

THE ROANOKE TIMES

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Miller recalled for spirit, approach

By Robert Anderson

George “Kila” Miller seemed larger than life.

Forget the urban legends, the tale of a long-ago wrestling “match” against a carnival animal or the day it is said he took down pro wrestler Tony Atlas.

Miller, 69, made his mark in the city of Roanoke as a true urban legend as a teacher, coach, mentor, adviser, and surrogate father to scores of kids who needed a leg up or a strong set of shoulders in their corner.

Miller’s large life ended Tuesday night when the former William Fleming High School football and wrestling coach died at Salem Health and Rehabilitation Center following recent complications from COVID-19 and years of other health concerns that included diabetes and prostate cancer.

Longtime friend and coaching colleague Doug Dupuy said Miller’s latest health problems began earlier this year.

“He was having problems with COVID back in April,” Dupuy said. “He put up a heck of a fight.”

A Roanoke native and a 1970 William Fleming graduate, Miller spent more than three decades in the city as an administrator, teacher and coach as well as a volunteer with countless civic institutions.

Roanoke Mayor Sherman Lea was one of many saddened by the news of Miller’s death.

“He’s a guy that had an impact on this city in many ways,” Lea said.

“George had such a presence in the community with young people. He was a no-nonsense guy, and he had to be. People respected him.”

Miller’s athletic and professional resume is long and impressive:

He was inducted into the the Athletics Hall of Fame at Elizabeth City State University, as a football and wrestling star where he was a three-time CIAA wrestling champion and an NAIA district champ with a 69-3 dual-match record.

He was longtime assistant football coach and the head coach at William Fleming for five seasons, leading the Colonels to the 1997 Division 5 championship game.

He coached wrestling at Fleming for 23 years, 19 as head coach, compiling a 209-34 record and nine Roanoke Valley District championships and six Big Orange Classic titles, earning induction into the Roanoke Valley Wrestling Hall of Fame in 2008 and the William Fleming Hall of Fame.

He was the head coach of Fleming's girls track and field program for six years. He also coached a semipro football team in Roanoke — the Virginia Hunters — for two seasons and remained involved as a coach with the Gator/Victory Boxing Club.

In 2018, the city named the football and track facility after Miller and former Fleming coach Sherley Stuart.

Miller served for 14 years as a hall principal at Fleming before moving to the school system's central office where he retired as the city's director of athletics.

He also spent two years as the principal at Noel C. Taylor Academy.

"Noel Taylor, at the time, was an alternative school," Lea said. "We would send kids over there who had trouble adjusting in school. George would make sure they became orderly.

"More than anybody, we wanted George there. He dealt not only with the students, but in many cases he had handled their parents. He knew everybody.

"He was a no-nonsense guy, but he cared."

Roanoke resident Mike Bonilla received a first-hand look at Miller's largesse.

"I grew up in Hurt Park," Bonilla said. "My mother is white. My father is Puerto Rican. I have kind of a different flavor than everybody had at that time. There were no Hispanic kids around. The man definitely took me under his wing. He set me up to be a hard worker."

Bonilla also experienced Miller's largeness.

Miller, an All-American defensive lineman in college, was a powerhouse of man with a booming voice and intimidating presence.

Bonilla recalled a day in school when he was upset about a situation with his girlfriend and was ready to take on the world.

"Coach Miller was a huge man," Bonilla said. "I was 130 pounds. He comes through and just snatches me up and carries me to his office and sits me down and says, 'What's the problem?'"

Miller had an impact on students who were not athletes.

Roanoker Jamal Millner graduated from Fleming, but he preferred electronics over sports.

Millner said Miller trusted him to handle the school's expensive equipment. Today, he is an award-winning owner of a successful Roanoke County business, M3:GRAFIX.

"I had a lot of extra privileges that other people didn't have," Millner said.

Miller's helping hands extended beyond the Fleming campus throughout the city.

Shannon Taylor starred at Patrick Henry High School before a college career at Virginia and a stint in the NFL with the Baltimore Ravens.

Taylor is now an assistant football coach and former head boys basketball coach at North Cross.

“He was a male role model for a lot of us who grew up without fathers, looking to assist guys with whatever it was,” Taylor said. “Whether it was getting into school, or issues at home.

“About 10 or 15 years ago he told me the University of Miami had called about recruiting me to see if I was legit. He said, ‘Yeah, he’s legit. You should recruit him.’ ”

While Miller was willing to help a rival athlete, when it was time to rumble on the wrestling mat or the field it was a different story.

Dupuy coached wrestling at Patrick Henry and also was Miller’s assistant coach at Fleming.

“He was very competitive,” Dupuy said. “His kids were built that way. Kila would always say, ‘Friendship ends when the match begins. When the match is over we’re friends again.’ ”

That philosophy was tested in 1997 after a William Fleming team led by future Virginia Tech and NFL running back Lee Suggs lost to Hampton 51-8 in the VHSL football championship game at Norfolk State University.

Amid a sea of spectators, the postgame scene turned ugly with the potential for worse.

Former Roanoke Times sports writer Ray Cox remembers Miller preventing the brouhaha from escalating.

“He just kind of corralled all his guys together and got them out of there,” Cox said.

Earlier in the 1997 season, Miller and William Fleming were involved in a more serious situation.

During a regular-season game at Victory Stadium, Pulaski County football player Danny Lee Cook collapsed and later died on William Fleming’s homecoming night.

“We postponed the homecoming dance in honor and respect of Lee Cook,” Miller said in a 2007 Roanoke Times story. “We felt that what happened to Lee Cook was far more important than that game ... We were able to play another game. He wasn’t.”

Miller retired from coaching in 1999.

He served briefly as Fleming’s athletic director before taking the job as the city’s director of athletics where current Grayson County superintendent of schools Kelly Wilmore was early in an administrative career.

“We were all new and younger and he took us under his wing,” Wilmore said. “He treated us like family, like we were his little brother and son.”

Wilmore learned just how popular Miller was around town.

“If you went somewhere with him, it was like going somewhere with Denzel Washington,” he said.

Miller was known as a sharp dresser. Wilmore said he liked a particular necktie Miller was wearing. Miller took it off and gave it to him.

“That is still my favorite tie that I wear,” Wilmore said. I always get compliments on it.”

Old stories about Miller have become apocryphal.

Did he really have an impromptu wrestling match in a local park against Roanoke native and world-renowned professional wrestler and bodybuilder Tony Atlas?

And what about the supposed wrestling match against a gorilla?

Dupuy believes that to be true.

“There was some kind of carnival that came to town,” he said. “It might have been when he was still in high school. They had this gorilla that would try to pull your pants down, that kind of thing.

“They coaxed [Miller] into getting in there, and he wasn’t having any part of that.”

Bonilla said Miller was so strong that several members of the Fleming wrestling team would attempt to take him down after daily practices.

“We would all try to jump him, the whole team, and he would just take us all out,” Bonilla recalled. “We’d ambush him, but it never paid off.”

But it paid off later.

The young kid from Hurt Park, the 130-pound high schooler that Miller picked up and carried into his office to give some advice, what’s he doing today?

“I’m a teacher at Breckenridge Middle School, and I’m the wrestling coach,” Bonilla said.

A funeral service will be held at noon Monday at Garden of Prayer 7 Church in Roanoke.

Visitation will be at 11:30 a.m.

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AUGUST 27, 2021
Dashing back to field

By Robert Anderson

The shortened 2020 VHSL football season was more of a sprint than a marathon.

William Fleming's Micah Jones was left at the starting line.

Jones, a Fleming track and field star who might be Timesland's fastest athlete, planned to play football for the Colonels when the season began in March following a seven-month delay because of COVID-19.

Instead, Jones failed to meet Fleming coach Jamar Lovelace's requirements to participate.

The William Fleming coach calls the expectations for his players' behavior in the classroom, hallways and practice facilities his "blueprint."

When Lovelace first showed up at Fleming in 2018 with his disciplined approach, 47 players in the overall program fell short. The result? See you next year, no exceptions.

Jones came under Lovelace's microscope last fall after failing two classes and standing close to the precipice of a third during the first nine weeks.

He was academically eligible under VHSL rules, but not under Lovelace's more stringent standards.

Lovelace did not let Jones suit up.

In a 2020-21 school year torn apart by the health crisis, Jones was one of many students who struggled with remote learning, sitting alone in front of a computer screen without the normal pace of classwork on campus.

"It's hard to stay focused, when your phone is right there and you're at home," Jones said. "You can go to sleep at any time. You can get off track or play a [video] game at any time.

"With corona, you had to adjust to learning online. I couldn't do that. My grades slipped."

No excuses though.

"It was more of an 'On me,' thing," he said.

Lovelace recognized the hardships his players experienced.

It was not unusual for multiple William Fleming players to show up early at the football field house last fall and use it as a study hall to combat the problems associated with in-home learning.

“You wake up on your own. You’ve got to get online on your own. Suddenly, you’ve got to manage this thing by yourself,” Lovelace said. “A lot of guys, as juniors in high school, weren’t ready for that change.

“We had kids that were able to come into the field house and stay all day, working on assignments. We have a steady internet connection here. Some of our players had four or five siblings at home who were also doing in-home learning. This field house kind of became a safe haven for kids.

“It changed the way everybody had to look at academics.”

Before Lovelace applied any sanction to Jones, the Fleming coach discussed the matter with the player and his family.

“We had multiple meetings with [his] mom,” Lovelace said. “We made the decision that he didn’t need to play football, and he agreed with it.”

Lovelace said he was looking out more for Jones’ future than Fleming’s immediate football fortunes.

“The big thing for him ... for a kid that’s on the fringe for a scholarship in track, last year was important for a lot of reasons, not just football but for whatever his future’s going to be,” Lovelace said.

It worked out well for both parties.

Fleming advanced to the Class 5 state semifinals in late April.

Meanwhile, Jones swept the 55-meter dash and the 55-meter hurdles in the Class 5 state indoor track and field meet. More importantly, Jones got back in good graces with Lovelace after getting his academics back on track.

The 5-foot-10, 150-pound Jones will be in the starting lineup Friday at wide receiver when Fleming opens the 2021 season at home against Heritage High of Lynchburg.

“I’m proud of him,” Lovelace said. “He’s grown up a whole lot since last year.”

Jones played for Fleming as a sophomore in 2019, rushing for a long gain in a Region 5D playoff victory over Harrisonburg and starting at cornerback in a second-round game at Mountain View.

Jones, whose older siblings Major and Majesty were Fleming track stars, ran the 55 meters last winter in 6.41 seconds and the hurdles in 7.64. He placed third in the 100 in the Class 5 outdoor meet.

Fleming returns a strong receiving corps led by Louis English and Jacob Henderson, and will look for ways to get Jones the ball, perhaps on a few handoffs.

“Even in the crowded receiver room, his speed is something that’s unique,” Lovelace said. “He’s always a deep-ball threat. He’s the fastest guy I’ve had on one of my teams.

“When UVa-Wise and Emory & Henry did their prospect camps, he was the fastest guy at both of them. They were very intrigued.”

Jones said he is anxious to play football again after a 21-month wait.

“I’m just ready to get out there,” he said. “I’m not really nervous.”

The Fleming senior said he would consider a college football career if his sprint times and his grade point average don't merit enough attention from college track coaches.

Jones is making a final lean toward the tape in the classroom.

"I've got to work on it this year," he said. "Ever since school started I've been focused, like, going to sleep early every night, waking up in the morning on time, getting here on time."

As Fleming made its drive to the state semifinals last spring, Jones was one of the team's biggest fans.

Don't think Lovelace didn't notice.

"He was at every single game," the coach said. "His attitude didn't change about football one bit. I think that had a lot to do with why he's being as successful as he is early this year."

Jones is ready to run the race this year with his teammates.

"I supported them every step of the way," he said. "There was no hate. I wished I was with the team, but I was still happy."

THE ROANOKE TIMES
JULY 30, 2021
'Knight Vision' goggles

By Robert Anderson

Jeff Leftwich had a plan earlier this year for how to spend some of his time in retirement after 35 years as a high school football assistant coach.

"I was going to go to the beach this fall," he said.

Well, it was 90-plus degrees under a blazing sun Thursday at Cave Spring High School.

Just close your eyes and pretend.

In reality, Leftwich wasn't kicked back in a chair watching waves crash on the shore. The veteran coach sported a floppy sun hat as Cave Spring opened official practice for the 2021 season.

The operation was conducted by the Knights' new head coach — Leftwich's son, Nick.

Cave Spring hired Nick Leftwich, 32, in May. One of his first moves was convincing his father to join him as the team's defensive coordinator.

Jeff Leftwich worked as an assistant coach at five schools: Pound, Franklin County, Northside, Hidden Valley and most recently at Salem, where Nick was a four-year player and a two-year starter at quarterback.

He called it quits after Salem's 28-20 win over Lake Taylor on May 1 in the VHSL Class 4 state final.

The old man's retirement actually ended before it started.

The elder Leftwich finished up the spring as the Spartans' boys outdoor track and field coach after he had agreed to come to Cave Spring.

"We had talked about it a little bit," Nick Leftwich said. "I just kind of threw it out, 'Hey, if I ever get a head job, I'll want you to coach.'

"I also gave him the option, 'Look, I know you just retired. You can enjoy retirement and sit back and kind of be a fan and critique, you're more than welcome to. But if you want to be a part of the staff, come on down.' I'm glad he accepted."

Nick Leftwich is a third-generation coach.

His grandfather, Wayne Leftwich, was the head coach at Pound High in Wise County, where Jeff spent his first five seasons.

Jeff coached at Franklin County for eight years, at Northside for seven, at Hidden Valley for one and at Salem for 14 where he was part of four VHSL championship teams.

He was at Hidden Valley in 2006 when Nick was a junior quarterback at Salem. At Northside in 2005, he coached against his son when Nick was a sophomore on a Salem team that finished 14-0 with a second successive state title.

When Nick was growing up in Salem, his buddies knew his father was a football coach ... somewhere.

“All my friends, no one called him ‘Coach Leftwich’ at the time,” Nick said. “All my buddies who grew up with me knew him as ‘Nick’s dad.’ They called him ‘Coach Dad.’”

Jeff’s first year at Salem was 2007, Nick’s senior year.

Nick, who played college football at UVa-Wise, saw his prep career end with a 48-35 loss to Amherst County in a Division 4 state semifinal.

“I remember that like it was yesterday,” Nick said. “Obviously, you want that state ring. Now [Dad has] four and I’m still stuck with two.”

On his first day as Cave Spring’s new coach, Nick Leftwich hit the ground running, timing players in the 40-yard dash to get a firsthand assessment of his athletes.

Each player wore a red T-shirt with the team’s new motto printed on the back: Knight Vision.

Leftwich felt it important to establish a new brand for the program, which was coached for the previous 16 years by Tim Fulton, who is now an assistant coach at Franklin County.

For the past two seasons, Leftwich was part of a total rebranding effort at William Fleming under head coach Jamar Lovelace that took the Colonels from an 0-10 record in 2017 to a berth in the 2020 Class 5 state semifinals.

“That’s no dig at anyone who was there prior, but there was a need for there to be a different perception and things had to be approached in different ways,” Leftwich said of his experience at Fleming.

“You see what it’s doing now. I think I can take a lot from that with what we’re trying to do here. I won’t say we’re trying to change the culture, we’re trying to create a different culture.”

The young coach wants his team to adopt a “1 and 0” mentality at Cave Spring, which has not posted a winning season since 2014. That is, each game, each day in the weight room or the classroom is a fresh start that Leftwich expects his players to strive to win.

It might be a cliché, but when Cave Spring lines up against the likes of Salem, Pulaski County or Patrick Henry, that mindset will be necessary.

“Don’t go into it with the mentality, ‘I don’t know if this is going to work out,’” he said. “No matter who we play on Friday night, we’re going to look at everybody the same.”

Five assistants off Fulton’s staff — Ryan Poff, Chris Askew, Ricky Lonker, Timmy Roberts and Landon Dermott — give Leftwich important continuity.

And now there will be a familiar voice in the new coach’s ear. Jeff Leftwich just is not the retiring type.

“He’s bringing experience, knowledge and that old-school mentality,” Nick said about his father. “I’m kind of old-school myself. I know he’s going to keep me in check which is another great thing too.

“I ask him all the time, ‘Am I doing things right?’ He’s going to be honest with me.”