

The King of coaches

By Rex Nelson

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In the days leading up to this week's college football national championship game, thousands of words were written about the fact that Auburn University head coach Gus Malzahn once worked at the high school level in Arkansas.

High school coaches are an important part of the fabric of this state. I talk to many Arkansans who are quick to note that outside their parents, the people who had the most influence on them were high school coaches.

My father spent most of his career traveling the state, selling athletic goods. At one point, he knew about every high school coach in Arkansas. My best days were those when I would travel with him. My birthday is Sept. 2. Rather than starting the first grade just as I turned age 6, I waited until I turned 7. My father decided it would be better if I were one of the oldest students in my grade rather than one of the youngest. "I redshirted him," he would say.

I had attended a private kindergarten the previous year—there were no public kindergartens in those days—and my father determined that I would learn more crisscrossing the state with him than I would learn by repeating kindergarten.

Even though it has been 48 years, I have clear memories of those months on the road with my father. I can remember sitting on a couch next to a potbelly stove with the coaches in the old gym at Shirley on a cold winter day; taking off my shoes and wading in the Caddo River at Caddo Gap on a warm spring afternoon; waiting in line to buy a hamburger in a small café at Delight; watching deer run across the parking lot of the high school at Magazine. My favorite thing to do was simply sit and listen to my dad, who once had been a coach himself, and some of this state's veteran coaches trade stories.

I thought about all of that while reading articles about Malzahn's high school coaching days. And I thought about Augusta's Curtis King, perhaps the most famous high school coach of them all. During the annual coaches' clinic early each August, King would come to our motel room and tell stories late into the night as he and my father smoked their pipes. He was funny. I recall him looking at me one night, smiling and asking: "How long has it been since you were whipped by an old man with bad teeth?"

His son, Jerry King, is writing a book about the coach. Jerry was lucky because, like me, his dad took him everywhere.

"I remember all the bus rides to and from games," Jerry King says. "Dad drove the bus, washed and dried all the uniforms, lined the field, maintained the bleachers, you name it. He also taught two classes of algebra and one of geometry. One student, at the first of a school year, leaned into his classroom and asked, 'Coach, is this plane geometry?' He replied, 'Yes, but it will never be plain to you.'"

The younger King relates another story that's well-known among those of a certain age at Augusta: "Dad was always out of money. One time, he had no lime to put on the field. During practice, the players began to complain about the smell. They stopped practice and looked around the edge of the fence that surrounded the field for a dead animal. As it turned out, Dad had taken powdered milk from the cafeteria and used it on the field. It had rained, the milk had soured and the whole south end of Augusta stunk."

It's duck season, so Jerry King couldn't resist telling the story of the time Curtis King took his two sons duck hunting: "We were in the blind, and Dad said, 'OK, boys, these ducks are circling. When I count to three, let's shoot them.' Well, on the count of two, he shot and then began laughing. He said, 'Don't you boys ever trust a duck hunter.'"

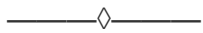
Curtis King was raised in the Ozark Mountains at Mountain View, but he made a name for himself in the Arkansas Delta. He began his coaching and teaching career in his hometown. During a retirement banquet in 1973, he said: "I had a brand new Model A, a pretty young wife, six foxhounds and \$17.50 in my pocket. Tonight, 44 years later, I return with a secondhand car and a worn-out woman. My dogs are dead, and I've overdrawn at the bank."

King was only 5'7" and weighed 160 pounds. A writer once described him as a combination of Popeye and Superman. There was no football team at Mountain View when King was growing up, so he played basketball and baseball. He was an assistant coach at Beebe from 1937-40 for another legendary coach, Des Arc native Ambrose "Bro" Erwin. Erwin recommended King, who was working construction jobs in Tennessee at the time, to members of the Augusta School Board in 1944. King was the Augusta coach from 1944-73, compiling a 182-105-12 record in football despite consistently playing larger schools such as Searcy, Newport and Batesville. He also coached boys' basketball, girls' basketball and track.

"I never had enough sense to do anything else," he once said. "Any idiot can coach. You only have to do three things to be able to coach: Drive a bus, clean out a commode and repair equipment."

King was inducted into the Arkansas Sports Hall of Fame in 1980, and the Curtis King Award was established by the Arkansas High School Coaches Association. King died in October 1980. Services were held at Augusta in the football stadium that bears his name. The stands were packed that day.

Gus Malzahn often tells interviewers that he comes from the high school coaching tree in Arkansas. For years, Augusta's Curtis King was the base of that tree.



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