

Coach Baggage

Alexandrian remembers the Titans differently

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The winning coach of this week's U.S. Army All-American Bowl, a high school all-star game in San Antonio, will be presented with the Herman Boone Trophy. That statue is named in honor of the former T.C. Williams High School football coach, whom the film *Remember the Titans* immortalized.

Undeservingly so, Greg Paspatis would argue.

"I don't think the movie should be more important than the truth," he says.

Paspatis has written to the organizers of the All-American Bowl to challenge the appropriateness of naming the trophy after Boone. It's become something of a crusade. Ever since *Titans*' 2000 theatrical release, he has been contacting folks who promote Boone based on Denzel Washington's character in the movie, and not, Paspatis argues, based on reality. He doesn't think the real Boone deserves to be propped up as the face of T.C. Williams or the city of Alexandria.

That's Paspatis' school, too—class of '78. And his hometown.

So whenever he reads that an organization is honoring Boone or bringing him in to speak—Boone charges about \$15,000 per speech, according to Key Speakers Bureau, a California outfit that books public-speaking engagements—Paspatis sends out a packet of newspaper clippings from Boone's days at T.C. Williams that show a coach far less attractive than the Disney re-creation.

He doesn't like to dwell on the many misperceptions about T.C. Williams generated by the movie, which grossed more than \$100 million during its theatrical run and sold a

reported 10 million copies in video stores. That's an easy pursuit: A Disney press release pegged to the March release of a director's cut DVD touted the movie as being about a coach from "an all-black school"; a 2003 press release from the National University, a chain of community colleges in California, announced Boone's induction to the school's board of trustees by touting his reign at "all-black T.C. Williams High School." When prodded, Paspatis can point out that T.C. Williams was never an all-black school, even before Boone took over: All three Alexandria high schools—George Washington, Hammond, and Williams—had large white populations prior to being consolidated into one school, also named T.C. Williams and also majority white, in 1971.

And he can laugh at the perception that racial harmony, as opposed to sheer talent and numbers, was the cornerstone of the '71 team: The consolidation of three schools into one gave T.C. Williams more 11th and 12th graders than any other school in the state and made an already deep talent pool—Hammond had won the region title two years earlier—that much deeper. The headline in the Washington Post's 1971 prep-football preview, a clip that's not among those Paspatis mailed out to All-American Bowl organizers, asserts "Williams Loaded." Only if baited will Paspatis question Boone's X's-and-O's ability by pointing out that Bob Hardage coached Annandale, a relatively teensy, nearly all-white school mere miles west of the T.C. campus, to two of his three state championships during Boone's single-title reign.

Paspatis is far more intent on challenging Boone's film-induced reputation as a person worthy of lionizing. So the stories he's clipped from the archives of area newspapers come from several years after the 1971 season and focus on the accusations of mistreatment of players and a wholesale defection of his coaching staff that conspired to cause Boone's 1979 firing as coach.

There is, for example, a July 1978 clip from the Washington Star headlined "Three Aides Resign over Coach's Methods at T.C. Williams"; it contains several accusations that Boone verbally and mentally abused his players and quotes one of the departing assistants as saying he left the team because Boone's conduct was "detrimental to the kids involved." Another story, from the Alexandria Port Packet in June 1979, after Boone

had been fired, quotes a player who'd quit the team as saying a coaching change "had to happen" because of the turmoil the coach had created in the football program.

Among the few things that Titans got right, the way Paspatis sees it, is that Boone did indeed unite black and white players during his T.C. tenure. Just not exactly in the way the movie leads viewers to think.

"Herman Boone treated everybody horribly, no matter what race," says Paspatis, who calls Boone "arguably the most hated coach in the history of Northern Virginia high-school football."

The Army folks never responded to Paspatis after he sent his package of Boone clippings. Paspatis wasn't surprised.

"Nobody writes back," he says. "I deal in the facts: Herman Boone left the game of football in disgrace....It's like nobody wants to deal with this. This is a taboo subject everywhere. Some people in Alexandria know the truth, but they won't talk about it, because they're afraid it will hurt the image of the city or because it's a racial issue, so it's touchy. And it's easier now for people to want to hold Herman Boone up on a pedestal. All I do is point out facts. And Herman Boone is out there feeding the myth of the movie. It's a distortion of history."

Paspatis takes history very seriously, particularly when it comes to Alexandria and sports. He studied history at George Mason University and is a past president of the Alexandria Sportsman's Club, a throwback klatch that gathers monthly in a meeting room in Old Town. He is regarded as the club's premier sports historian and knows a whole lot more about schoolboy athletics than anybody else in the field, as he proved when the group commissioned him to catalog Alexandria's 100 Greatest Athletes for a publication released at the millennium.

Boone didn't make that list, but Paspatis is well versed on him all the same. Gregory Allen Howard, the Titans screenwriter, who was born in Norfolk, Va., and grew up in Vallejo, Calif., reportedly came up with his portrait of Boone after moving to Alexandria

in the '90s and hearing about vintage T.C. Williams football in conversations at a local barbershop.

Paspatis, meanwhile, played for Boone.

He was a kicker on T.C.'s 1977 team. That squad didn't win a state championship. But it played a pivotal role in Boone's tenure, a role that helped end his days as coach. The Titans, as per custom in those days, were rated as the top team in Northern Virginia heading into that season. But midway through the campaign, Boone's players voted to quit en masse because of the coach's behavior after a loss to Chantilly.

"We mutinied," says Paspatis. "Herman Boone's actions crossed the line, but really that incident was just one thing. It had been building up and building up because of the way he treated players, just singling guys out in the locker room to humiliate them in front of the whole team. Finally, the leadership of the team told him everybody had enough."

Boone later apologized to the team for that tirade, and players agreed to put their pads back on. But the team never met preseason expectations. Apart from the mutiny, really, these Titans aren't worth remembering. But Paspatis says that memory of the player revolt motivates him to continue the anti-hero campaign all these years later.

"I wish we had more success, and with all the talent we had on the team that year, I think we could have had more success," he says. "So you could say I'm a little bitter now about how things turned out. But at the time, I didn't know any better. I was just infatuated with being on the team at T.C., like everybody else. As the years went by and I learned more about the history of high-school football and how things were done at other schools with other coaches, I got a little more bitter. But, really, I'm more concerned with getting the truth out there and fighting the myth."

Boone says he makes "no apologies" for and has "no regrets" about his comportment during his run as T.C.'s coach. He agrees that the 1977 player uprising was the beginning of the end for him at the school. But he says his undoing was inevitable once his brand of discipline fell out of vogue in schools and coaching.

“I was very tough,” says Boone, calling from San Antonio and getting more fired up with every recollection. “I believe in discipline and respect. And one or two [players] who I jacked up, who I chastised, those one or two people...wanted things to go their way, instead of my way. My way was being challenged. A lot of people don’t like this, but the day they joined that team, I said, ‘This football team is not a democracy! It’s a dictatorship! And I’m the dictator! If you don’t like it, go find yourself a soccer team!’”

“You got one or two people who sit back and say they don’t want to play under a strict disciplinarian system and infiltrate the team with that hippie mentality. But it was at that time that teachers and coaches allowed students and players to call them by their first names, to walk into their classroom 15 minutes late with their pants hanging out....Herman Boone stood against that, and I became the bad guy. That was the times. Well, the hell with the times.”

Even if he’s not changing any minds, Paspatis promises to keep fighting.

“I’ve probably already sent something about this to every section at the Post but never heard anything back yet,” he says with a laugh. “Now I’m trying to put something together for the obituary section, so that when Boone passes away, they’ll have something ready.”—