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Sports Editor

Everybody Called Him 'Coach'

Nobody ever called him Mr. Jones. A few friends might have called him "J.J.," but to the literally hundreds of Greenevillians who knew him, he was known simply as "Coach Jones."

Coach John J. Jones died Tuesday. He was a football coach and an educator for more than 30 years, most of that time in Greeneville, first as head coach at George Clem, then after integration, at Greeneville High as an assistant coach.

"He was an integral part of our school," Greeneville High Principal Gene King, who taught and coached alongside Coach Jones, said. "He was highly respected, both as an educator and as a football coach, by students as well as other teachers."

Coach Jones earned his nickname of "coach," and people referred to him in that manner out of respect more than anything else.

"Nobody ever called him Mr. Jones," King said. "He was always 'Coach Jones.'"

He and his wife, Fannye, moved to Greeneville in 1950 from Benham, Ky., where he had been serving as football coach. He became head coach at George Clem School his wife served as a member of the faculty there.

His reputation as a motivator and a tactician began to grow immediately at George Clem. He coached his teams to championship seasons in the old Tri-Cities Athletic Association in 1955-56 and 1956-57, and he was named that association's coach of the year in 1959-60. His Wolverines never had a losing season.

Integration came about here in 1963, and Coach went to Greeneville High School as a guidance counselor, science teacher and an assistant coach; he served there until his retirement in 1982.

"Coach was a military man, a veteran of World War II, and he was a tough customer," King remembers. "Don Riley was head football coach, and we had some pretty strong football teams during those days. Coach Riley involved Coach Jones heavily in the coaching duties of those teams."

The 1960s were troubled times in that race relations across the country were strained. Many local people credit Coach Jones for helping to build good race relations during the integration of schools.

"He helped ease tensions," King recalls. "We had some problems just like everybody else, but certainly not to the extent that some other towns had to endure."

His accomplishments did not go unnoticed.

Coach was inducted into the East Tennessee Football Foundation Hall of Fame at the University of Tennessee in 1974. In 1992 he was inducted into the Alfred E. Beach High School Athletic Hall of Fame in Savannah, Ga., which was his alma mater. He also received the Greeneville Exchange Club's Book of Golden Deeds during that year.

Dr. Hilton Seay, who was principal at GHS in 1992 and presented the Book of Golden Deeds to Coach Jones, told the gathering that night that Jones' teaching and coaching style touched fellow teachers as well as the students.

"I'll never forget once observing how he taught a group of slow learners a certain botany project," Seay said. "The class was able to watch seeds turn into plants under the guidance of Coach, and I think that captured their interest better than anything we could have tried from the book. Coach Jones not only taught school, he taught life."

In 1994, Coach Jones was inducted into the Northeast Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame during a ceremony in Johnson City.