

***DOES ANYONE REMEMBER THE <sup>VAULT</sup>  
TITANS? THE DESEGREGATION  
OF T.C. WILLIAMS HIGH IN  
1971 LED TO A STATE  
FOOTBALL TITLE AND A  
DISNEY MOVIE. THIRTY YEARS  
LATER ALL THAT PROGRESS  
HAS BEEN REVERSED. WHAT  
HAPPENED?***

BY TIM LAYDEN

**P**eople say that it can't work, black and white;  
Well here we make it work, every day.  
We have our disagreements, of course,  
But before we reach for hate,  
Always, always, we remember the Titans.

--CLOSING LINES FROM THE MOVIE Remember the Titans

On the first Friday in September, the eve of the 2001 football season, the Titans of T.C. Williams High in Alexandria, Va., gather for a pregame meal in the school's ground-floor cafeteria. It is a special evening for the players, symbolic of their persistence and survival. They have been together through a spartan, weeklong August training camp at a rural Virginia

military complex. No Game Boys. No television. No boom boxes. No headphones. They have practiced twice a day back home in the stifling late-summer heat. Now the Titans, wearing their blood-red game jerseys, sit in hard-back plastic chairs. At one o'clock the next afternoon they will face Chantilly High, and their effort will be measured in cold numbers. For now everyone is hopeful and all is right. The Titans are undefeated.

At the center of the room first-year coach Riki Ellison, a 41-year-old former NFL linebacker who won a collegiate national championship at USC and three Super Bowl rings with the San Francisco 49ers, stands and asks for quiet. His trademark Panama hat is tipped back on his head, his dress shirt soaked with sweat. "Everybody here at 10:30 tomorrow," Ellison says. "Tonight, enjoy your friends, enjoy your food. Tomorrow we take it to the house."

There are ripples of applause and supportive hoots. "Remember," adds Ellison, raising his right index finger into the air. "One family. One team. One town."



### ORIGINAL LAYOUT

His words are loaded with resonance. A year ago Disney released Remember the Titans, a film based on the true story of how the 1971 T.C. Williams team overcame the racial tension created by the combining of largely black and largely white high schools to meet federal desegregation guidelines and won the Virginia state Group AAA championship. The movie missed nary a note in demonstrating that we can all just get along, and it was a huge success, grossing \$115 million nationwide.

A year later it is still impossible to walk the halls at T.C. Williams High, a three-story brick building erected in 1965, without feeling the presence of the '71 Titans. Movie posters hang in many classrooms and offices. Tourists visiting Washington, D.C., make the 15-minute trip across the Potomac River to see the school. (They are often surprised to find that it looks nothing like it did in the movie; in fact, the film was made in Georgia.) During the summer a couple from Iowa pulled into the parking lot and asked to take a picture of principal John Porter, even though he had no connection to the '71 team. "It didn't matter," says Porter. "They wanted a photo of a Titan."

One long glass trophy case in the school's carpeted lobby is devoted to the achievements of '71 linebacker Gerry Bertier, who became a world-class Paralympic athlete after a car accident left him paralyzed from the waist down. Another display case honors the '71 Titans and the movie. A visitor counts faces in the team picture. Sure enough, 38 are white and 31 black, almost an even split. They made it work.

So much has changed. T.C. Williams, still one of the largest public high schools in Virginia (2,013 students in three grades), now fields one of the weakest football teams in the state. T.C. Williams was 1-9 in 2000, taunted at every game by opposing crowds alluding to the movie and by opposing players motivated to beat the Titans. A sign displayed during a game at Annandale High read FORGET THE TITANS, REMEMBER THE ATOMS. The Titans have been bad for a long time. T.C. Williams's 10-year record entering the 2001 season was 30-70. Its last winning season was 1995; its last trip to the state playoffs, 1990.

Even more jarring, in light of the feel-good racial harmony at the core of the movie, is the fact that T.C. Williams's football team is almost entirely devoid of the racial balance that made the '71 squad a beacon of social harmony in Alexandria. Of the 42 Titans who dressed for the first game this year, six are

white, and of those six only two were starters and only three played before garbage time in the 31-6 opening-game loss to Chantilly--a glaring homogeneity in a city whose population is nearly 60% white.

Those numbers don't tell the whole story, either. For more than a decade, T.C. Williams has held its athletes to higher academic standards for eligibility than most high schools in Virginia, requirements that are criticized emotionally in Alexandria and blamed for reducing the school's talent pool. There is also simmering resentment over the private funding lavished on the school's predominantly white crew program.

For all that has changed at T.C. Williams, many of the racial divisions portrayed at the start of the movie exist today. "The story that nobody in the school system or the community wants to tell is that 30 years have gone by since the events in that movie, and nothing has changed," says Thurston McClain, one of Ellison's first-year assistants and also an Alexandria fireman. "It's still 1971."

In 1996 screenwriter Gregory Allen Howard was fed up with living in L.A. and moved to Alexandria, where he began casting about for a new project. "I was sort of scrambling for an idea," he recalls. "I couldn't help but notice that Alexandria seemed to be a very integrated city. I asked people how it happened. They kept talking about this football team back in 1971."

Howard researched the '71 Titans and made contact with Herman Boone, the black man who coached T.C. Williams at the time and whose character, portrayed by Denzel Washington, is at the center of the movie. Boone, a proud man, resisted. "This guy called, said he wanted to make a movie, and I didn't believe him," Boone says. Howard wore him down, and Boone eventually helped him work through the pipeline of flummoxed former Titans who were just as shocked that Hollywood would be interested in their story.

The resulting movie is a fairy-tale treatise on race, youth and football. It is full of hoary cliches and cartoonish characters (the bigoted white girlfriend of the star white linebacker, the redneck assistant coach) but succeeds as wholesome entertainment and what Howard calls "a different paradigm on race: You don't have to like each other to get along; you just have to respect each other." A quick summary: The two high schools are joined; the no-nonsense black man is named coach instead of the legendary white coach (Bill Yoast, played by Will Patton). Players rebel, then bond and win all their games amid social unrest. A divided city celebrates as one. Fade to black.

Those who lived the '71 season can nitpick the celluloid version of their lives, but they are virtually unanimous in their overall assessment of the film: "The movie captures the spirit of the team and the time," says Rufus Littlejohn, a starting linebacker in '71. The movie has brought the players together in a sort of nonstop reunion. They have a website. Groups of them drive together to speak to community groups and the like. The movie is shown and, afterward, questions are answered by the Real Original Titans.

Nobody, however, has been affected as much as Boone. A crusty man given to speech-making to even the smallest audience (one listener will do), he was signed last fall by the American Program Bureau, a Boston-based agency that counts Mikhail Gorbachev and Johnnie Cochran among its more than 200 speakers. Boone makes speeches at colleges, high schools and corporate team-building seminars more than 20 times a month for fees as high as \$12,000 per appearance. "We thought demand for Herman would die out when people stopped going to the movie," says Trinity Ray, who represents Boone. "It's been the opposite. He's developed a following almost separate from his character in the film."

Yoast accompanies Boone roughly four times a month, and the two men, close friends, work the audience together. "I have to pinch

myself," Boone says. "I really do."

Best of all--better than small fame or big money for any of these men--is the knowledge that the message of the movie is real. Coming together in 1971 had been every bit as difficult for them as the film conveys. At the end of the previous school year, administrators had brought together returning football players from all three of the schools that were being merged. (In real life T.C. Williams, George Washington High and Francis C. Hammond High were joined, not two schools.) The players sat on the tiered risers in the T.C. Williams band room in three distinct groups, segregated mostly by the colors of their skin and of their school shirts. "I was one of the last to walk in, saw where everybody was sitting and thought, Oh, yeah, this is going to work real well," says Jerry Buck, who was a starting offensive lineman on the '71 team.

Players fought even more than those in the movie. "Vicious fights," says Carl Turner, a running back on the '71 team who teaches middle school in Alexandria and coaches jayvee basketball at T.C. Williams. "Black guys fighting white guys, black guys from G.W. fighting black guys from T.C., white guys from Hammond fighting white guys from G.W." In the end, though, says Boone, "the film is about diversity and trust and courage, and that's what we found."

And the part about uniting a city? Many say it's true. "There had been, for several years, a great deal of adult tension in the city," says Melvin Miller, a retired Alexandria attorney who was active in the city's roiling civil rights movement in the '60s and '70s and later served as chairman of the city's school board. "That football team helped soothe tempers. It's true. It really brought the city together."

Boone coached T.C. Williams for seven years after '71. His record in Alexandria was a solid 62-19-4, but he never won another state title, and the Titans went 4-5-1 in 1978, his last season. His

replacement was Paul (Doc) Hines, one of his assistant coaches, who went 13-14-3 in three years before Glenn Furman, another former Boone assistant, began a 10-year run that included state championships in 1984 and '87. In the middle of the 1991 season Furman's final team was 3-0 and nationally ranked, but it fell apart in a five-game losing streak. That began a slide that has continued until today, leaving little similarity between the movie team and the current squad.

How did the Titans devolve from inspirational diversity and on-field excellence to resegregated ineptitude? They had help.

Like many other U.S. cities, Alexandria has changed demographically. The availability of affordable middle-class housing diminished until the majority of the city's residents were either very poor (and often members of a minority) or very well-to-do (and often older, with grown children, or single and childless). In 1970 Alexandria's population of 110,938 was 85% white, and 77% of the students at T.C. Williams were white. Today the city's population, 128,283, is still 60% white, but the student population at T.C. Williams, the lone public high school in Alexandria, is only 27% white. The mandatory school desegregation portrayed in *Remember the Titans* has been reversed, in part because many middle-class white families have left the city. In 1970 more than 21,000 white couples owned homes in Alexandria; now around 14,500 do.

By contrast, the number of low-income or publicly subsidized housing units in the city, many of them populated by minority families, has increased to 4,925 from 1,125 in the days of the original Titans. "If you don't have a plan in place to keep integration functioning, you'll get resegregation," says Gary Orfield, a professor of education and social policy at Harvard and co-director of Harvard's Civil Rights Project.

As the city's demographics changed, so did support for school programs. Football, the sport with the need for the most

funding, suffered worst. "The school has let football slide, and the community hasn't supported football," says Patrick Welsh, who has taught English at T.C. Williams for 30 years. "The sport has been left to die."

Another kind of trouble contributed to the decline. In the winter of 1987, following Furman's second state title, all-state linebacker Tracy Fells was arrested and charged with possession of crack cocaine with intent to distribute. He was acquitted of that charge, but he was later convicted of the same offense, and in 1989 he was sentenced to a 20-year term (with a minimum of 17 years in prison). Later, another Titans player was arrested for cocaine and handgun possession. Players from both the '84 and '87 teams told SI that drug use and drug dealing were rampant among the Titans throughout the middle of the decade. "I can think of at least seven guys who were dealing drugs on the '84 team," says a starter on that year's squad, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Bill Dawes, who played on the '87 and '88 teams and is an actor living in New York City, says, "On both of my teams there was drug trafficking and drug use. You would hear conversations in the locker room. Nobody was hiding anything. I used to give some of my teammates rides home to the projects, and they talked openly about the drug trafficking on the team, and it was by no means limited to Tracy Fells."

Almost in concert with the rise and fall of Furman's teams in the '80s, the Alexandria school board stiffened the academic standards for T.C. Williams students participating in interscholastic sports. Alexandria had always used the state requirement that an athlete simply pass four courses, but in the early '80s it raised the minimum grade point average to 1.55 for the marking period prior to the relevant sports season (the previous spring for football players). Before the 1991 football season the minimum GPA was raised again, to 2.0 (a C average). The issue was--and remains--controversial, because under

Virginia High School League rules athletes can play with a 1.0 average. Alexandria is one of the few school districts in the state to have raised requirements on its own. Many people in the city believed that the toughened standards were aimed at the football program and its troubles. "There was a feeling of, Let's not let the football team embarrass us anymore," says Welsh. "The school board and the administration seemed to feel that a harsh C rule would clean up the team."

Furman argued against the rule. Boone, who was retired from coaching but still teaching driver's education in the district, argued against it. Yoast, who was still working with the football team, argued against it. "Nobody seemed to realize that the kids who were going to be excluded by the rule were the ones who were most in need of supervision between three and six o'clock," says Yoast.

Paul Masem, the Alexandria superintendent from 1987 to '94, brought the 2.0 rule to Alexandria after having implemented it in the Little Rock school system, and he scoffs at the coaches' claims. "The only people who complained were coaches afraid of losing players," says Masem, who is white and who is now retired after having worked as a superintendent in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. "T.C. Williams is a big school with broad-based programs. Students doing remedial work could qualify for sports. It isn't that difficult."

Miller, the retired Alexandria attorney, who is black and who was a member of the school board when it passed the 2.0 rule, agrees with Masem. "Left alone, the system wouldn't have helped kids below 2.0 get into college," says Miller. Yet the C rule remains a lightning rod at T.C. Williams; it's one of the first factors mentioned in any discussion of the football program's struggles.

As significant to the football program was the deterioration of facilities. When Ellison took over last spring, he found his only practice field was a mess of weeds and dirt. The blocking sleds

were decades old, rusted and nearly useless. Locker room showers and toilets were filthy and so clogged that they couldn't be used. "I was appalled by the condition of our facilities, especially the locker room," says a former Alexandria administrator who has left the district. "There had to have been a complete breakdown in reporting and maintenance, from the facilities manager to the athletic director to the principal of the school."

Because football requires more equipment and more funding than most sports, it was hardest hit by such neglect. The weight room, according to Ellison, was a wreck. Often T.C. Williams's junior varsity and freshman football teams are pushed off practice fields by youth soccer teams. Funding for football is approximately \$12,500 a year, from an athletic budget of \$65,000, says athletic director Aly Khan Johnson, who in the mid-'80s was the school's cross-country and track coach. "That figure has been steady for many years," he says.

Eric Henderson, who was the football coach for two years before Ellison took over (record: 4-16, including one forfeit for an eligibility violation in 2000), says he spent \$5,000 of his own money to improve the program. "I asked for help from the school, but I couldn't get any," says Henderson. "At one point I was told to cut kids because the school didn't have enough equipment for them." (Johnson denies that Henderson was asked to cut players.)

White participation, meanwhile, had waned. Neither of Furman's state title teams had more than five white players who made significant contributions. The '84 squad had a certain amount of black-white unity, of the sort depicted in the hilarious scene in *Remember the Titans* in which black players initiate Gerry Bertier into the world of Yo Mama put-downs, in effect making him one of their own. Mike Porterfield, a white starting offensive lineman on the '84 team who would go on to row crew for the U.S. national team and coach the women's pair (without coxswain) to a bronze medal at the 2000 Olympics, says, "The experience I had at T.C.,

playing football with black guys, mixing with them every day, is something I've never replicated. I loved it and I miss it. The Yo Mama scene in the movie cut right to my heart, because that was my experience."

Three years later, however, Dawes, a starting wide receiver in '88, had a different impression of the team. "By the time I came through, it was clear that the team belonged to the black guys," he says.

Today it is rare to find a white player contributing to the football program. "Most white kids around here wouldn't even think of coming out for football," says Josh Freeman, a white senior who has been in the football program for four years and was T.C. Williams's starting center before a knee injury ended his season in early September. "They think it's a black sport."

"That's a problem," says Yoast. "Not because you need white kids to be a good football team--you don't--but because in Group AAA in Virginia you need all your good athletes on the field. Some of them are going to be white."

Says Marvin Watkins, a senior wide receiver on this year's team, "Most of the good teams we play have big white guys and quick black athletes. We don't."

Visitors to T.C. Williams are greeted by the lobby's Hall of Nations, a display of flags representing the more than 80 birth countries of the school's vastly diverse population. Diversity, however, does not breed interaction. "Alexandria has a huge inter-national community," says former superintendent Masem, "but the community is socially split, and the school is socially split."

Inside T.C. Williams that dynamic produces something dangerously close to separate-but-equal facilities. "There are no racial clashes at T.C.," says Jay Blount, a Yale freshman who was

president of the school's student government last year. "There is no anger, and nobody cares what your race or national origin is. But people stick with their own social class. I saw lots of black kids every day, but I hung out with my white friends, took my AP [advanced placement] classes and rowed crew."

Alexandria city manager Phil Sunderland, who sent three children through T.C. Williams, says, "T.C. tends to differentiate by class and race and social network. We have to do a better job of removing that."

T.C. Williams has lost many white athletes to private schools. Billy Schweitzer, a redshirt freshman quarterback on scholarship at Virginia, was raised in Alexandria but attended St. Stephen's & St. Agnes School there. "I grew up playing rec sports with T.C. Williams kids," says Schweitzer, "but when it comes to high school, you don't benefit athletically or academically from going there. If your parents have the means to send you to private school, you go."

Nothing, though, illustrates the struggle of the Titans football program more than its comparison with crew. Thanks to aggressive fund-raising outside the school budget by well-heeled Alexandria parents, T.C. Williams's crew operation, with its \$1.3 million boathouse on the banks of the Potomac, would be the envy of many colleges. "The crew program is outstanding," says Blount. "The facilities are incredible. On a scale of one to 10, crew is a 10, and the football program is about a two."

On a warm September afternoon the T.C. Williams boys' crew coach, Mike Penn, stands on the floor of the cavernous Alexandria Schools Rowing Facility, which was built by the city for the school district in 1983. There are 25 four- and eight-oared shells in large racks, along with several double shells. A fully equipped eight-oared shell costs about \$27,000, and with the help of the parent-driven Alexandria Crew Boosters, the team buys one eight-oared shell a year. The boosters sponsor six fund-raising

activities each year and operate an endowment worth almost \$40,000. "An awful lot of good people have given time to this program," says Penn.

On the second floor of the boathouse is a sprawling weight room that, by comparison, humbles the football team's musty basement facility. Dozens of T.C. rowers have gone on to row in college. There is little crossover between crew and football, despite the former's preponderance of tall, strong athletes and the latter's need for the same. Says Clayton Wynne, a 5'10", 175-pound senior rower, "The football team isn't very good, and that's part of the reason the white kids don't want to do it."

Black kids don't row, either. Penn says that of the 87 boys and 93 girls in the program, 12 are black. "I've been hassled about the lack of participation by minority kids," says Penn. "I've tried for years to get black kids to come out for crew. It's difficult breaking down stereotypes. Plus, I've had several African-American kids come to me who couldn't pass the swimming test." (The test, says Penn, requires a 100-meter swim and an unaided two-minute float.) When Penn attended a preseason football meeting, black football assistants McClain and John Morehead say they got into a heated debate with him over the lack of cross-pollination between the sports.

"To make a generalization, the crew parents represent where the money and power are," says Porterfield. "The parents in the football program are not in the same position." Therefore, the football program has had only the resources that the school provided, and those were not enough.

After his team's opening loss to Chantilly, a defeat that would be followed by three more losses by a combined score of 95-20, Riki Ellison walked out the front door of T.C. Williams High, shuffling under the weight of a heavy briefcase, an ink-jet printer (for copying game plans and play selection cards) and 30

years of history. "We're going to get this done," he said. "I'm not quitting until we do."

Ellison brings an eclectic resume to his job. Born in New Zealand, he went to high school in Arizona before playing at USC in the late '70s, when that program was producing some of the most talented college teams in history. He also played 10 years in the NFL (seven with the 49ers, three with the Los Angeles Raiders) before retiring after the '92 season. An undersized linebacker, he played on brains and guts, "and when the fight was gone, it was gone," he says. After retirement Ellison lived for four years in New Zealand with his wife and four children, playing rugby and getting the NFL out of his system. In 1996, divorced, he returned to the U.S. and took a consulting job with Lockheed Martin, the defense and aerospace company, and moved to northern Virginia.

As part of his work with the company's philanthropic efforts, Ellison visited twice a week with students at T.C. Williams, and in 2000 he sought a position as an assistant football coach. He was not hired. He took a job helping coach at St. Albans School, an exclusive prep school in D.C. It got him back in the game but was unfulfilling. "I think the kids at St. Albans got something from me, but it was nothing that could change their lives," says Ellison. "They were incredibly bright, but privileged and coddled. I wanted to do something more." The T.C. Williams job opened up last winter, and this time Ellison was hired. He hasn't stopped running since.

As part of his staff, Ellison hired Morehead, McClain, Tony Lee and Steve Miner, black men with high school coaching experience and with standing in the community. Meanwhile, Ellison courted influential members of the community to exert pressure on the school administration. A committee formed by departing Alexandria superintendent Herb Berg recommended that \$240,000 of the T.C. Williams budget be allocated for athletics. A payment of \$100,000 was eventually approved, of which \$81,952 was immediately spent

on football. "If I had known we needed funds for athletics two or three years ago, I would have found the money then," says Berg. "T.C. Williams should showcase football."

With those funds the weight room was refurbished, blocking sleds were replaced, the practice field was resodded and, for \$15,000, the Titans spent a week bonding at Fort Pickett in central Virginia. The same committee recommended a change in the 2.0 GPA standard, so that it goes into effect in an athlete's sophomore year--in effect, giving freshmen a year to satisfy the requirements. Grades remain an issue:

Ellison enticed 200 students to sign a preliminary tryout sheet last spring, and 87 of them were ineligible. Of his 36 top players 18 are at risk of falling below 2.0.

Community supporters have formed a football booster club, seeking donations on the crew model. But with financial assistance from a private foundation, Ellison has been able to start the Odyssey Program, which will provide after-hours study halls and SAT prep work, among other academic support, to football players. He also is using other incentives to try to motivate his team. Players who achieve a significant jump in their GPA will receive a pair of basketball shoes. Those who reach the highest academic goals set for them can earn a letterman's jacket. "Work for this," Ellison tells his players. "I'm hearing rumors that some of you don't bring books home. Start."

Still, the team is too small, too weak and too inexperienced to win in a strong suburban league, although last Friday night's tough 13-6 loss to West Springfield High sounded the first encouraging note of the season. "Not one player will play at any level of college ball," says Donald Futrell, a former assistant to Boone and Furman. (Ellison disagrees, and thinks that 6'2", 190-pound junior tailback Tony Hunt will play Division I-A ball.) The school administration has asked Ellison to improve the diversity of the program. Maybe it wants support from

affluent parents. Maybe it would like the team picture to look more like that of the '71 Titans. "There's so much to do," says Ellison. "Change the environment, make kids proud to play football and, most important, make football a vehicle to take them somewhere in life."

In the week before the football season began, Herman Boone sat on the bleachers next to the T.C. Williams football field, recalling another time. He lives with his wife of 39 years, Carol, in a house not far from the school. It's the same house in which the windows were broken by a toilet full of feces heaved into his living room by his racist critics in that fall of 1971, the same house in which Boone now writes speeches about bringing us all together. "It makes me sad to see what's happened at T.C., with so much trouble winning and so few white boys on the team," he says. He pauses to look across the light-green late-summer grass and continues, "Football can bring your school together, it really can."

His words are a sweet, distant memory, re-formed as a wish.

**T**. C. Williams football is now almost devoid of the buoyant racial balance that made the '71 team a beacon of social harmony. "I was appalled by the condition of our facilities," says one former city official. "There was a complete breakdown in maintenance."

"The film is about diversity and trust and courage," says Boone, the '71 coach, "and that's what we found."

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