 YEARS

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COOKEVILLE -- If an organization does the same thing successfully for 80 years, it must be doing something right.



The 2008 season marks year No. 80 for Cookeville High football, and the Cavaliers are celebrating that milestone with their theme "80 Years of Tradition." The program has had ups and downs just like any other, but former and current Cavaliers are focused on their rich tradition that the team has, from the first years with founding coach Eddie Watson to the last 11 years with head coach Jerry Joslin.

Pictured: The 1928 Cookeville High football team gathers for a team portrait. The team included: (laying in front) team manager Nixon, (sitting from left) Wilber Johnson, Hubert Bush, John Moore, Clifford Caruthers, Ben Sidwell, Rudolph Stover,

(kneeling, from left) Doss Stanton, Arnold Sparks, Herman Alcorn, Henry Emery, Raymond "Gus" Shipley, Robert Johnson, (standing, from left) coach Eddie "Jelly" Watson, Anderson Elmore, "Mousie" Qualls, Clarence Ramsey, Reed Mitchell, Edgar Watson and Paul Haile.

"It's kind of exciting to think about it (being year No. 80)," said Cavalier Athletic Foundation president Ralph Mullins. "I know Coach Watson would be amazed at what he started back in the 27-28 season, to see where the program is now and where Coach Joslin has led us the last 10 or 11 years.

"We've gone from a very small number of boys playing, to the mid-60s our squads probably had around 33-35 kids, and Coach Joslin's got well over 100. It's amazing to see the interest that has been created there, and it's just exciting to see these young men out there and wanting to be a part of that."

One of Mullins' classmates and teammates, Ottis Phillips, said the strength of the program is amazing.

"It's surprising how entrenched it is and what a big deal it is," said Phillips, who played alongside Mullins from 1966-68. "We had the reunion last summer where we had over 500 people show up for our first-ever Cavalier reunion. It was mind-boggling. We just kinda shook our heads; we just did not anticipate it.

"We thought there'd be a lot of people and a big turnout, but it really exceeded all our expectations. I think that shows this community is really behind the Cookeville Cavaliers, and the feelings are pretty deep especially among the guys that have played there."

Mullins and Phillips played for the last undefeated team in Cavalier history (1967), and a couple familiar names were on that team as well: quarterback Watson Brown -- now Tennessee Tech's head coach -- and halfback Mack Brown, the skipper for the University of Texas.

"I was reading in the Herald-Citizen over the weekend about Watson Brown getting his 100th win as a head coach," Mullins said. "And Watson was our quarterback, and we had an awesome experience back in the 60s. I think those three years with Coach Bucky Pitts and David Blair, the boys that graduated out of those programs went on to be exceptional citizens and good people."

"I was blessed to be on the last undefeated team that Cookeville's had; of course, that was back before the playoffs. Now you've got to win the state championship to be undefeated."

Phillips said his teammates from those days still share a special connection.

"It was just a real special time," he said. "When you think back about it, it all seems surreal. We were going through it at the time; you knew that was a special group. You just kinda had that feeling when you were playing, and it was a real close-knit group of kids. If I run into any of those guys on the street today, it's just like going back 35 years."

Mullins said the Cookeville stadium's namesake, Eddie Watson Stadium, is a fitting tribute to an important figure in program history.

"I think we owe a lot of credit to coach Watson's family and also the Brown family," he said. "There have been four undefeated teams in the history of Cavalier football, and Coach Eddie Watson coached three of those and his grandsons were on the fourth and final team."

Concerning the Cavalier tradition, Mullins said the first thing he thinks about is pride.

"You have a lot of pride representing the town and community, and being a part of something that you've worked hard to accomplish," he explained. "You get a lot of meaning out of that hard work. You don't always win, so you have to learn to deal with defeat, also. Of course, winning is a whole lot easier. I think pride is the main thing, pride in accomplishment, and watching your teammates do well is great."

Phillips said he thinks about never giving up when he thinks of Cavalier football.

"I think the things we learned playing for Coach Pitts and being a Cavalier, we just learned lessons about perseverance and about not quitting, about doing the best you can and never giving up," he said. "I think those are some things we carried with us the rest of our lives. It's transferred over into being successful as people or business people, or whatever it is we've done. I think some of that is a direct result of the lessons we learned playing football under Coach Pitts and being a Cavalier."

Joslin, meanwhile, said he's just trying to carry on that tradition from each senior class to the next one.

"I think there's a degree of pride and loyalty to this community that is instilled when you find yourself involved with young people. I think when you look these young people in the eyes and see the character of them, I think we have some fine, young men," he said. "I think our seniors challenge every class to leave the program better than when they got here. As long as the seniors challenge each group to leave it better than when you got here, that's called tradition."

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