

## A Small Town's Dynasty

David Lee

As you ride down the streets of Lincolnton, you feel a certain calmness of small-town atmosphere, the kind that makes you want to go back time and time again. This peacefulness, along with hospitality, is what small Southern towns are known for. But as you reach the wide street in the middle of town that the football stadium is on, the tall, metal light poles and the concrete stadium wall loom over everybody who rides by. This combination of peacefulness and intimidation is reflected in the citizens that hold the football team so near to their hearts. There is a politeness that you can't find anywhere else: the small-town, approachable style of people that you only see in movies. However, each and every one of them also has the serious side that is brought out whenever Red Devils football is talked about or watched on Friday nights. This combination is what makes Lincolnton so unique as a football town.

Lincolnton is the kind of town where you can leave your doors unlocked, strangers greet you by waving as you meet them on the road, and church and family are instilled from the beginning. "I like the people here," coach Larry Campbell's wife, Connie Campbell, says. "I've raised my family here. It's just a small community that supports you. It's just home." (Nelson, 332)

The ride through town takes a total of one minute, possibly adding an extra minute or two if stopped by one of the three stoplights. As Jon Nelson states in his book, Backroads and Backfields, Lincolnton is a town where "you can even leave the doors to your white Chevrolet Z-71 pick up truck open." (332) He refers to Coach Campbell's truck that is regularly parked outside of his office. "Just don't be surprised when someone leaves something inside of it- instead of the all-too-common practice of taking something out and not returning it later. If you're Larry Campbell you could get anything from food as a gift on the passenger seat or the new Brooks and Dunn CD with a post-it note attached

to listen to a particular track.” (Nelson, 332)

A popular description of Lincolnton, one that I use to describe it to non-residents, is that everybody knows everybody and they more than likely know your business. The old last names of the town that have been around for many generations are still going strong. There are several large families in Lincolnton that take up more than a page of the rather small area phone book. And several still hold the same property that has been in the family for generations. If you ride through the countryside, you will notice houses grouped together at some points. Many times, they are homes of different generations of a family living on the same or bordering property.

There is plenty of gossip that makes its way around town, but there are plenty of good hearts that come to the aid of fellow church members, neighbors, or complete strangers. We went through a tragedy with a car wreck once,” Coach Campbell remembers. “I had a nephew killed and one paralyzed as they were heading home. And this town took up enough money to buy my brother a van. And they didn't even know him! They were able to transport their crippled child because of that and I don't know how they came up with the money for something like that in a small town like this.” (Nelson, 332)

Evidence of how special the town is to its citizens appears often in the form of former residents, students, and football players that come back to visit. While at high school, it is regularly said from students that there is nothing to do in Lincolnton and that they will never live here or even come back. But visits or taking up residence in the county happens to a lot of those that said it the most. This is the case with many of the former Devils football players as well. “It's not like the movie 'Varsity Blues,’” Augusta sports broadcaster John Hart says. “You'll see his (Campbell) old players show up for home games or randomly show up for practice. And I think that's pretty cool. There will be players who have made names for themselves and will return home.” (Nelson, 332)

It is easy to spark up debate with fellow citizens over various topics, such as politics and sports, at any place in town. The “sit-a-spell”-type atmosphere that is portrayed in movies and shows like O'

Brother Where Art Thou and The Andy Griffith Show are thought to be a thing of the past. However, it is a regular occurrence in this small town, and the most common topic is Lincoln County football.

Some of the most important moments in the movie *Radio* were shot in a local barbershop. Coach Harold Jones went to the barbershop following each game to discuss how the game went with the usual group of old residents. You can find similar moments wherever you go in the town of Lincolnton. Groups of local citizens will discuss previous games, upcoming games, and just the team in general whenever they get together. It is rare to see the knowledge and experience that you can find from the fans in Lincolnton.

### **A Legend of a Coach**

Lincoln County's head football coach, Larry Campbell, is known as a legend in the area of Georgia high school football. He started coaching the team in 1972, but originally moved to Lincolnton to coach the newly-formed baseball program the year before. In his first season as football coach, the Red Devils went 3-7, one win better than the previous year. The following year, his Devils went 8-1-1. They haven't had a losing season since. From then on, reaching the title game has been expected in Lincoln County every year.

Coach Campbell has over 400 career wins, which is a state record. He has been to 18 title games in 36 seasons, winning 11 of those 18 appearances. When great high school coaches in Georgia are talked about, the name Campbell is the first to come out of the mouth. He has been a mainstay on the sideline for 36 straight years. While there have been rumors of leaving for a higher job throughout the years, and more recently the annual discussion of retirement, Coach Campbell has never left the team, school, or town.

“I've probably kept him here a few times,” Connie says. “Sometimes the grass looks greener on the other side, but then you look again and it's probably not. Money-wise we've probably been better off had we moved from town to town, but it's not all about money. Money isn't everything. I like

Lincolnton. This is a small town and you have your good things and your bad, but I've always loved being here. I'm glad we stayed and I hope he is, too.” (Nelson, 327)

As is the case with a coach on any level, Coach Campbell has had his share of pressures through the years. Long-time Red Devil statistician, Johnny Walton, offers his take: “Coach Campbell has certainly taken Lincoln County football to a sustained outstanding effort that very, very few schools can match. LCHS has not had a losing season since 1972. If we do, there will be grumbling. I don't think winning is taken for granted, but it is certainly expected in Lincoln County.” (Walton, Johnny. 7 Nov. 2008)

“I've thought about it a time or two just to go somewhere and have a clean start,” Coach Campbell says. “You know? Get away from the handful of folks that don't agree with you. But we've always bit the dust and just hung on.” (Nelson, 326)

Since the turn of the century, the yearly talk around the area has been the future of Lincoln County's legendary coach. After each season, the Red Devils and their fans stay up-to-date on Coach Campbell's plans of either continuing his coaching or hanging it up after thirty-plus years. The younger members of the fan base hold an uncertainty of not knowing the team's future beyond Coach Campbell, since they have only known him to be on the sideline. There is one thing all citizens know without a doubt: the passion and talent level in Lincoln County will never falter.

### **Buddy Bufford Field**

At first, you see nothing but trees and homes lining the road. It appears to be another nice street in the town of Lincolnton. But ride a little further and the tall concrete wall appears, looming over the parking lot adjacent to the football stadium. For opposing teams, this means they are about to go through a brutal fight on the football field. It is the front entrance to Buddy Bufford Field, which is home to the Lincoln County Red Devils.

The wall looms large over the fans and players that enter it. You walk through the cut out

entrance, like the door to a castle, and immediately stand with the field before you. The wall lists all of the region and state titles that the Devils have won in football through the years, as well as state records that they hold. Opposing teams cannot help but notice this as they arrive at the stadium. The gate, and what it represents, is definitely a big intimidation factor. It shows that championship football in the state of Georgia runs through Lincoln County and that concrete entrance.

“Lincolnton and Lincoln County High School just kind of appear to you out of nowhere,” Hart explains. “There’s all these trees and darkness- especially that time of year- in the winter when they’re in the playoffs. And when you’re going there for the first time you see the haze of the lights over the trees and as you come into Lincolnton.” (Nelson, 333)

Walton adds, “To me, the fact that we still play home games on the same piece of dirt where we started in 1922 adds to the aura. Many schools put their field behind or to the side of the high school. I think Lincolnton is special in that our stadium is prominently in front of the school.”

“It’s almost like in ‘Field of Dreams’ where the corn field was and then there’s a baseball field,” Hart says. “The trees just parted and there’s just a field out of all this nothingness. The lights and the atmosphere were, and I don’t want to sound cliché by using the word ‘electric,’ but it was different than any other football environment I’ve ever seen.” (Nelson, 333) Hart graduated from the University of Georgia and has seen his share of football environments.

Many opponents will tell you that Buddy Bufford Field is the toughest place to play in high school football. It has an intimidation factor that experts talk about in college and pro football. Opposing teams look around them and see a sea of red in three different directions: the two end zones and the home side. The large concrete stands on the home side sit literally almost on the sideline, and they hover over the field due to the structure being as tall as it is. The school gymnasium sits on the

other side of the fence at one end zone, the one closest to the band and student section, leaving no place for the noise to go except on the field. The away stands were built recently for the purpose of serving as the new home side, but Lincoln County's fans refused to leave the concrete. Those stands sit farther away and are not as tall. Also, a nice touch is they- the visitor's bleachers- are red and white, which are Lincoln County's school colors.

The fence that surrounds the field is always mentioned along with the entrance whenever the stadium is talked about. Unlike many schools' fields, there is no track separating the stands from the field. People line the fence that surrounds the field and congratulate Devils players after a touchdown as well as bark at opposing players. If a team is backed up to the goal line, the players cannot help but hear the people at the fence as they attempt to call out the next play.

The field, named for one of the great coaches in Lincoln County history, has seen its share of great memories. The largest attendance in the stadium's history was the 2005 state championship game against bitter rival, Washington-Wilkes. Walton describes the game, "There have been many great memories, but my favorite would have to be the 2005 state title game when LC whipped Washington-Wilkes 25-0 to tie the all-time series before a crowd of over 6,000. I call it 'The Game.' Fans were in line at the gates five hours before the gates opened. At least for Red Devil fans, the game lived up to its huge hype. It was also a special "homecoming" on the LC side, as many of our great players from years past came to the game."

Another great memory, a personal favorite of mine, was the 2006 state championship game against Clinch County. Fans lined the gates five hours before they opened, and the stands were filled thirty minutes after they opened. Instead of the team appearing in the traditional way, from behind a sign at one end zone, the Devils poured onto the field from the tunnel in the middle of the home stands. Watching from one end zone, I was left with chills as I watched the players, wearing all red, appear from the sea of red in the stands.

They proceeded to defeat Clinch County, 21-14, to win their second consecutive state title.

### **An Unwavering Support**

“The stillness was ruptured by a thousand different sounds smashing into each other in wonderful chaos- deep-throated yells, violent exhortations, giddy screams, hoarse whoops. The people in the stands lost all sight of who they were and what they were supposed to be like, all dignity and restraint thrown aside because of these high school boys in front of them, *their* boys, *their* heroes, upon whom they rested all their vicarious thrills, all their dreams. No connection in all of sports was more intimate than this one, the one between town and high school.” (Bissinger, 14)

The previous passage from the book, Friday Night Lights, describes the connection between a town and high school perfectly. While many would say there is nothing like the passion of college football or the devotion involved in the NFL, those who are fortunate enough to experience Class A high school football in Georgia know they have seen a connection unlike any other. It is an unwavering support from a small town: boosters who have supported the program financially for years, fans who arrive hours before game time, parents and fans who roll out their grills to cook before and after games for the players.

When the Red Devils started the season 0-3 in 2005, those fans cooked for the team after the third loss to show that the support was still there, that they should continue to fight and turn the season around. They then won their next twelve games and cruised through the playoffs for their first state title in ten years. After that first win, they were guaranteed food after games from then on.

“Lincoln County fans plan events around football games,” Walton says. “Football decides when the Christmas parade is scheduled. Families plan weddings and vacations around football.”

In Lincoln County, it isn't officially Christmas time until playoff talk is brought up. Come playoff time, chartered buses are lined up on Friday afternoons to take fans to away games, including what has become an almost annual trip to Atlanta's Georgia Dome in the semifinals. It is easy to

recognize when it's playoff time in Lincoln due to the red and white paint on store windows throughout town and the many signs found on roadsides. “Go Big Red, Dome Bound, All the Way to State” are just some of the sayings that are found around town.

Due to the excitement brewing all over school and town, work often takes a back seat on Fridays during football season. Students, as well as fans in the community, cram into the school gymnasium on some Friday afternoons for pep rallies, and it gets loud. There are also public pep rallies held on Thursdays and Fridays at the stadium for the bigger games. There is no limit to the amount of support that is shown for their Red Devils.

“This connection is a product of generations,” Walton adds. “Lincoln County players, cheerleaders, coaches, and supporters talk about how their parents and grandparents and now great-grandparents participated with football years ago. Involvement with football is in-grained.”

H.G. Bissinger, the author of Friday Night Lights, interviewed a local realtor in the town of Odessa, Texas, where his book was based. The realtor, Bob Rutherford, summed up what Lincoln County's supporters feel every time they see the lights of Buddy Bufford Field on a Friday night: “Life really wouldn't be worth livin' if you didn't have a high school football team to support.” (Bissinger, 20)

### **A Pretty Good Success Rate**

It's now time to brag a little on my high school football team. Whenever I am asked where I'm from and I answer with Lincoln County, the majority of the time the person asking will say something to the effect of “oh yeah, the football town.” This could come from people who live across the state or even a neighboring state. Lincoln County is known everywhere for its football, and looking at the track record it is no wonder.

The Lincoln County Red Devils are currently second on the list of all-time football wins in

Georgia behind the national leader, Valdosta. They are also in the national top 100. This is a remarkable stat for such a small school. But this is just the beginning as far as remarkable stats go.

Lincoln County has been blessed with fine coaching since the beginning. Under the category of career wins in Georgia high school football, two of the top three coaches have spent time on the sideline of Buddy Bufford Field. The second round of the playoffs this season marks Coach Campbell's 500<sup>th</sup> career game. Only ten other high school coaches in the nation have reached that amount. He is third nationally in all-time career wins as a coach with a record of 424-72-3, all of this at one Class A high school.

Since Coach Campbell's first year in 1972, the Red Devils have scored nearly 10,000 more points than their opposition. The second round game this year also marks Coach Campbell's 130<sup>th</sup> career playoff game, in which his teams have won 106. That is an 82% success rate in the playoffs. The Devils have won at least one playoff game in 33 of the past 35 seasons.

Defense has always been a strong point for the Devils, which leads to what could possibly be the most amazing stat of all: opponents have been shut out 168 times, while the Devils have only been shut out 15 times.

For the Devils' eleven state championships while Coach Campbell has been on the sideline, only two of them didn't come in consecutive seasons, and those were separated by one year. The Red Devils won five state championships in the span of six years between 1985 and 1990. But Lincoln County's success didn't completely appear with Coach Campbell; they went undefeated in only their second season as a program and won two state championships before his hiring.

The Red Devils have recorded fourteen undefeated regular seasons and eight perfect seasons, in which they swept through the playoffs. They hold almost every state record having to do with the playoffs. They have the most state championship appearances in the past 35, 30, and 10 years. They hold the most consecutive region titles as well as the most consecutive playoff years.

The Devils never lost three straight games in the first 381 games played under Coach Campbell. They also held a 250-game streak without losing consecutive games. Lincoln County's longest win streaks as a team are 44 and 38 straight wins, including the playoffs. Their longest regular season win streak is 53 straight wins. They hold the state record for winning 108 consecutive region games and for winning 54 consecutive road games. Coach Campbell has never lost a homecoming game as head coach.

As amazing as the team's records are, Coach Campbell's may be even more jaw-dropping. He is the youngest coach in the world to win 300 high school football games. He is the fifth coach in the country to win 400 games, and when he coaches the second round playoff game this season, he will be the eleventh coach in the country to coach 500 games. Coach Campbell is number one in Georgia in wins, currently and all-time. He is number three nationally in wins, currently and all-time.

Despite a population of only 8,510 in the entire county, Lincolnton holds its own against the heavyweights of high school football, and in many cases comes out on top. If you happen to come through at night and see the white lights burning over the trees and across the town sky, you must witness Lincoln County football for yourself. But beware: the urge to return to Lincolnton on Friday nights will never leave you.