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Ties that bind

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Furman athletics

Ties that bind

Scholarship fund helps Purple Pounders reconnect

It is often said that what doesn't kill you will make you stronger.

In the case of a group of former Furman football players from the late 1950s, what they survived as a team has created a bond that has proven to be stronger than anything that might have been forged in success.

Those football alumni, who call themselves the Purple Pounders, have one thing in common. They played during the years 1955 through 1957, which produced a not-so-memorable 6-24 record. More specifically, they played during the three-year coaching tenure of Homer Hobbs, a demanding taskmaster whose national aspirations for the Furman football program did not mesh with the realities of a small liberal arts college.

The schedule, for instance, was brutal. During those three seasons Furman traveled to Army, South Carolina, Auburn, Florida State, West Virginia and Clemson. Even after Hobbs' departure, his scheduling left the 1958 team with games against Florida State, Alabama and Penn State, in addition to the yearly contests against Clemson and South Carolina. Furman was overmatched at almost every turn, and the combination of losing and of Hobbs' frustration with the team left the players feeling miserable.

It was, according to Marvin Behlke '61, the "forgotten" era of Furman football, coming as it did a few seasons after coach Bill Young's success of the early 1950s and a few years before Bob King would revitalize the program in the early 1960s — and nearly two decades before Furman football began the resurgence it still enjoys today.

"We didn't win a lot of games. We didn't win national championships," says Behlke, who transferred to Furman from the University of Florida and played guard and tackle for the team, then known as the Purple Hurricanes. "But those of us who didn't quit and stuck with the team developed a special bond."

Bill Howes '59, a Purple Pounder who would go on to become a member of the Furman board of trustees, agrees.

"It's kind of like war," Howes says, laughing. "When you've been in the trenches with people who went through the same things, you develop a certain camaraderie. Those of us who survived those years have a lot of respect for one another."

Purple Pounders was the name given to players like Behlke and Howes who made up the scout team early in their careers. At practice, their job was to run the offense and defense of that week's opponent against the first team. Needless to say, they were

"pounded" regularly. The name came from former Furman great Vince Perone '54, who helped coach the teams during that time.

"The name originally referred to the scout team players," Behlke says, "but it came to refer to anybody who played during the Hobbs years."

After years of mostly informal contacts, the players began holding reunions about five years ago, and soon they decided to do something to make sure the Furman fans didn't forget them. So they created the Purple Pounders Scholarship Fund, which, fittingly, provides aid to the Paladin football player that the coaches deem to have been the outstanding scout team player of the previous season. The first award, given in January, went to running back Brandon Mayes of Arden, N.C., who will be a redshirt freshman this fall.

While supporting current and future players, the scholarship fund has served as a catalyst for some former Pounders, such as Tom Avery '59 of Dana Point, Calif., to reconnect with the university. And as the group has re-established contact in recent years, they have been reminded of their special bond that extends beyond the playing field. They were not only the last group of football players to spend their entire career on the old campus, but also the last to live as a team in infamous McGee Hall.

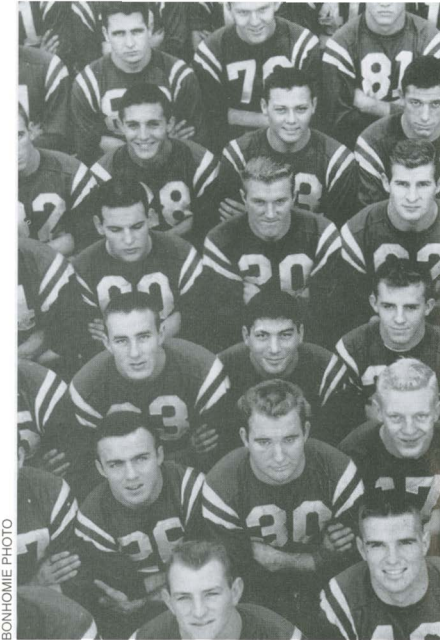
"Living in McGee was a blast," Howes says. "It was a little bit like Animal House." Behlke disagrees: "It was a lot like Animal House."

The Purple Pounders are due to meet again during Homecoming 2002, and Behlke says the party list is growing all the time. There are now about 40 players who meet regularly and have contributed to the scholarship fund, which has surpassed \$50,000 in gifts and pledges.

"It's been really good for all of us to get back together," Behlke says. "We didn't want to be forgotten."

That's certainly not likely to happen anytime soon. Not as long as there is a scholarship reserved for "Pounder of the Year."

— Vince Moore



Members of the '57 squad.

Furman football set to open vs. Vanderbilt

Bobby Lamb's first game as Furman's head football coach is set for September 7 in Nashville, Tenn., against the Vanderbilt Commodores and Lamb's immediate predecessor, Bobby Johnson.

Game time is tentatively set for 6 p.m., and the athletic department and Alumni Office want Furman fans to attend.

Furman will have a block of tickets, at \$22 apiece, available through the Athletic Events office later this summer. In addition, Paladin fans will be able to attend a pre-game barbecue and pep rally beginning at 4 p.m. at Centennial Park Pavilion across from Vanderbilt Stadium. Cost of the barbecue is to be determined.

The university has secured an \$84 rate (including breakfast and parking) with the

Holiday Inn Select near the stadium. Make hotel reservations by calling 1-800-633-4427; the code for the Furman block of rooms is FUN.

For Furman fans in the Greenville area, plans are in the works to offer a package deal that will include transportation by bus, Saturday night hotel stay, game ticket and pre-game barbecue. While final details are still being completed, the total cost for the trip is expected to be approximately \$170 per person.

As plans are finalized, details will be posted on the Furman Athletics Web site (furmanpaladins.com) and the Alumni site at furman.edu/admin/alumni. Keep checking the Web for details, or call Furman Athletic Events at 1-800-PURPLE5.

2002 FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

SEPTEMBER

7 at Vanderbilt
14 ELON
21 at Richmond
28 at Virginia Military

OCTOBER

5 WESTERN CAROLINA
12 at Appalachian State
19 THE CITADEL (Homecoming)
26 at East Tennessee

NOVEMBER

9 GEORGIA SOUTHERN
16 at Wofford
23 UT-CHATTANOOGA

Home games ALL CAPS.
Times to be announced.