

**BRAKEFIELD**  
and the  
**BRAKEFIELD BOYS**

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In his later coaching years he was called “Legendary” and an “Under appreciated football genius.” I was one of the fortunate few that he first began coaching on his way to becoming a mentor for thousands to follow in the decades ahead.

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He was born in Quinton, Alabama and came to Kentucky with his father who was a coal mine foreman. He graduated from Evarts High School in 1937. Little is known now of his high school days except that he played football and earned the nickname “Pug”, a nickname that stayed with him for many years. His football and academic abilities earned him a scholarship to Centre College. He graduated in 1941 and was soon learning to be a U.S. Navy pilot at Corpus Christi Naval Air Station. I had the opportunity of reading his log book in 2004 and was surprised that it contained so little detail. Just the bare facts, some of which I share with you here.

He qualified for carrier landings in August 1942 and went on to torpedo squadron training, flying Grumman TBMs (torpedo bombers) and mastered 40 degree dives. He flew usually with the same crew members. Indeed they were fortunate to go through the Pacific campaigns of World War II unscathed. According to the log book that I read, January and February 1945 were very active months. During that period he flew anti-submarine patrols, sank a tanker, flew bombing raids on Okinawa, Chichi Jima, Iwo Jima, Formosa and Tokyo. When asked if he ever got scared, he said that his biggest worry was being able to find his aircraft carrier upon completing a mission. And, the biggest feeling of relief was when the tail hook caught on the arresting gear in the landing process. He departed the Pacific war front in April 1945 and went to Miami where he served as an instructor until <sup>September</sup> 1945. He turned in his flight gear September 10, 1945, and went to William & Mary College to serve as an assistant coach while working on his Masters Degree.

His name was James A. Brakefield. Some of us knew him as “Coach”, some knew him as “Pug”. Others knew him as Commander, and later as Captain in the U.S. Navy Reserve. In his college coaching days he was known as Coach Jim Brakefield. He was an assistant coach at Emory & Henry College in Emory, Virginia, from 1950 to 1952; then an assistant coach at Wofford College in Spartanburg, South Carolina 1953 to 1966, then serving as Wofford’s head coach from 1967 to 1970. Then, he moved to Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina, as head coach from 1971 to 1979.

This is the write-up in a football program during his final year as football coach at Appalachian State:

*Not many people are as respected in the coaching ranks as Appalachian State's Jim Brakefield. A father-figure to the entire athletic program at ASU, Brakefield is a favorite among the press for his dry wit and his frankness. While Brakefield has worked extremely hard on the recruitment and coaching of the Mountaineers football talent, he has also worked diligently to upgrade the university as a whole and gain support for all its athletic endeavors. He is his own best public relations man and he has become one of the best-liked residents of the northwestern North Carolina mountains. Brakefield came to ASU from Wofford College in Spartanburg, South Carolina where he built a powerhouse in the late 1960's and early 1970's. His 1970 team posted an 11-1 record and a 20 game winning streak. In addition to supervising everything about ASU football from scheduling to practice, he and his staff conduct annual summer clinics on the wishbone offense.*

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A story from the Denver Post tells us about the time that the Air Force Academy wanted to build up and improve its football program. In 1979, the coach, Ken Hatfield, decided that a triple-option wishbone offense would be the thing to do. But how to teach that well and quickly? They invited Coach Jim Brakefield to come to the Academy and talk to the coaching staff. Brakefield did more than just talk to the Air Force coaches; he brought his ASU coaching staff to Colorado Springs to install the triple option wishbone offense. That staff included Fisher DeBerry, who became the Air Force Academy head coach in 1983.

Coach Brakefield and his wife, Eloise, established a scholarship at Appalachian State for athletes who achieved a high academic rating. His wife died while they were at ASU. He died in October, 2002. As late as 2005 he was recognized by the North Carolina legislature for his outstanding contributions to Appalachian State University and the State of North Carolina. Also in 2005 ASU won the NCAA Division 1-AA Championship, and this week (November 2, 2006) is ranked number one in the NCAA Division 1-AA poll.

Coach Jim Brakefield's influence, his legacy, will live on for generations.

This is the story of Coach Brakefield's first group of boys—the Evarts High School Wildcats. Before he arrived on the scene The Wildcats had not won a game in three years. My next door neighbor, Bill Vanpelt, a senior, had three coaches in three years. Brakefield was his fourth. I was a sophomore that year and almost didn't come out for football because of the poor coaching the year before. I had worked that summer in Illinois while staying with my Grandmother. I didn't return to Kentucky until time for school to start, so I missed most of the hot August drills. Bill told me what a great coach Brakefield was so I decided I would give it another try. I played enough to letter. Some freshman, before Brakefield, played in street shoes and wore sweatshirts with numbers stenciled on them. There just weren't enough uniforms to go around. With Brakefield everything was better. He was organized, friendly but firm and certainly knew what he was doing. That first season we were 4-4. The seniors were a happy bunch just to have won some games. Many of us were sophomores that year and I have always believed that was part of the reason for the successes to come; we were a group and remained a group through our senior year. We got a taste of winning, we liked each other, we worked well as a unit, we loved the coach and we wanted more.

In 1945 and 1946 we played our games on the Harlan High School field as did many of the schools in Harlan County. Cumberland, Benham and Lynch had their own fields, but Evarts, Hall, Loyal and Wallins played on the very well used Harlan field. Our practice field was a cow pasture at nearby Redbud, just outside Kenvir. A school bus took us to practice every afternoon after lunch and returned us to school after practice. The Redbud practice field was sandwiched between the Yocum Creek branch of the Cumberland River and the railroad tracks hauling coal out of the mines at Kenvir, known locally as Black Mountain. The dressing room at the high school was in the basement beneath the gymnasium; it was small, crowded, smelly and would never have passed a health department inspection.

Following that 4-4 season in 1946, interest in football hit fever pitch. Coach Brakefield gathered support from fathers, business men, mine owners and others to build up the program. In 1947, as Juniors most of us received brand new uniforms, headgear, shoes—and a field of our own! Money was raised to carve out a place on the mountainside about a mile from the school. We walked to and from practice every day, and even on game nights. We played on Saturday nights on Rainey Memorial Field, which we nicknamed “Rocky Bottom.” Following Friday afternoon practice we spread across the field and for 120 yards we strode, picking up rocks of any size and tossing them to the sidelines in hopes that more would not tumble down the mountain before Saturday night.

**The assistant coach in 1946-47** was John U. Pike; his nickname was “Lockjaw” for obvious reasons. He was big, sporting a 50 inch chest but he was not fat.....just big. He had black, curly hair, a big smile, and loved football and coaching. He had played college ball at a school in West Virginia which he smilingly called an “outlaw” school when it came to eligibility. He also had played briefly for the New York Giants. He coached the backfield. We had a lot to look forward to...with a naval hero head coach and an assistant who had played pro football. From doubters to believers in one year....we loved it!

**In 1947 we were 7-3** and, in my mind at least, had three very memorable games. In the second game of the season against Fleming-Neon, we lost five starters to injuries, in the first two plays; lost three on the opening kick-off and two more on the first play of scrimmage...including two quarterbacks, fullback and running back. We went on to win the game 20-7. The third and fourth games marked the first time Evarts had ever beaten Harlan (14-0) and Lynch (12-6).

**In 1948 we were 10-0.** Coach “Lockjaw” Pike had moved on and Russ Dozier, an Air Force veteran and Eastern Kentucky University player became the backfield coach. There were several memorable games. After the reserves had let Jenkins move to the 5 yard line, Coach put the first defense in to hold onto a 32-0 shut-out. Alas, on the fourth down we were penalized and on the fifth down the Jenkins Cavaliers scored and we made the long ride back over Pine Mountain with a 32-6 win.

Against the powerful Prestonsburg Blackcats the Harlan Daily Enterprise write-up said, *“Evarts shows tremendous power in thumping Prestonsburg 46-19. Evarts, like a roaring windswept mountain fire, cashed in on every break in outclassing Prestonsburg in a great 46-19 triumph in its bid for the mythical state high school gridiron title before the season’s record crowd in Evarts Saturday night. It was a personal triumph for James “Banty” Bryant, the will o-the-wisp, eel hipped Wildcat halfback who dominated the touchdown parade with 31 points.”* Indeed, it really was like a roaring windswept mountain fire, because high above the field, the mountain tops actually were on fire creating an eerie scene on us below, a night not to be forgotten. Victories over Harlan and Lynch followed and then another highlight game against the Benham Tigers. We were both undefeated at 6-and 0, but Benham had not been scored on. Evarts won 19-7.

**The Wildcats went on to a 10-0 season** and according to the Louisville Courier-Journal we were the highest scoring team in the state with 269 points; not much by today’s scoring machines but it was an achievement then when players played both offense and defense.

Unfortunately there is one bitter note to this great season. Evarts and Somerset were selected to play in the first Recreation Bowl at Mt. Sterling. I regret to say the Somerset Briar Jumpers won 27-0.

**Now let's take a look at some of the Brakefield Boys** who comprised the teams of 1947-1948. As mentioned earlier, players went both ways, playing offense and defense. And, on the 24 man varsity of 1947 and 25 man varsity of 1948 we relied mostly on 16 players over the two year period. With no slight intended for all the others, I pass on memories of those I remembered most. And, much of this information comes from the most knowledgeable player on those teams, Jim Clem, the center on the 1947 team.

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**The Taylor Twins**, Delbert and Elbert. Twin brothers returned from the navy with two years eligibility left and played at the End position but after the '47 season they went to Detroit to work for the summer and never returned. They are deceased.

**Rodney Sturgill** at Right End in 1947. Rodney was one of those naturally gifted athletes who never had to train and didn't. He was a free spirit, stayed out at night, smoked, and drank. He was always in top notch condition, hard as nails, never seemed to tire. Coach Brakefield didn't have too many iron-clad rules and he let Rodney get by with a lot as long as he stayed after practice and run 20-25 laps.....which he did at least once a week or more. Was in the Army all through the Korean War. Went back to Closesplint, married, had two children and was electrocuted working with a TV antenna on the mountain.

**J.C. Luttrell** at End on the '48 team. A sophomore, he was small for the position at 5-7, 140 pounds but a tough, solid player. Deceased.

**Charles Hoskins**. A tackle in '47, moved to left end in '48. Tough outstanding player in very difficult conditions. His father was an invalid and Charles, being the oldest child, bootlegged whiskey at night in order to support the family. Could have been much better without that responsibility. (He did not graduate and several years later was killed by a son-in-law in a family dispute.)

**Robert Vaughn**. Big, likable, the only player weighing over 200 pounds, at 6-2 and 250 pounds, Big Rob played right tackle both years. Attended Hiwassee College until the Korean War, went into the Air Force and while home on leave he suffered a burst appendix and died.

**Joel Edmonds**. Could have started on most teams but because the guards were the best in the state he subbed for them in '47. 'Small but tough. When Jim Clem asked Coach why he kept Joel as a reserve in '47, he said "even Harold and Creed get tired sometime." He did become a starting guard in '48 when Harold moved to left tackle. Owned a bar and pool room in Lorain, Ohio. Died of heart attack.

**Creed Farley, right guard in '47 and '48.** Outstanding player at 5-9 and 160 pounds, he was All Cumberland Valley Conference and All-State both years, made the All-Southern team in '48 and invited to play in the Senior Glass Bowl in Toledo, Ohio, but declined. He married a girl from across the mountain at Gate City, Virginia, and worked in Kingsport, Tennessee. Deceased.

**Harold King, left guard in '47 moved to left tackle in '48.** He was the team captain in '48, made All Cumberland Valley Conference, and honorable mention All-State. Walked away from football scholarships at UK and WKU to work in radio while attending Western Kentucky University. Following Navy service in Korean War, returned to Bowling Green radio & WKU and eventually settled in Hopkinsville. After 25 years in radio, he formed his own advertising business. One of three remaining members of the '47 and '48 teams.

**Fullback Bill Smith.** A gentleman and a gentle man. Quiet, shy, soft spoken, and a powerful hard running fullback. Team captain in '47 and All Cumberland Valley Conference in '48. Had a scholarship at Western but left after freshman year to attend Eastern Kentucky University. Served in the Army with rank of captain during Korean War. Returned home and helped run the family business while coaching and teaching at Evarts High School. In retirement he suffered from diabetes, had both legs amputated and died of complications.

**Glenn Steele, Halfback/tailback.** Started in '47 and mostly in '48 but was hampered by a shoulder injury. Fastest man on the team. If he ever got around end no one was going to catch him. He did not like to be hit or to hit anyone...he just didn't like contact in a contact sport. Received scholarship to U-K but failed to graduate high school. Moved to St. Louis. Deceased.

**Robert Bunch, Halfback.** Started many games in '47 and '48. Fast, elusive, hard runner, nicknamed "Freight Train." Little is known of "Freight Train" but he moved to California. Deceased.

**The Quarterbacks were virtually interchangeable.** They each had their strengths and we were confident in both of them.

**Jimmy Brassfield, Quarterback.** Started in '47 and alternated in '48. Was more like a blocking back in Brakefield's single wing offense. Quiet, never seemed to get rattled. Now retired and resides in Loyal, Kentucky.

**Harry Lee, Quarterback,** alternated both years, started in '48. Harry was also a good blocking back and he had a strong arm, could throw a football through a brick wall. However, we rarely passed. Harry served in the Navy, married a New York girl and was a steel worker until he retired on Long Island.

**James “Banty” Bryant, Tailback in both ‘47 and ‘48.** An outstanding tailback at 5-5 and 140 pounds, built like a body builder. Tough, rugged, fast, elusive and extremely hard to see in those navy blue uniforms running behind the interference of Farley and King. He returned punts and kick-offs, played safety on defense. Went into the Army and listed as Killed/Missing in Action in Korea, November, 1950.

**Eugene Pack, Fullback.** Reserve fullback in ‘47 and ‘48, Gene Pack was the very capable relief for Bill Smith. A hard runner, quiet, soft spoken, friendly, always smiling. Nicknamed “Onion Head” he became one of the most decorated soldiers of the Korean War, was awarded the Silver Star. Returned to the mountains for a short while then moved to Detroit and suffered a fatal heart attack in the summer of 2006.

**Now, let’s take a look at two of the grittiest, toughest players I have ever seen.....Jimmy Clem and Jimmy Hendrickson.** In the summer of 1947 the player slated to be the starting center broke his leg. Coach Brakefield, in his infinite wisdom, chose the team manager to be the center. That may sound unusual to most people but we didn’t think anything of it. If Coach thought he could do it, well, he could do it.

**Jimmy Clem** lived next door to the coach, went everywhere with him, knew all the plays, knew his formations, his strategy, his thinking and he knew and understood us. So, Jimmy Clem, all of 5-7 and 130 pounds, became the starting center through all ten games. No one could have done any better. After school, Jim worked in the coal mines until drafted into the Army during the Korean War. Later, on the GI Bill, he attended Eastern Kentucky University majoring in business administration. He went to work for Magnavox as a junior accountant and after the acquisition by the Phillips Corporation he moved up to vice-president and comptroller of operations over five states and two foreign countries. He is now retired and resides in Greeneville, Tennessee.

**Jimmy Hendrickson, Center, 1948.** Pound for pound he may have been the toughest player to come out of Evarts High School. His father was killed in the coal mines when Jim was five years old. His mother raised him plus four brothers and two sisters by working two jobs. We nicknamed him “Cannonball” because his specialty was blocking punts, extra points and field goals. Somehow he found a way to get at the kicker. Hardly a practice went by that he didn’t suffer from leg cramps and/or charley horse but he always overcame it to get back into action. After Navy service during the Korean War he attended Eastern Kentucky University, became a store manager in Evarts and mayor of Evarts. He died of cancer.

We were a powerul, running team. Nearly always had five or six backs in double figures rushing. The most passes in one game was five...just one time. Some games we didn’t pass at all. Our punting game was very poor, But, boy, we sure could run.



Coach Brakefield used a lot of different formations. I guess there are several different names for them; the T, the Wing-T, the Single Wing, the Wish-Bone, The Tennessee Box, the Notre Dame Box and heaven only knows what else. I never paid any attention to it, I just did what was called for. We didn't know we were so versatile. We just did what Coach taught us. We weren't cocky but we did believe in our coaches and in our teammates. The linemen were confident that if they made the proper blocks that the backs would gain yardage. The backs were confident that the linemen would make those blocks.

We learned discipline (well, most of did), we learned the value of teamwork (especially if you worked at it), hardly anything worth having comes easy, and it sure is nice to hear a good word from someone you respect....makes you want to do even better.

Not until many years later did I think that it must have been unusual for athletes to call their coaches by their first name. We called Coach Brakefield "Pug." We called Coach Pike "Lockjkaw" and we called Coach Dozier "Russ."

When the August 1948 training camp began I had the feeling that season was going to be special and I saved every issue of the Harlan Daily Enterprise that had any kind of story about the team. I still have all those stories.

Jimmy Clem reminded me this year (2006) that Pug used to tell us, "It's not where you're from, it's where you're going. The lack of success is not due to strength or knowledge but the lack of will."

Thanks Pug. Thanks for the memories.