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1966 football Tigers got program back on track

BY TOMMY CAMP

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Editor's note - Sports editor Tommy Camp continues his series on "Coweta County's Great Teams" with a look at the 1966 Newnan Tigers' football season. When Max Bass took over the Newnan High School football program in 1966 he faced what looked like a challenge of monumental proportions.

The Tigers had won just four games in the previous three seasons under former head man Charlie Harris.

They had not enjoyed a winning season since 1961 and had not made the playoffs since 1960.

Little did Newnan fans realize, however, that a new day was dawning.

Bass's '66 team would not only turn things around quickly, but the season would usher in one of the most successful coaching runs in Georgia High School history.

When Bass retired 29 years later he had chalked up 203 wins making him one of the few coaches in Georgia annals to win 200 or more games at one school.

Of course, no one knew all that at the time.

Bass, who was familiar with Newnan from his assistant coaching days at Cedartown, came to Newnan highly recommended by former Tiger coach Norman Harrison who had observed his work at Bolles Academy in Jacksonville.

When Bass went to Bolles, the school had lost 23 games in a row. Two short years later his team won seven games and made a post-season bowl appearance.

Newnan fans hoped for the same kind of resurrection locally.

As it turned out, they wouldn't have to wait long.

Adding to the luster of the excitement the new coach brought to town was the fact that a brand new stadium was finally ready for occupancy after years of delay.

Newnan had toiled for years in antiquated Pickett Field, but in the fall of 1966 sparkling new Drake Stadium was inaugurated.

And what an inauguration it was.

The Tigers would win the Region 4-AA championship in Bass' first year, only the third region title ever for Newnan, and become one of only four Newnan High teams in history to go through the regular campaign undefeated.

In addition, the Tigers did not give up a single point in the new stadium in five regular season games.

The remarkable turnaround from a 2-8 year in '65 to a 9-1-1 in '66 ranks as the single biggest reversal of fortunes in school history from one regular season to the next.

As the nine-win season would indicate, Newnan was certainly not without talent despite its 2-8 showing the previous year.

Bass went with two quarterbacks, Mark Holloway and Steve Henderson who was moved from running back.

Eddie Traylor was shifted from guard to fullback and Buddy Cooper, a move-in from South Carolina, became a clutch performer on both sides of the ball, but especially in the defensive secondary.

Scotty McCarthy, Dewayne Taylor and Joe Hudson gave the Tigers depth at running back.

The line was full of experienced players led by Brad Sears, Lewis Powell and Ellis Mansour and end corps was deep and talented with Jim Stripling, Bob Hammock and future NHS principal Alan Wood.

Defensively, Taylor and Traylor made up what was arguably the region's best linebacking duo

with Cooper, Hudson and Henderson doing the same in the secondary.

Newnan dedicated Drake Stadium with an opening night, 19-0, win over Dallas with Henderson running 11 yards in the second quarter for the first-ever TD in the new stadium, and the Tigers enjoyed their most productive offensive night in four years with a 32-14 win over Sequoyah on the road the following week.

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Those 51 points in the first two games were more than the '65 team scored all year.

The only blot on the regular season slate came the next week with a 0-0 tie with Lakeshore, but the Tigers blasted Russell, under former Newnan assistant Tom Simonton, 47-0, in their next outing.

A 14-0 win over North Clayton on Homecoming night set up the "showdown" with No. 5 Headland on the road the next Friday evening.

Headland had never lost a homecoming game in its 10-year history, but the Tigers registered a 21-6 win after the two teams had battled to a 0-0 halftime deadlock.

The victory put Newnan in the Top 10 for the first time since 1960, grabbing the eighth spot in the statewide rankings.

Newnan then beat North Clayton, 24-6, and downed old nemesis Campbell of Fairburn in Drake Stadium, 7-0, for only their second win over the Bears since 1953.

The win over Campbell catapulted Newnan into first place in Region 4-AA after Lakeshore and Headland tied their game.

A Thursday night game in Callaway Stadium against Troup was an uphill battle all the way, but Newnan tied the game 7-7 just before halftime, took the lead in the third period and scored late to register a 21-7 win.

That set up the game against Douglas County on the road for the region championship.

A tie would have meant a playoff against Lakeshore the following week, but Newnan won, 20-7, in a game far closer than the final score would indicate.

Newnan led 7-0 until late in the game when Douglas County tied it with just over four minutes to play.

The Tigers on their subsequent possession, then faced a fourth and nine at their own 45, but Bass chose to go for it.

The do-or-die play turned out to be the most dramatic one of the season.

Holloway, who had just overthrown Cooper on third down, hit Hammock on a play that carried all the way to the Douglas County one. Taylor scored on the next snap to make it 13-7.

Moments later, Cooper intercepted a DC pass at the Newnan 25 and the Tigers, trying to run out the clock, broke Henderson on a 55-yard run to the home team's seven and Taylor scored for the final margin.

Newnan lost in the state quarterfinals to eventual state champion North Fulton, 47-6, but the '66 team had already carved a notch in the hearts of Tiger fans.

They had done the seemingly impossible, playing under a new coach in a new stadium.

The Newnan program was back on the winning track.