

# NASH COUNTY FOOTBALL

## THE LAST 25 YEARS



### FOUR STATE CHAMPIONSHIP APPEARANCES.

One state title. Two North Carolina State Athletes of the Year.

And countless victories, memories and talented players -- many of whom went on to enjoy successful college (and even professional) careers.

Certainly, the past 25 years proved to be a bountiful football experience for Nash County's public high schools -- Northern Nash, Nash Central, Rocky Mount and Southern Nash.

My name is Geoff Neville. For the past quarter-century, I've had the honor and privilege of being the sports editor for The Nashville Graphic and witnessing some of the most historic moments Nash County football has ever produced. I knew nothing about Nash County when I first arrived here in late-July of 1996. My first assignment was to shoot a gridiron practice at Southern Nash -- the first of Lord-knows-how-many-visits to that special place. After missing a few turns in the Pre-GPS Era, I finally found the practice field and was immediately captivated by a 6-foot-6 kid lined up at tailback. That kid -- Julius Peppers -- will be in the National Football League Hall of Fame in a few years I developed an immediate connection and friendship at Southern Nash with then-assistant Brian Foster. While so many other coaches have come and gone, we've been together for a quarter-century ride. I've seen the thrills, successes, everyday grunt work and personal and professional heartbreak that Brian and his staff have experienced.

When put in that context, you fully understand how important the Firebirds' trip to the state finals was last year -- and not just for the win-loss factor. It was truly a long-time journey. Every coach at SNHS will tell you it was well worth the wait and effort. With prep football unavailable this fall, we've decided to put together this section to commemorate the past 25 years of grid excellence in the county. It's been fun catching up with some of the legends of the past, or simply calling a coach or former player I still keep in touch with to rehash some of those great moments. During my conversations with these people, one consistent theme was relayed to me by them -- it was a pleasure and a thrill to take some time and reflect on the past. Sometimes we might not appreciate a landmark event while we are experiencing it. We are simply too caught up in the moment, far more concerned about achieving a current goal, as opposed to philosophizing what that achievement might mean to us later in life. Reminiscing about days gone by can be both a blessing and a curse. But when it is done the right way, there are few things more pleasurable in life. My greatest hope is that this edition makes a few 'old-timers' smile -- and helps our younger readers learn about some of the heroes and tremendous moments of the past.

I could not have made it through the past 25 years without the professional help of so many cohorts.

I would like to thank Dave Buck, Anthony Barham, Carl Copeland, Chance Puckett, Joanne Cooper and Meryn Johnson (among many others) for being at events when I couldn't make it. Y'all are fantastic. Two of my favorite 'stringers' are no longer with us -- Charles Alston and David Hahula. I think about you guys every day. Also, thanks to all of the coaches, players, managers, statisticians, chain gang members, fans and pretty much everyone involved in high school football for the past 25 years. In the sportswriter end, the people you meet become much more important than the results of the games you cover. Finally, I want to mention that picking the top all-time players from each school is one of the hardest endeavors I have ever undertaken. Some outstanding players did not make my final lists -- even guys who went on to compete on the Division I level.

While I feel badly that not everyone could be on the lists, it also made me realize just how amazing Nash County football has been since 1996. I apologize to those who were left out. Enjoy this section!



NASH CENTRAL

BULLDOGS



KEYWORDS - CONSISTENCY, IDENTITY



THE MAN WITH THE PLAN AT NASH CENTRAL. VETERAN SKIPPER CHRIS LEE IS ENTERING HIS SIXTH CAMPAIGN AS THE HEAD COACH OF THE NASH CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL TEAM. (PHOTO SUBMITTED BY ANTHONY BARHAM)

Strange as it may sound, but not much has changed within the Nash Central High School football program since its inception in 2002.

During that span of almost two decades, the Bulldogs have employed only three head coaches and utilized just two offenses -- the wishbone and the wing-T.

That's an amazing source of continuity, especially for a program that is still somewhat in its infancy.

Nash Central Football began not under the Friday Night Lights, but on Thursdays as the Bulldogs kicked off their first year by playing against other new schools in the area.



HOKIE SIGNEE. Houshun Gaines, who went on to play at Virginia Tech, is remembered as one of the best players in the history of Nash Central High School football. (Photo Submitted by Anthony Barham)

See NCHS, Page 7B

GREATEST GAME

• August 23, 2011 •  
Nash Central 38, Tarboro 28



BIG GAIN DURING A BIG GAME. Khalil Macklin was exceptional for the Nash Central Bulldogs against rival Tarboro. (Graphic photo by Geoff Neville)

Few area high school football programs boast the pedigree of Tarboro -- and the Vikings were fresh off back-to-back state championship runs when they visited The Dawg Pound for an early-season contest against the Nash Central Bulldogs.

The task was certainly a daunting one for a Central program that was still in its first decade of existence. And it didn't help the Bulldogs' cause that the Vikings featured one of the nation's top players in eventual National Football League superstar running back Todd Gurley. But the Bulldogs were not to be denied as they rode the talents of quarterback/defensive back Jalen Hendricks -- along with the contributions of many others -- en route to a 38-28 victory.



KEVIN CRUDUP

Due to weather, the contest was moved to Monday from the previous Friday -- a shift that proved to be a fortuitous one for the Bulldogs.

"That Thursday, Jalen had been in a car accident," said then-NCHS coach Kevin Crudup. "Had the game been Friday, we are not

See NC GAME, Pg. 7B



BEST PLAYER

JALEN HENDRICKS

Quarterback Jalen Hendricks was a man of few words but many actions during his storied football career at Nash Central High School.

"The biggest quality Jalen had was that he was a quick learner," said former NCHS head coach Kevin Crudup. "Things just came easy and naturally for him."

"He was very cerebral -- he never got rattled. That was important because his teammates fed off him. He always kept a cool demeanor."

Hendricks was a three-year starter for the Bulldogs and helped the club go 10-3 overall in 2011. One of the highlights of that campaign was an impressive victory over defending state champion Tarboro -- with Hendricks playing a starring role on both sides of the ball.

That fall, Hendricks was selected as the Big East Conference Player of the Year after piling up 1,800 total yards and 21 touchdowns. He also scored four times on defense.

After graduation from NCHS, Hendricks joined the football program at Livingstone University, where he excelled at the wide receiver position.

Hendricks was a two-time All-Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association First Team pick. During his junior year, Hendricks paced the CIAA in both receptions and receiving yards.

In 2014, Hendricks was selected as the Offensive Player of the Year for both Livingstone and the entire CIAA. He was also a standout punt returner for the Blue Bears.

OTHER GREATS

BRANDYN PETTAWAY

LB, One of the most prolific tacklers in school history.

TRAVIS GRIFFIN

His unbelievable QB work in '17 shattered just about every Bulldog record.

ALEX NOBLES

Two-way standout now playing at North Carolina.

EMMANUEL RHYANT

Nash Central's first excellent QB. Ran wishbone to near-perfection

CAM HOLLOWAY

Another talented signal-caller. Led Bulldogs to best-ever finish in state playoffs.

WILLENN BRINKLEY

Early-day fullback. Still one of the best-ever for the Bulldogs.

JEFF LUCAS

Linebacker went on to play for Western Carolina.

MICHAEL SPEIGHT

Tough-as-nails two-way standout.

See NC GREATS, Pg. 7B



NORTHERN NASH

KNIGHTS



KEYWORDS - POTENTIAL, FLASHES OF GREATNESS



USHERING IN A NEW ERA. Former quarterback Davontae Wiggins (left), now at Fayetteville State University, played an important role in Northern Nash's recent gridiron resurgence under Coach Andrew Farriss. (Graphic photo by Geoff Neville)

Periods of greatness. Periods of not much greatness. But so much potential.

That's the story of Northern Nash Football over the past-quarter century as the Knights have been up-and-down on the



scoreboard at times, but appear to be on an upward

trend as the program moves into the 2020s.

Current head coach Andrew Farriss is in the process of bringing the Knights back to the 'glory days', which for most fans would be the Jim Brett Era of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Brett, the former

See NNHS, Page 6B



DEFENSIVE STOPPER. Northern Nash has boasted several standout defenders through the years, but few were as effective as Kendrick Richardson (9). (Photo Submitted by Anthony Barham)



BEST PLAYER

JJ ARRINGTON

Some of JJ Arrington's best childhood memories were forged during trips to Tarrytown Mall, where he would purchase as many football cards as his mother allowed.

Arrington had no idea that that one day he would adorn several of those cards.

Arrington's road to the National Football League was an improbable one, beginning with his time as a member of the Nashville Hornets' youth football team.

Arrington eventually made it to the varsity roster at Northern Nash and enjoyed an exceptional career at running back, but didn't receive any of the big-time college scholarship offers that he had been hoping for after graduating from NN in 2001.

So, thanks to some contacts within the NNHS coaching staff, Arrington took a giant leap of faith to move away from Nash County and play at College of the Canyons in California.

"(Then-NN coaches) Jim Brett and Russell Weinstein knew some people out in California -- that is how that worked out," said former Knights' assistant Al Carter. "It ended up being a great move for J.J."

Arrington took his game to another level in the Golden State and was an outstanding two-year performer on the junior college level.

This time, Division I scouts were plenty interested, and Arrington signed with the

See JJ, Page 6B

OTHER GREATS

SHAIPHAN LEWIS

Winningest QB in school history. Led NN to state title game.

CHAD GREEN

Rush end and star of Northern's stingy defense in 2002.

QUAY MANN

Defensive back who went on to play at Duke University.

ISAIAH GAY

Now a senior DE at University of Illinois. Big East Player of the Year for NN.

JERROD PERRY

Heart and soul of NN's legendary 2002 squad as RB and LB.

DAVONTAE WIGGINS

QB now at Fayetteville State. Played in East-West Game.

RASHAD HEDGEPEETH

Leading rusher for league title team in '10. Signed with Northwood (Michigan) after prep career ended.

KHI DOWNEY

1997 NN grad who anchored O-Line before playing at Pitt and Indiana (Pa.). East-West selection.

See NN GREATS, Pg. 6B

GREATEST GAME

• December 14, 2002 •  
Northern Nash 28, E.E. Smith 7



REASON TO CELEBRATE. Northern Nash offensive coordinator Russell Weinstein poses with Shaiphan Lewis and Marcus Mercer after the Knights won the East Regional Championship. Northern defeated homestanding E.E. Smith in Fayetteville to earn the crown. (Graphic photo by Geoff Neville)

The foundation for Northern Nash's landmark 2002 football season was actually laid one year earlier, when the Knights went 10-1 but somehow did not qualify for the state playoffs.

That slight, along with a talented group of players and coaches, helped push Northern Nash to within one victory of making the Class 4-A State Finals the next season.

"We were ranked second in the state and 2001 but didn't get into the playoffs," said then-NN offensive lineman Mark Wooten. "We came back the next year wanting to prove a point. Redemption -- that was our motto all year."

Standing in the Fighting Knights' way in the Eastern Regional Championship was a touted Fayetteville



AL CARTER

E.E. Smith club that boasted four future Division I performers.

Due to the weather, the game was pushed back to a Saturday night -- and it was a cold December one in Cumberland County.

One week earlier, the Knights had stomped Wilmington Hogard on the road in

See NN GAME, Pg. 6B



SOUTHERN NASH

FIREBIRDS



KEYWORDS - PATIENCE, PROSPERITY, ALL IN



HOW IT ALL STARTED. Southern Nash High School's move to the Double Wing Offense showcased the talents of several star running backs, including Terron Huffman -- one of the first players utilized in the strategy. (Graphic photo by Geoff Neville)

Former player and current assistant coach Brian Batchelor fondly remembers his senior season at Southern Nash back in 1996. The Firebirds, led by the great Julius Peppers, posted a winning record and opened the campaign with a thrilling victory at powerhouse North Edgecombe. "We thought we had done something great -- we had gone over .500," Batchelor said. Suffice to say, things have changed considerably since then at Southern Nash, which has developed



See SNHS, Page 9B LEGENDARY SOUTHERN NASH HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL COACH BRIAN FOSTER

GREATEST GAME • December 6, 2019 • Southern Nash 32, E. Alamance 29



IT'S OURS. (L to R) Jason Bland, Quinton Cooley and Matt Foster celebrate with the regional title plaque. (Graphic photo by Geoff Neville)

Southern Nash's journey to the Eastern Regional Finals in 2009 was a memorable one -- and most experts considered it to simply be a matter of time before the Firebirds would once again make it that far in the postseason. Despite a myriad of overall successes, including four straight conference championships, the wait would last for 10 years at Southern Nash. But it was certainly worth it. The Firebirds roared through the 2019 campaign with an undefeated mark heading into a meeting with recent rival Eastern Alamance in the Class 3-A East Regional Finals. This time, the game was at Firebird Stadium, and the atmosphere was electric. Folks were parking out



QUINTON COOLEY on the road and tailgating far in advance of kickoff as SN prepared to undertake its most important home contest arguably in school history. It would indeed be a night to remember as Southern Nash outlasted the



BEST PLAYER

JULIUS PEPPERS

Nationwide, Julius Peppers is remembered as one of the National Football League's all-time greatest defensive ends -- a standout destined to be enshrined one day into the NFL Hall of Fame. But Southern Nash football fans will fondly look back on Peppers' days as a running back for the Firebirds -- albeit a shifty 6-foot-6 back with the size and skillset that nobody in Eastern North Carolina had ever seen before. Back then, the big talk about Peppers centered around where he would attend school, and what position he would eventually line up. Some smaller schools had offered Peppers an opportunity to stay at running back, but the Division I 'big boys' seemed to be divided on Peppers as either a tight end or running back. Some schools were even offering basketball scholarships, and there was also little doubt that Peppers could have been a D-1 track and field star -- and potentially an all-time great decathlete. Certainly, Peppers could do it all. Peppers starred in football, hoops and track at Southern Nash and played a key role in the Firebirds' track and field state team championship in 1998. That year, he was selected as the North Carolina High School Athletic Association State Male Athlete of the Year. Peppers ended

See JULIUS, Page 9B OTHER GREATS

- BRIAN BATCHELOR Prep teammate of Peppers. Played in E-W Game and then at William & Mary.
- QUINTON COOLEY Leading rusher in school history. Now at Wake Forest.
- ZONOVAN KNIGHT Teamed with Cooley for an unbelievable, victory-filled backfield. Now at NC State.
- KWAMAINE BATTLE Disruptive DL who played at Virginia Tech.
- TRACEY COPPEDGE Helped usher SN into a new offensive era before excelling at Elon University.
- TERRON HUFFMAN Paired with Coppedge for Dynamic Duo backfield in SN's renaissance days.
- ZACK FOSTER Graduated as the leading passer in school history.
- MATT FOSTER Threat with arm and feet as starting QB for state finalists.
- GARY THARRINGTON DL who starred for App. State in 'Upset of The Century'.

See SN GAME, Pg. 9B See SN GREATS, Pg. 7B



ROCKY MOUNT

GRYPHONS



KEYWORDS - TRADITION, EXCELLENCE



KEEPING THE TRADITION ALIVE FOR RM. Jason Battle, a former quarterback at Rocky Mount High School, has been amazing as a head coach for the Gryphons, and led them to the 2015 state championship. (Photo Submitted by Anthony Barham)

Rocky Mount has always boasted a competitive football program in the area -- a school that featured gridiron success, undying community support and an impressive list of former players that would raise the eyebrow of any fan.

But RM had not won a state football championship since 1963, when the school's mascot was the Blackbirds.

Try as they may, the Gryphons could not seem to get over the hump, despite making deep playoff run after deep playoff run.

RM was finally able to hoist the state title plaque in 2015, but the seeds for that title had actually been sown a few decades earlier.



PLAYMAKER SUPREME. Detrell Revis had a knack for making big plays for the Rocky Mount Gryphons during their 2015 state championship march. (Photo Submitted by Anthony Barham)

See RMHS, Page 6B

GREATEST GAME

• December 11, 2015 •  
Rocky Mount 24, South Point 21



CHASE IN THE CLUTCH. Chase Miller helped kick the Rocky Mount Gryphons to the 2015 state championship. (Photo Submitted by Anthony Barham)

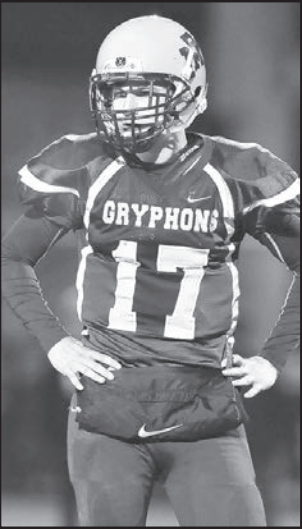
After so many near-misses during the B.W. Holt Era, some observers wondered if Rocky Mount would ever earn an elusive state football championship.

The answer came in the most improbable of ways as the Gryphons secured a wild 24-21 victory over South Point to take the Class 3-A State Title at Kenan Stadium on the campus of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

RM was only 3-2 early in the season and had just been topped by Greenville Rose by 40 points.

But the Gryphons wouldn't lose again and claimed four wins by seven points or less -- including a last-minute victory over Eden Morehead in the third round of the postseason.

RM then waltzed past Eastern Ala-



FORREST BELL  
mance in the regional championship game to move into a matchup against a touted South Point club that was on a 12-game winning streak.

The Gryphons made an early statement when B.J. Sanders returned the opening kickoff for an electrifying touchdown.

See RM GAME, Pg. 6B



BEST PLAYER

TERRELL HUDGINS

Terrell Hudgins seemed destined for greatness during his football career at Rocky Mount High School.

It was simply a matter of finding out where Hudgins' lofty assets would be best suited.

Hudgins could have starred at any skill position for RM, but legendary Gryphons' coach B.W. Holt eventually place him at quarterback, where Hudgins' run-pass talents would prove to be a perfect fit in Holt's wing-T system.

From there, Hudgins and the Gryphons embarked on one of the greatest stretches in RM football history -- a period laced with deep playoff runs.

As a senior in 2008, Hudgins would set the school passing record while leading Rocky Mount to a 12-1 overall record. Just before graduation that year, Hudgins was tabbed as the North Carolina High School Athletic Association Male State Athlete of the Year.

But Hudgins' career was just getting started as he signed to play collegiately at Elon University, where he was immediately shifted to wide receiver.

That decision would end up being a part of Division I-AA Football lore as Hudgins set 10 NCAA records and became the first D-A receiver to amass over 1,000 yards in each of his four seasons.

Hudgins' school-best career mark for receptions (395) and receiving yards (5,250) are both second-best in the history of FCS football. He was a first-team All-American on two occasions.

In 2018, Hudgins received Elon University's ultimate honor as he was inducted into the school's Athletics Hall of Fame.

Hudgins is now the succesful head football coach at Rocky Mount Academy.

OTHER GREATS

SHERROD GREENE  
Fierce LB now at South Carolina.

SHYHEIM BATTLE  
Starting DB at NC State.

WHIT BARNES  
Great lineman, eventual star at Wake Forest.

STEPHAN VIRGIL  
Played DB at Va. Tech.

ROBERT HART  
Amazing LB in Holt Era.

MARQUAVIUS ALSTON  
Owns several RM rushing records.

DETRELL REVIS  
All he did was make big plays.

JEMONTE BATTLE  
Starred at Catawba and the CFL.

CALVIN HUDGINS  
RB was Big East Player of the Year.

See RM GREATS, Pg. 7B



## NNHS

continued from page 3B

legendary coach at Tarboro, brought instant respect when he arrived in Red Oak in 1999. He brought along the acclaimed Russell Weinstein as an offensive coordinator, along with retaining several highly thought of assistants from the previous regime.

Also aiding the cause was the fact that Brett inherited a strong freshman class his first year -- and a few of those performers even started as ninth-graders, including quarterback Shaiphan Lewis.

“That group of freshmen -- we had never lost a game with the Nashville Hornets or in middle school,” said offensive lineman Mark Wooten. “We just had a confidence about ourselves -- we felt like we were going to turn things around at Northern Nash.”

In the 11th-grade year for that group, NN went 10-1, but somehow did not qualify for the playoffs.

That disappointment only fueled the fire for the 2002 season as Northern Nash was sternly focused on a singular task -- making it to the state finals.

The Fighting Knights earned that spot with a convincing victory over E.E. Smith in the Eastern Regional Championship.

But an injury to Jerrod Perry at the end of that game left him unavailable for the title contest, and Perry’s absence affected NN on both sides of the ball.

The Knights were defeated 14-7 by Asheville Reynolds, but that didn’t diminish the fact that the school was able to enjoy its best-ever gridiron campaign.

“When I came to Northern Nash

(in 2000), I was very impressed with what Coach Brett was doing,” said former NN assistant Al Carter. “Coach Weinstein was also there, and having him was a big thing.

“The culture change that happened was amazing. It was refreshing to get over there and see how hard the coaches and players worked.”

Brett eventually retired and the program bounced between success and mediocrity for the ensuing 15 years while going through several coaches.

NN did win the conference crown in 2010 behind star back Rashad Hedgepeth, but the program would ultimately struggle heading up to the announcement that Andrew Farriss would be the Knights’ next head coach ahead of the 2018 season.

One year later, Northern Nash went 8-5 and made the second round of the playoffs before being defeated at Southern Nash -- though the Knights led the game in the second half.

With that as a foundation, along with the fact that the Northern Nash youth program is booming, it’s a safe bet to say that Death Valley will continue to be a tough place for visitors to play.

“When I think about Northern Nash, I’ve always thought about the potential that was there,” said Wooten, who is now an assistant at Tarboro. “When I was young, myself and all of my friends wanted to grow up to be Knights.

“You kind of see that coming back. (Farriss) seems to have some good things in place.”

## NN GAME

continued from page 3B

the quarterfinals -- and NN offensive mastermind coordinator Russell Weinstein was already plotting his upcoming strategy during the bus ride home.

“I asked Russell on the bus what he had in mind for next week,” said then-NNHS assistant coach Al Carter. “He told me it was time to bring out the old ‘T’ offense.”

That was a formation that Weinstein was familiar with during his days as a player at Tarboro -- under the direction of the legendary Jim Brett, who was NN’s head coach that year.

But Weinstein had another trick up his sleeve -- one the Knights’ had been practicing all season long.

The famed fumblerooski -- arguably the greatest play in NNHS school history.

Late in the first half, the Knights were behind 7-6, but were driving into E.E. Smith territory.

That’s when the fumblerooski play was sent into the huddle -- to the shock of just about everyone on the offensive side of the ball.

“We practiced that play all the time,” Wooten said. “But I had no idea we would try it in the regional championship. I was like ‘Are we going to run that right now?’ I never actually thought we would do it in a game.”

The ball was put on the ground and scooped up by Chris Akpobiyeri, who raced untouched for a touchdown. Following the successful two-point conversion, NN took a 14-7 lead into halftime.

“Chris was a guard who could pull and had a lot of speed,” said former NNHS assistant coach Al Carter. “I just remember how big his eyes were when he was running and turned the corner. It was an incredible moment.”

With the momentum secured, NN used its scissors package out of the T to wear down the Golden Bulls in the second half en route to a 28-7 triumph that sealed the Knights’ regional championship.

“We didn’t have any big plays in the second half,” Wooten said. “We just had these long drives and kept moving the (first-

down chains). We were so pumped up coming out of the locker room.

“And even though we had a great offense, our defense was really the key. (EE Smith) couldn’t do anything against us after that early touchdown). We knew it was ours.”

The only downer from the game came when Jerrod Perry, a stalwart at running back and linebacker, was injured late in the game and was unable to play the next week in the state championship game, which the Knights dropped 14-7 to Asheville Reynolds.

“Not having Jerrod really hurt us on both sides of the ball in the state finals,” Carter said.

Still, Northern Nash had earned its first regional crown and successfully erased the bitter taste of its playoff exclusion one year earlier.

“We knew all along that we could play with the best teams in the state,” Wooten said. “People didn’t think we had much of a chance against E.E. Smith because they had all of these big-name guys.

“But we knew we belonged.”

## NN GREATS

continued from page 3B

### KENDRICK RICHARDSON

Conference Player of the Year as a defensive lineman. Also played QB.

### DAVID GREEN

Wide receiver, DB and special teams ace ended up walking on at

NC State.

### MICHAEL BUNN

Big East Defensive Player of the Year as a senior LB in 2019.

### MARCUS MERCER

Four-year starter at linebacker during Northern’s all-time best stretch.

### BO BROWN

Great two-way player from ‘02 group. Went on to excel at NC Wesleyan as a linebacker.

### ANTONIO WALKER

Tremendous lineman who cleared the way for powerful offense in 2001.

## RMHS

continued from page 5B

In theory, the quest began when Jason Battle transferred from Northern Nash to Rocky Mount in 1996 and became the Gryphons’ starting quarterback.

Battle eventually graduated and went to North Carolina A&T to play baseball, but he had developed a passion for RM that would help forge his career path.

In the meantime, the Gryphons had gone back-and-forth between a few coaches in the late 90s before handing the keys to B.W. Holt, who is considered one of Eastern North Carolina’s all-time coaching masters.

Holt took over in 2003 and immediately developed Rocky Mount into a state powerhouse during his six-year stint at the school.

“BW brought discipline to the entire program,” said former RM assistant coach Chris Lee, now the head

coach at Nash Central. “He demanded respect, whether you were the best player or the last player on the bench. His attention to detail was unbelievable. You were going to do things his way, or you weren’t going to play.

“BW also came around at the right time because we just seemed to have an endless run of athletes. And when you have great athletes willing to bend over backward for their coach, that’s a great combination. Kids loved playing for him.”

RM went 71-12 during Holt’s tenure and made the East Regional Finals on a trio of occasions -- but was unable to advance past there.

During that time, Battle was back in town working under Holt, learning everything he could about coaching from the legend.

The tutelage paid off when Battle was

named the head coach one year after Holt retired -- and the winning process simply continued.

Another great stretch for RM was capped in 2015 when the Gryphons topped South Point in overtime to win the Class 3-A State Championship.

Rocky Mount went back to the state finals one year later, dropping a close one to the same South Point club.

Three more competitive seasons have followed, and the Gryphons show no signs of slowing down.

“Rocky Mount has always had good talent and good coaching,” said Kent Cox, who was an assistant at RM from 1999-2012. “There is just a lot of tradition at Rocky Mount. Expectations are high every year.

“Kids at Rocky Mount know what is expected of them and what they have to do to be successful on the football field.”

## RM GAME

continued from page 5B

But the rest of the outing would be back-and-forth before South Point went ahead 21-14 early in the fourth quarter of action.

RM then faced a fourth-and-long situation, and the Gryphons went for it with the season on the line.

Gryphons’ quarterback Forrest Bell was sacked on the play, but he was face masked, giving his club a key first down.

RM would take up much of the final period with its time-churning drive that went 18 plays and 90 yards -- and didn’t culminate until Nick Bynum strolled into the end zone from six yards out with just over three minutes left.

The Gryphons, however, were called for a celebration penalty, meaning Chase Miller’s potential score-tying PAT would now be a 35-yarder.

Miller calmly split the uprights, and the game would eventually go to overtime.

South Point opened the extra session with a missed field goal to set up the drama for Miller, who banged home a 20-yarder to give the Gryphons their first state football

championship since 1963.

Bell, playing his final game for Rocky Mount, was selected as the Most Valuable Player after throwing for 210 yards.

## JJ

continued from page 3B

University of California to play in the PAC-12 -- and attend one of the country’s most regarded universities.

After serving as a situational back as a junior, Arrington made his senior season one to remember as he set a Bears’ single-campaign school record with an amazing 2,108 rushing yards to go with 15 touchdowns. For his efforts, Arrington was a first-team All-PAC 12 pick and was also an All-American selection.

Arrington was selected by the Arizona Cardinals in the second round of the National Football League Draft and played four years in the NFL

before his career was sidelined by a serious knee injury. The highlight of Arrington’s NFL tenure came when he participated in Super Bowl XLIII in 2009.



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NCHS

continued from page 2B

Central had only freshmen and sophomores on its roster, so the Bulldogs were unable to compete versus some of the ‘Big Boys’ in the area. Kenneth Grantham was hired to coach the squad, and he almost immediately brought an air of legitimacy to the program.

“You have to consider the situation -- we were coming into an area with established schools like Rocky Mount and Northern Nash,” said Kevin Crudup, who would serve as both an assistant to Grantham and then the head coach during his time at Nash Central. “Our players -- their parents had all gone to those schools. They were Gryphons and Knights. We were trying to mesh all of those parts together.

“Coach Grantham was extremely organized and knew what he wanted. He taught me how to be a head coach -- all of the things you needed to do in addition to just coaching (on Friday nights).”

Little by little, Grantham brought the Bulldogs toward area acceptances, and it wasn’t long before Central was making a deep run in the playoffs.

Grantham eventually left to return home to Greene Central, leaving the keys to Crudup, who guided the Bulldogs to an amazing 10-3 mark in 2011 that featured a victory over Tarboro -- and several other area powerhouses.

The program then went on a downward curve, seemingly overwhelmed by the strength of the Big East Conference, along with its usual difficult non-league worksheet.

Chris Lee took over for Crudup six years ago and implemented his wing-T offense -- one he learned while working at Rocky Mount under the legendary BW Holt.

After one tough season, Central’s fortunes began to push upward once again, culminating with a historic 2017 campaign that featured the most prolific offensive work in school history.

Travis Griffin shattered several school passing records that fall as Central scored over 30 points on nine occasions.

The Bulldogs also topped rivals Rocky Mount and Northern Nash and claimed their first-ever league crown -- a share of the Class 2-A Eastern Plains Conference.

“Everything just came together that year,” Lee said. “That senior class -- a lot of those guys had been pressed into starting early in their careers. So they were now three-year starters, and they had developed a lot of confidence during that time..

“We had some great players on the defensive side of the ball, and we had some great playmakers. We had a lot of very good athletes, and they all bought in.”

Central has not been able to replicate that success since then, but Lee considers his club to be an annual threat in the EPC -- and he sees both himself and his staff in it for the long haul.

“I love the school and I love the people here,” Lee said.

“I feel like we have a respectable program, and I feel like we can keep it going.”

NC GREATS

continued from page 2B

**JAROD RICHARDSON**  
RB/LB who competed in the East-West All-Star Game.

**HOUSHUN GAINES**  
TE/DE went on to play for the Virginia Tech Hokies.

**MAURICE MERCER**  
Another TE/DE, Mercer was Central’s first-ever ‘Big Time’ signee when he

inked with East Carolina University.

**DANNY ALLEN**  
Speedy wideout was arguably the school’s best receiver of all-time.

**DEVIN EVANS**  
Four-year starter along the offensive and defensive lines during high-powered era.

**ERIC MOORE**  
Exceptional two-way player

at fullback and linebacker.

**KENDALL WINSTON**  
Threat as rusher and receiver on great squad from 2017.

**DOMINIQUE HOLLOWAY**  
Was a threat to score from anywhere on the field. His performance during overtime victory versus Bunn was one to remember for the ages.

SN GREATS

continued from page 4B

**DAE’ONE WILKINS**  
Safety was Big East MVP. Now a redshirt sophomore at Furman.

**TYLER WHITLEY**  
Best offensive lineman on SN’s state semis club in 2009. Some argue best OL in school history.

**TAHJ DEANS**  
Three-year starter at safety at wide receiver.

Played at East Carolina.

**DWAYNE HERNDON**

Ended up starting at OL at NC State.

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RM GREATS

continued from page 5B

**NICK HAHULA**  
Owns school records for kicking. Also punted and started at fullback.

**BRIAN GOODWIN**  
Four-year starter, not just great at baseball.

**MIKE MASON**  
WR at North Carolina.

**JACOBI JENKINS**  
DB at East Carolina.

NC GAME

continued from page 2B

sure Jalen would have been able to play.”

Hendricks delivered a pair of touchdown passes and scooped up a fumble and returned it for a touchdown to give the Bulldogs the lead for good at 26-20 in the second stanza.

A wild first quarter ended with Tarboro ahead 20-14, but Central tied the score early in the second period.

Offense had ruled the day to that point, but Hendricks’ fumble recovery pushed the momentum toward the home team once and for all.

Hendricks then threw a touchdown pass to Justin Williams just before intermission, and the Bulldogs added an insurance tally in the third frame courtesy of a touchdown burst from Xavier Macklin, who scored twice during the game.

The Bulldogs led 38-20 before the Vikings tacked on a late touchdown to make the outcome closer.

Hendricks came through with 179 yards of total offense in addition to his scoop and score.

“I think we all felt that we had the potential to have a good team that year,” Crudup said. “But we weren’t sure how good. That game gave us a pretty good idea of what we were capable of.

“That game gave us a good foundation to

work with for the rest of the year. We ended up going 10-3 and having a great season.

“The win over Tarboro was great for us. But I will say this -- it took 11 people on defense to stop Todd Gurley on every play. He was amazing.”

That victory was only the beginning for Nash Central during what we be a star-studded campaign.

With Hendricks leading the way, the Bulldogs would win 10 of their 13 outings. Wilson Hunt would prove to be Nash Central’s greatest nemesis as the Warriors topped the Bulldogs twice, including in the Class 3-A State Football Playoffs.

But the Tarboro game was certainly

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SNHS

into one of the area's top gridiron programs -- year in and year out.

That development began in 1998 when Brian Foster took over as head coach after serving as an assistant under Ray Davis.

Foster vowed to be at Southern Nash for the long-term and refused to take short cuts to success. Instead, he focused on building a foundation that would stand the test of time -- and potential inevitable upswings and downswings in talent.

"Our philosophy has always been the same," Foster said. "We wanted to have our former players return as coaches. We wanted to make sure the middle school program did a lot of the same things we did."

"We wanted to get a youth program going so these kids could be together for a longer period of time. We wanted to get our athletes involved in the weight room, and we wanted to start an off-season workout program."

"Finally, we wanted to make sure everyone at the school understood how much our players appreciated being at Southern Nash."

That foundation is now in place, but it wasn't an easy journey to this point.

The early portion of the 2000s featured plenty of struggles for Southern Nash, though bits and pieces of future success were being foreshadowed as the Firebirds boasted some strong running backs, notably Alan Atwater and Jerry Howard.

But the Birds couldn't get over the hump against a competitive league schedule.

"It took a lot of

patience, but I remember the day I knew it was going to work," said Batchelor, who eventually played at William & Mary before returning to campus as an assistant coach. "It was a Friday, and we had a big game that night against Fike."

"Two of our best players were goofing off in the weight room. Coach Foster said they weren't going to play unless they stopped acting up."

"Being kids, they decided to test Coach Foster. They didn't play that night. That told me right there what Coach Foster believed in."

Yes, the foundation was in place, but SN still needed an identity -- especially on offense. It seems like all great area programs have something they are known for offensively, and opponents seem powerless to stop it, even when they know what is coming.

The Firebirds had tried a few different strategies, including a disastrous experiment with the spread in 2007.

One day, Foster walked into Batchelor's classroom and put three manila folders on his assistant's desk.

"I remember that day vividly," Batchelor said. "Coach Foster came in and said he had been doing some research. The folders said wing-T, double wing and triple option. He asked me to look over them and see which one I thought would be best."

"Coach Foster then took a few steps out the door, but came back almost immediately. He said 'Forget that -- we are running the double wing.'"

At some point, in those few steps Foster

took, came Southern's ultimate epiphany.

The double wing was an instant success. It allowed Southern Nash to get two talented runners on the field at the same time -- a trend that seems to continue year after year.

It also best served the never-ending string of good linemen who have come through Stanhope, and the offense was simple enough that the youth and middle school programs could run it.

Within two years, the Firebirds had put together an unlikely run to the state semifinals, where they dropped an overtime heartbreaker at South Johnson.

It took 11 long seasons, but SN made it back to the regional finals last year -- and topped Eastern Alamance to advance to the state championship.

This time around, the match to the finals was hardly unexpected. Not with the Firebirds reeling off four consecutive Big East Conference crowns, along with consistently producing high-level college talent.

"We've come a long way," said Southern Nash assistant coach Robbie Kennedy.

SN GAME

Eagles 32-29 in a thriller to make it to the state finals for the first time.

The score was tied 15-15 at half-time before the Firebirds moved ahead thanks to a field goal from Evan Barnes and a touchdown burst from senior star Quinton Cooley.

SN's cushion was 25-15, but EA could claw back to within three points late in the third stanza of action.

Now was the time for the Firebirds to use their double-wing offense to seal the victory.

That's exactly what happened. Daylon Whitley delivered a touchdown run to help extend SN's advantage once again, but EA would once again respond with a touchdown to shrink the Firebirds' lead to three with 5:37 left.

Needing to maintain possession,

Southern Nash called on Cooley for 10 consecutive running plays, and he did not disappoint as the Eagles would not touch the ball again.

When the final horn sounded, the overflow crowd raced on to the field to celebrate a championship a long time in the making.

Cooley, who finished with an unbelievable 354 rushing yards, accepted the region title plaque along with teammates Matt Foster and Jason Bland.

"We had always kind of envisioned how that would be -- playing at home for the regional title," said SNHS assistant coach Robbie Kennedy.

"It was pretty much everything we thought it would be. It was a tremendous experience. The more I think about it, the more special it becomes."

JULIUS

the next-level suspense by accepting a football scholarship to attend the University of North Carolina, where he was redshirted as a freshman and initially pegged as a tight end.

Somebody in Chapel Hill eventually came up with the idea to switch Peppers to defensive end, and the rest is history.

Peppers became an All-American at UNC and won the Chuck Bednarik Award, given to the country's best defensive player. And oh yeah, he moonlighted with the Tar Heels' basketball squad and helped UNC to the Final Four as a key rotation performer.

It didn't take long

for Peppers' name to be called at the 2002 National Football League Draft as he was the second overall pick by his home-state squad -- the Carolina Panthers.

Peppers would play an amazing 17 seasons in the NFL and was a nine-time Pro Bowl selection. He was tabbed for the NFL's All-Decade Team

in the 2000s and 2010s. He amassed the fourth-highest sacks total in NFL history while starring for the Panthers, Chicago Bears and Green Bay Packers.

After retiring in 2018, Peppers became a member of the Panthers' front office and splits his time between Charlotte and Miami.

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