

He Was Always There

by Thomas Boswell, Class of 1965



My hero in sports died on Sunday. His name was Sleepy Thompson. He coached and taught at St. Stephen's & St. Agnes School for the last 40 years.

Sleepy was, in his own way, the backbone of American sports. He was a true coach — a dignified, principled, caring teacher who stayed in high school coaching for 40 years because that's where he could best influence the lives of hundreds of his players.

He never cheated, cursed, bent an academic rule or tolerated dirty play. He won by "taking whatever boys came through the door" and turning them into smart, tough teams. I've met coaches as successful as Sleepy, as ethical as Sleepy and even some who were as good for their players as Sleepy. But I never met one any better in all areas.

Thompson wasn't famous or rich, although, had he chose, he might had been both. Sleepy could have had his pick of college coaching jobs in either football or basketball. He was that good and that widely respected.

In 32 years, his St. Stephen's football teams were 203-98-5 with 29 winning seasons, 12 Interstate Athletic Conference titles and three undefeated seasons. When he retired, he was the dean of Washington area high school coaches. In 20 years, his basketball teams were 307-178 with four IAC titles and several years in the area top 20.

In the mid-1960s, Dean Smith wanted Thompson to be his top basketball assistant at North Carolina. And that was Sleepy's second-best sport.

In football, his reputation as one of the founders of the veer offense was so wide that in 1978 he was asked to speak before a national convention of thousands of high school and college coaches on the intricacies of the offense.

"He was an all-night X-and-O man," said his St. Stephen's friend Dick Babyak yesterday. "He'd get started at midnight and sometimes he'd never stop until the sun came up."

Over the years, the fancy big-time chances were always there — one telephone call away — but Thompson stayed with the kids at St. Stephen's.

There, he worked long hours — like most of the real in-the-trenches coaches all over this country who use the joy of sports to reach and teach children. Thompson was also athletic director, chalked many a sideline, taped ankles and measured helmet sizes. In his spare minutes, he coached third and fourth grades because he just loved kids that age and, for years, he taught seventh and eighth grade science because that's when boys in puberty might need somebody they trusted for a talk.

To players, Thompson was magnetic. He'd been a minor league pitcher for the Red Sox, although he never talked about it — not even the way his career ended when he was hit in the eye by a liner. He'd been a local three-sport high school star at St. John's although he never talked about it. He'd been a

B-17 gunner in World War II, although he never talked about it. He was one of the best basketball officials in Washington — just another moonlight job — although he never talked about it.

Sleepy never even told the story about how Al McGuire, then coaching at Belmont Abbey, once got the crowd so riled up out at Quantico that, when Thompson put out both index fingers to signal a one-and-one, a fan ran out of the crowd to bite his finger. And, of course, got cheered.

In an academically oriented private Episcopal School, Thompson offered a counter-balance in temperament. He was practical rather than theoretical. He believed in simple right and wrong, which gave him authority, but with compassion, which made those in trouble seek him out. Besides, he smoked, liked a drink and had a beaut of a temper — which he somehow controlled utterly, though he often looked as if he might explode. Basketball officials made Sleepy so apoplectic that his wife Alice and his three daughters decided to have a doctor sit behind the St. Stephen's bench — just in case. Maybe Sleepy got so upset because he had so often been a zebra himself.

“Cheese and crackers,” Thompson would erupt. That was Thompson's ultimate oath and it brought an utter silence, sometimes to a packed gym, which few teachers will ever know the pleasure of achieving.

On the practice field, Thompson seldom yelled at a player and never demeaned him. In this area, the rationalizations for bad behavior of our various John Thompsons and Bobby Knights are just that — only rationalizations. After Thompson had muttered his own frustrations into submission, he would patiently explain the choreography of team play or the theory behind a strategy or the technique of a block, tackle or pick.

His instructions, down to the details, could stay with you for decades. He might tell a quarterback: “You make the quick fake to the halfback with one hand — show them your bare hand and hide the ball on your hip. But you ride the fullback into the hole with two hands because by then you may get hit. Then you run right at the defensive end before you option. This offense is called a sprint out, not a walk out ...”

Although Sleepy's health had been poor in recent years, forcing him out of coaching and into alumni affairs, his death at 67 was sudden and unexpected. When I talked to him last month, he sounded just as he did in 1960 — direct, honest, funny, anecdotal, wired to the grapevine, full of energy and plans.

He couldn't wait for his favorite week of the year — the Final Four, Opening Day and The Masters. He and Alice were planning to build a new house. The six grandchildren were flourishing. And St. Stephen's and St. Agnes was, in his opinion, largely over its merger pains of recent years. Long a supporter of boys-only schools, he's converted totally to coeducation and couldn't do enough to pump the school.

“I know why you didn't answer my call,” he told me. “I don't blame you. You know I'm gonna ask for something.”

Sleepy always called his old players, even the lousy ones, for favors. Never for himself, of course. He was a one-man old-boy, and now, old-girl network, making sure everybody helped everybody. When he died, I still had an unopened envelope from him in my desk. What a pain in the neck he was, dragging good works out of our uncharitable souls.

Now he won't call anymore.

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