

Web Exclusives - Web Exclusives MacArthur Memories - Joe Bill Fox
Tuesday, 01 May 2007 Joe Bill Fox By John Edmiston Contributing Writer

Former MacArthur High School head football coach Joe Bill Fox knows how to win.

But there's one game that still haunts him: A loss to Spring Branch Bears 40 years ago in a tough defensive match up on a cold crisp December day in 1966. It was the state semifinals. Spring Branch won 14-6. Over and over, Coach Fox has replayed that game.

Mac scored first in the game, on a halfback Al Hook to end Rick Oberlies option pass, but the extra point kick failed. The slim 6-0 lead held until Spring Branch scored a TD in the third quarter and converted the point after, leading 7-6. Then came a MacArthur 56-yard drive to the Bears 11. Hook carried for nine yards to the Spring Branch two. But the Houston team's defense held fullback Dutch Riefler twice and Hook once as the Brahmas tried to bend the Spring Branch line. The referees refused to budge, saying the Brahmas didn't move the line enough to get that first down.

"I know when the line moves – I know if we made a yard or a half yard," Fox says. It was clear to him that Spring Branch did bend. He just couldn't convince the officials. There was no film replay in those days, no flag that he could seek a second opinion.

Asked about it half a life later, the 75-year-old coach feels the officials that day were confused, focusing on the goal line instead of a Mac first down on the one. A touchdown might have been enough to carry Mac to the state championship game. Fox then could have turned the game over to Mac's vaunted defense, also led by Riefler. But Spring Branch quarterback Donnie Wiggington managed a late-game TD, and Mac's Cinderella season ended with a groan.

"We had a great team," Fox remembers. "We could have won that game, if we'd gotten a couple of plays called in the right manner." Fox believes his team would have done well against San Angelo, coached by Emory Bellard, which defeated Spring Branch the next weekend 21-14 for the state championship.

"The kids played well," Fox says. They gave everything we asked them to give." Maybe, he says later, he didn't use his quarterback Rocky Self enough.

The next season, 1967, MacArthur strung together six consecutive wins to challenge Robert E. Lee's Volunteers for the district championship. Lee won 7-6,

converting an extra point, and holding on to win. That was Fox's last year as Mac's head coach. He moved on to athletic director for the Northeast School District, proving himself an innovator and a pioneer as women's athletics started to take hold. At MacArthur, he finished with a 49-22 record, winning more than 34 games in his last four seasons. (Forty years later, MacArthur managed to get to semifinals again, falling to Cypress Falls in a heartbreaker last December. Fox kept abreast of MacArthur's fortunes all season, thanks to former assistant Ezra Corley, who had moved on to coach Churchill in 1966, its first year in competition.)

But that 1966 team is a favorite for Fox. He heaps praise on his assistants: Bobby Jack Price, a former classmate at McMurry College in Abilene, who died in 1974; John Porter, an innovative young coach and Vernon McManus, a "wild" coach out of Lamar University hired to teach his linebackers. McManus gained infamy a decade or so later by being convicted of helping a girlfriend kill her parents for the insurance money. He claimed he was framed, and was pardoned, after spending nearly a decade on Texas' Death Row. To his credit, Fox never hesitated to give McManus the benefit of the doubt in that scenario, and sent him several letters of recommendation.

"We got along fine, and I always treated him fairly. He gave me everything I ever asked him to give."

That says a lot about Coach Fox, who remembers the battles he faced to get them up to playing speed. It was a tough road, a lot of work – but Fox relishes the spirit he saw at MacArthur during that championship drive season.

"The whole community came together," he said. "It was a vibrant (area) and I made some really good friends."

His time, patience and work ethic paid off, as his players won college scholarships or on gained team positions as walk-ons, such as offensive center Bobby Hahn and his brother Jamie, both going on to Texas Tech; Joe Matulich, quarterback, Texas Tech; Waymond Lightfoot, center and linebacker; Barney Harris, son of then Mac principal Ben Harris, guard Walter Mohen, Texas A&M; Chuck Dannis, end, Southern Methodist University; Jeff Davis, Princeton, and Dan Terwelp, a defensive back for the University of Texas.

Looking back, Fox describes a comprehensive Monday to Monday daily chart of training, drills, study, and consulting with teachers to move his troops up to the pinnacle. He cajoled, counseled, critiqued and cracked the whip when necessary to get his players ready.

Fox arrived at MacArthur in 1961, after a stellar career as a quarterback at McMurray State in Abilene, and a .500 won-loss record at Birdville, near his Fort Worth hometown. He'd been a playing legend in Fort Worth. MacArthur, he said, was a promising school for an ambitious young coach. He interviewed with district legend and Superintendent Virgil Blossom, who'd come to Northeast soon after his historic stand on integrating Little Rock, Ark. schools.

"It was our gain in Texas, " Fox says. "I learned a lot from him." Blossom first wanted to know how long it would take Fox's Brahma team to beat district powerhouse Jefferson.

"Three years," Fox responded. And three years after that, Mac did defeat Jeff and tied the Mustangs for the district championship. It was another powerhouse, Robert E. Lee that proved to be Fox's nemesis, leaving him with a 3-3-1 mark.

On the phone, you can envision him shaking his head.

Fox was hired to replace the amiable Wendell Rittiman, a well-liked coach whose players loved him, despite poor win-loss records. The students at the school- led by the football team – rallied behind Rittiman when the coach's contract was allowed to expire, and protested the decision not to rehire him.

"There was a strike, kids walked out of school," Fox said. "I didn't know all that. Mr. Blossom just told me, 'you got some work to do.' " Blossom arranged a dinner with the football team to introduce the new coach, at the old Petroleum Club on what is now Loop 410. "He didn't brief me, I just started talking." Blossom told Fox after the meeting that he believed he'd won the team over. "I never had another problem," Fox said. Among those players who listened that evening were Allen Cecil, an end, the first Mac player ever recruited in the Southwest Conference; Bubber Collins, who went to A&M, and John Avent, recruited by Texas Tech.

Fox also remembers George Davis, who went on to Baylor on scholarship to play tackle. "He was a fat kid, so big he couldn't wear Levis jeans, all he could wear were overalls. He couldn't run, couldn't even lift his own weight." But Fox recognized Davis' playing potential. "We need you," he told him. "You've got to lose the weight to play." Davis did trim down. "He had a massive chest, and a lot of pride."

Later, there were Jamie and Bobby Hahn, two big brothers with bigger hearts, Fox says. Both were excellent linemen and went on to play at Texas Tech. Bobby, a big, shy kid with a winning smile, was moved to offensive center on the

1966 team because of his blocking ability. Hahn's job was to protect quarterback Self. He did it well. Bobby died two years ago from Lou Gehrig's disease. Jamie died a decade ago from complications during an operation. "The Hahns were good people," Fox says.

After a 7-3 record in 1965, Fox knew he needed a great quarterback who can throw, good runners who can move into the line and runners with breakaway speed. He found them in junior Hook, wide receiver Rick Oberlies and option slotback Mike McLeod, a track star at Mac who later won a scholarship to A&M. Fox worked hard to recruit McLeod to play football for the Brahmas, "I can get you a spot, and we can get you outside," Fox said he told the superb runner. "You won't have to run into the line." McLeod broke several long runs for the Brahmas that season "You have to have a great quarterback who can throw, Fox says. "You've got to have some good runners and you've got to have breakaway speed."

It was Fox who knew quarterbacking, he'd been one himself, near perfect, at McMurry in 1956. On that team played one of his superb assistants, Bobby Jack Price, and Grant Teaff, who went on to become a coaching legend in the SWC while at the helm at Baylor. After MacArthur, Fox moved into the NE district administrative as athletic director for the district, where he oversaw the move to women's athletics and focused on improving the district's athletic stature. By the mid-1970s, he tried his hand as operations manager of the old World American Football League's San Antonio Wings, helping them to a 4-4-1 record before he left. By the end of the decade, he had relocated back home, to Fort Worth, where he coached again where he'd started out, at Birdville, helping to drive a striving city suburb into a small powerhouse.

Now, he's retired. A member of McMurry's Board of Regents, last year he had to vote to do away with the school mascot, the Indians, a difficult decision, he said. He golfs once a week and plays tennis three times a week, and he and his wife Beverly help their daughter raise Sophie, a precocious four-year-old. They've also raised quarter horses, and rebuilt and remodeled houses. His wife is known in the area for her interior decorating tastes, and they've toured the world, including New Zealand, and later this month, Eastern Europe.

"We had to stop for a minute and remember we're really retired," he laughs. He says he never has any trouble filling his days. His football world may be behind him, but he still thinks of strategies, and still keeps tabs with Teaff, Bellard, Gene Stallings and others. He knows football, and he still knows what to do to win. In fact, Joe Bill Fox is accomplished at winning.