

CHC: Fred Thompson Was An Athlete

by Bill Traughber

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This interview between Bill Traughber and 2008 Presidential candidate Fred Thompson was first published in May 1999 in Nashville Sports Weekly. Thompson was a Tennessee Senator at the time and is a graduate of the Vanderbilt School of Law in 1967.

Almost 40 years ago, Freddy was quite a popular student while strolling the hallways of Lawrenceburg High School. Today, this same former student is now strolling through the corridors of the U.S. Capitol building in Washington D.C. where he is known to his colleagues as Senator.

Challenges are not new to Fred Thompson who on the movie screen has clashed with such heavyweights as Clint Eastwood, Sean Connery and Bruce Willis. What might be fiction now was reality in the late 1950's when Thompson accepted challenges in athletics. In high school (class of 1960) Thompson competed in football and basketball.

In the fall of 1959, Thompson's Lawrenceburg football team was invited to play against Father Ryan at Vanderbilt's Dudley Field in the 10th annual prestigious Clinic Bowl. Future Vanderbilt player Art Guepe, Jr. and Boots Donnelly the former MTSU head football coach led Ryan. Participates for this annual Thanksgiving Day charity game consisted of the top teams from the Midstate and Nashville.

"Art Guepe, Jr. just ran us ragged," Thompson said laughing from his Washington D.C. office. "We were big old country boys and ran the single wing. It was like line up and run right at them and run over them. Father Ryan was quicker and faster than anything we had seen and he just ran all over the place."

Ryan dominated the game with a 26-0 win in front of an estimated crowd of 18,000. Lawrenceburg finished this memorable season with an 8-2-1 record. But Thompson, who stood 6-5, could not be overlooked on the gridiron.

"My best year in football was my junior season," Thompson said. "I got hurt in the beginning of my senior year and never did get back to where I was my junior year. I had made Honorable Mention All-Midstate as a junior. Over the summer, I had put on some weight and was really looking forward to my senior year. But right before the season started, I tore up my shoulder and missed a good part of the year. I also got married during this time and that took a little speed off my fastball."



During his junior season, Lawrenceburg (9-1) gained an invitation to the Butter Bowl against Tullahoma. Thompson was an offensive end and the center on punts. He also played some at defensive tackle where Lawrenceburg shut out Tullahoma, 20-0 on Thanksgiving Day.

The late Leonard Staggs was Thompson's football and basketball coach during high school. Staggs was highly successful in both sports where his toughness and discipline earned the respect from his players. He led his Wildcat teams to four basketball state appearances in 11 years.

"He was quite a guy," recalled Thompson. "He had been a real outstanding running back at David Lipscomb and MTSU. He struck terror in the hearts of most of us. He was so respected that 10 years after players left high school, they wouldn't smoke in front of him. The coach in a young man's life is the most important man in their life except for his father."

One of Thompson's teammates from those Butter and Clinic Bowl years was running back Jerome Gaines. Gaines, who was the Butter Bowl MVP, remembers Thompson as a tough, aggressive leader.

"Fred was a pretty good ball player, especially on defense," Gaines said. "He had grown quite a bit and was kind of tall and rangy. He had long arms that really helped him on the defensive side of the ball. Fred was really out-going and kept everybody loose. Our only loss during the Butter Bowl season was to Hillsboro in the second game.

"We had a bunch of penalties which cost us the game while most of them were for jumping offsides. The next week in practice Coach Staggs carried a paddle so when somebody jumped offsides, he would give them a lick. Freddy was on the receiving end of one or two of those whops as I remember."

Thompson was also a member of Lawrenceburg's basketball team his junior and senior years. In 1959, he participated in the state basketball tournament at Vanderbilt as a junior.

"I was the sixth man on that team," said Thompson. "Joe Brewer was about 6-3, but I was probably the tallest guy on the team at that point. Going to the state tournament was a quite an experience for country boys. We thought that going to Nashville was like going to New York City. I played against John Ed Miller (former Vanderbilt player) who was at Lenoir City. I'm always kidding John Ed about Lawrenceburg beating them I believe, in the quarterfinals. We were fourth in the state my junior year."

Garner Ezell was an assistant coach under Staggs for football and basketball while Thompson was at Lawrenceburg. As the offensive coordinator, Ezell fondly remembers Thompson the football player.

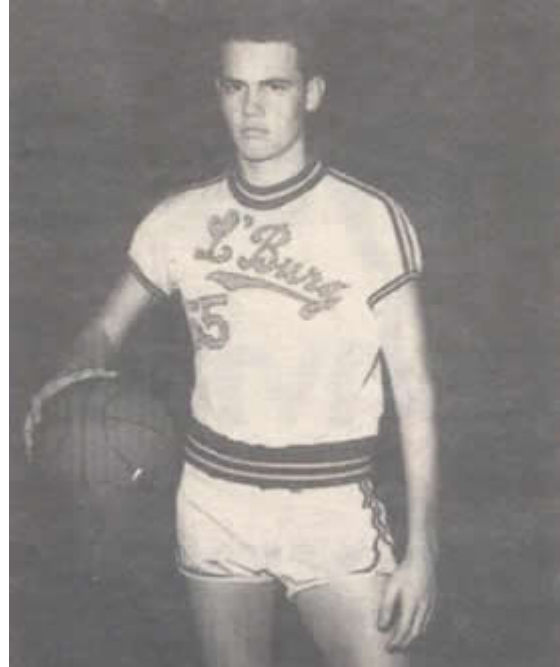
"He was a lot skinnier than he was now; he was skin and bones," Ezell said. "I believe he was the one that sent managers or a friend to the store to get him a Coca-Cola during practice. Coach Staggs didn't think too much of that. I think he had to do a little running for that."

Ezell gave this recollection of Thompson during one of his basketball seasons.

"The biggest thing I remember was when we were in the region tournament," Ezell said. "Coach Staggs went to Franklin to scout a team, so I was going to feed them and bring the team on up. When we got ready to leave, Fred wasn't there. So we left him and ate at a restaurant in Lawrenceburg.

"Fred met us there later and asked for the keys so he could get his uniform and I wouldn't give them to him. Just as we were leaving, here comes Fred with his uniform. I don't know how he got into the gymnasium. He was late because we was at his girlfriend's house. We taught him a lesson that night, he had to leave without eating."

Thompson was married during the basketball season in his senior year. His new responsibilities as a husband caused him to leave the team. However, his athleticism did not go unnoticed, as his basketball career didn't end in high school.



"I started out at Florence State (Ala.) where I was a walk-on and earned a scholarship for a short period of time my freshman year," Thompson said. "Somebody else transferred in at Florence State and was better than I was and took my position. I didn't try out anymore and decided that I was going to have to study."

And study he did. Thompson transferred to Memphis State where he received his undergraduate degrees in philosophy and political science in 1964. Thompson earned a law degree from Vanderbilt University in 1967.

This versatile athlete also played baseball in the Babe Ruth League during the summers. Thompson made the all-star team during that last summer of competition.

The Senator also was influential in luring the Tennessee Titans (Oilers) to Nashville and likes the new name and logo.

"I think it's all great, I'm just tickled to death," said Thompson. "I'm a huge spectator sports fan and I have tickets to the Titans. I love football. I follow the Commodores, and I follow the Vols. I went to the Fiesta Bowl last year and was excited for them. I'm tickled over Nashville getting pro football."

Who is the current athlete, which made the greatest impression on Thompson?

"Peyton Manning," Thompson said without hesitation. "I spoke at his graduation over at UT and had a chance to know him. I've known his father and I think Peyton is an outstanding guy and I've appreciated him coming back for his senior year. I thought he showed he had his head on straight, he's a class young man."

As a teenager growing into manhood, Thompson cherished the times he would attend sporting events with his father.

"I go back to the old Nashville Vols, Double-A ball," said Thompson. "We lived in Lawrenceburg and my daddy and I would go up there and watch those games at Sulphur Dell when Cincinnati was their farm team. I can't forget the right field dump. A Billy goat would have a hard time standing up out at there.

"They had a level area cut out in the middle of it where the right fielder would stand until the ball was hit. There was a real short right field fence and a high screen. If you could pop that thing up you wouldn't have to hit it very far to right. And I remember old Bob Lennon hit 50 or 60 home runs one year, a lot over that right field screen. It was a great experience."

If you have comments or suggestions you can contact Bill Traughber via e-mail WLTraughber@aol.com.