

Williams' Success Is Seen in Black and White

By Leonard Shapiro

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IT IS ONLY a few minutes before 9 a.m. and still the buses roll in to T.C. Williams High School, spewing forth their cargoes of young blacks, coming from the projects and row houses on Alexandria's east end, and young whites, from the ranches, split-levels and high-rises over to the west.

The sidewalks paralleling King Street are still teeming with youngsters making their way to school on foot. Already the parking lot is full.

Gary Bertier has been lucky. Somehow, he has managed to find a spot for his 1961 Volvo, the one he purchased last summer after two years of saving. Now he walks quickly into school, wrapped comfortably in his varsity letter jacket, adorned with the memorabilia of his varied and highly successful athletic career.

THIS PARTICULAR morning he has been summoned to the office of Herman Boone, his coach, to tell a visitor about the phenomenal success of Williams' undefeated and No. 1-ranked football team.

It has been nearly two months since Bertier and 81 other young men assembled on the field behind the school for the start of practice. They had come from all over Alexandria, not by choice but because the school board had voted to consolidate the city's three high schools into one.

The football team, starting two weeks before classes opened, would present the first opportunity to see whether the kids could get along.

"AT FIRST, I WAS very displeased —yes, hateful, about changing schools. I even petitioned against it," said Bertier, a starting linebacker at Hammond (99 per cent white) for two years. "I didn't know very many blacks, and the ones I played against I didn't like very much.

"Anyway, the first week of practice, the coaches put in a policy of meeting a new person every day. Then we went away to football camp. That's when we really got together. When we came back, we were a football team, not just a bunch of guys with everyone looking out for himself.

"Now we all goof around together,

white and black. We go to parties. Even the people I thought I hated are my friends now. No one skips practice. We worked as monitors when school started to try and relieve some of the racial tension. It's been marvelous, the greatest experience I've ever had."

As Bertier spoke, his coach, who happens to be black, sat quietly in a corner, listening to the conversation. It had not been an easy two months for Herman Boone, by any means, but he would not speak at length until Bertier left.

BOONE, 37, CAME to Williams two years ago from North Carolina, where he had been one of the most successful coaches in that state. He served as backfield coach at Williams, and would have been content to do the same this year, until the reorganization. Like most of his colleagues, he applied for the head coaching job.

Some Alexandrians still insist he was chosen because of his color, as a concession to the black community and its city councilman, Ira Robinson. Bill Yoast, the Hammond coach, had seniority, and he had won the Northern

Virginia title in 1969. Why pick Boone, they wanted to know. Boone had no answer.

"All I know is that if I were selected for this position solely on the basis of color, I would never have taken the job," he said. "I couldn't sleep at night."

Nevertheless, there was some resentment when the appointment was first announced. Some of the white players at Hammond were talking about skipping football entirely. The blacks had heard that several white assistant coaches still talked in terms of "niggers."

"WE WERE VERY worried about it," said Julius Campbell, a black defensive end. "It just made us work that much harder. I think I can honestly say we've had no problems."

"Really," said Boone, "the kids have been fantastic, the coaches just tremendous. We regard ourselves as one big family. Our principal (Dr. Arnold Oates) is a football nut. He comes to every game. He'll even dig into his pocket if we're short.

"The people in the city have really

joined in with me to make this thing work. I get calls before each game from businessmen wishing us well. After a game, my phone doesn't stop ringing with people offering congratulations.

"If prejudices are there, the people who hold them should be in Hollywood, Calif., because they're some damn good actors.

"It didn't have to be that way. The kids could have come out and said, 'hell, no, I'm going to transfer.' Luckily, they didn't. You just can't coach a attitude."

THAT IS WHY HE scoffs at the contention of his critics that T. C. Williams could hardly help but go undefeated. Look at all the talent he had to work with, they tell him.

"It's pure nonsense," said Boone. "Northern Virginia said to us even before the first day of practice that we were a super team. That put a tremendous strain on the kids that I think is unfair. Just remember, you're dealing with high-school students. It's very important to recognize that."

Down at school headquarters, admin-

istrators are obviously delighted with Williams' record, with Boone's remarkable success in adjusting to his rather precarious position, and, most important, with the role the team has played in calming the school's racial problems.

"I think it's pretty obvious that there's been a tremendous spillover into the entire system because of that team," said John Stubbins, director of secondary education. "The parents are thrilled to death to see these kids getting along, and it's really helped. A lot of minds have been changed at the dinner table, believe me."

DOUG PORETZ, director of information for the schools and a 1963 graduate of Hammond, believes "the football team has captured the imagination of the entire city.

"It goes back to the old concept of the central school, where the community channels all its energies into the school," said Poretz. "One school captures the spirit of the city instead of dividing it between three schools."

"All I know is that we're winning," said Gary Bertier. "And I've never enjoyed myself more in my whole life."