

ALERT TOP STORY

After Further Review: Heart and Soul

Ben Cates

Mar 10, 2023



E.C. Glass' O'Maundre Harris puts up a shot against Varina's Damari Carter (left) and Josh Hughes during the Class 4 Siegel Center on Thursday, March 9, 2023.

Paige Dingler, The News & Advance

Ben Cates

In a press conference after Thursday night's loss to Varina, E.C. Glass basketball coach DJ Best could've cried.

Could've but didn't. He'd already shed enough tears earlier in the day, long before the Hilltoppers took to the court to play in their first state championship game in 56 years.

He cried for his team, knowing, no matter the outcome, their time together was drawing to a close.

"I cried all day today. I cried before the game because it's over," Best said. "I knew once that last whistle blew we were gonna be finished. My senior-led team that I've had playing since 10th grade is going on to a new life. My guys, who have worked their tails off over the offseason."

With him sat two of those seniors, Camp Conner and O'Maundre Harris, both red-eyed. They had just given their all, and now the dream of making school history was fading away.

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Here's the thing about giving your all. Sometimes it means immense pain and sudden suffering. Sometimes it means crying in front of your peers, as 7,000 people look on.

So after that final whistle, Harris sat underneath the Glass basket and wept. He pulled his jersey over his face. Varina coaches walked over to console him, recognizing the greatness they'd just witnessed and the weight of the moment on the Glass guard.

He'd unloaded 31 points, more than half of his team's total, and nearly willed his team to a state title.

Think about that for a moment. The guy who contributed so much — who put his body on the line every game, who got flung to the floor over and over and also knocked down head-shaking baskets — that guy put his team, and his school, on his back one more time. His was a splendid effort in the 59-56 loss, and it was nearly enough. Harris, quite simply, looked otherworldly this season, as if basketball was invented on some distant planet and he was chosen to bring it to us.

In three state tournament games, he scored 32, 34 and 31 points. He gave everything he had Thursday night and every night, and he left the Siegel Center beat up and bruised. He stayed in the game despite hitting his elbow hard on the floor in the third quarter, then jumpstarted Glass' comeback from 12 points down. Then, late in the fourth, he exited for just 30 seconds after getting fouled and knocked to the ground, where he cramped up under the Glass basket. Other than that short sequence, Harris was on the floor for all 32 minutes, the only player in the building to play basically the entire game.

He gave all he had for E.C. Glass. For his teammates. For his community. For his coach. There's a reason why Best referred to Harris this season as the heart and soul of Glass basketball.

Last year, Best brought O'Maundre to our office for a portrait and interview. O'Maundre was our All-Area boys basketball player of the year. During his interview, I asked him something like this: Is there a person who has most influenced your life?

O'Maundre didn't say anything at first. Just kind of hung his head and pointed. Across the room, at Best. It was one of those beautiful moments you don't expect as a reporter. I think there were tears in Best's eyes. I know there were in mine.

I asked why. This was O'Maundre's response: "Because he influences me to be a better person and a better man, on and off the court."

The coach and the player made history at E.C. Glass this season. They left Richmond without the trophy, and they don't have to tell you how much that hurts for you to know it does. They didn't make the drive just to be state runner-up. That 'One More' mantra, that was ultimately about winning the last game of the season. They know getting to the state championship is special, but that it tastes bitter without the sweetness of winning the whole thing.

I take a different approach. I watched Best coach and Harris play without reservation Thursday night. I watched Conner hit game-changing 3-pointers. I watched Dexter Harris provide lights-out defense and force turnovers that gave Glass momentum. And I came away with this conclusion: sometimes it's OK to not be the best. To not win it all. To walk away with your dreams denied.

What matters most is that you have heart and soul. Glass certainly has that right now. The kind you only get by going through trials.

In the summer of 2021, Best lay in an ICU bed, unsure whether he'd coach again. Unsure what his life would look like after it was uprooted by an autoimmune disease. But he battled back and vowed that, in the summer of 2022, he would give his all, always be there for his team throughout its journey.

Staying invested and encouraging and locked in through a long season — that is heart and soul.

Best's wife, Desha, made T-shirts for fans to wear at the state title game. They were royal blue and said on the front "One team, one dream," with "Hilltoppers" in between those two phrases. On one sleeve was written the team's motto "One More."

Giving of your time so others can enjoy theirs — that is also heart and soul.

When Best was asked about the large contingent of Glass fans that made the trip to Richmond, the coach talked about looking up at the stands and seeing all that royal blue. O'Maundre Harris began to cry at the thought.

Loving your people to the point of tears — that is also heart and soul.

Best tried to summarize the season and talked about "how hard we had to fight." And by that he meant: "the scratches, the claws, the tears, the blood, everything it took just to get to this point of where we are today."

"I think when it settles down, they're gonna enjoy it," he continued, talking about how his players will eventually view Thursday's game. "It's something they're gonna get to talk about the rest of their lives."

And who knows what the rest of their lives will entail? Whatever twists and turns lie ahead, they'll be better for going through this run together, for laughing and crying as one.

Their tears flowed from a place deep down Thursday. The place that says you love each other. The place that says you wish this time together would never end. The place that says basketball is life, and life sometimes rips your guts out.

That place, with all its glory and pain, is the intersection of heart and soul.

ALERT TOP STORY

After Further Review: Farewell to a Lynchburg legend

Ben Cates

Aug 28, 2023

There was no blueprint for how Carl Crennel could succeed. No guidebook telling him how to act. How to play. How to carry himself.

It was 1965, and Crennel was new to Lynchburg, a senior who stood out from the rest of his E.C. Glass teammates. More than three years earlier, in January of 1962, Lynda Woodruff and Owen Cardwell had walked into the school's doors, becoming the first Black students to attend classes there. Still, there were no Black faces on the school's varsity football team.

Until Crennel came along. The self-described "Army brat" who, years after his high school days ended, thought back and said he'd never considered making history, nevertheless became a trailblazer. A hero. A gridiron giant. An inspiration to countless youngsters who came after him.

Crennel died Aug. 19 at age 74. Word of his passing reached E.C. Glass alumni late last week. Friday evening at Lynchburg City Stadium, during halftime of the team's season opener, a PA announcer read about his life. When he finished, applause rang out through the night.

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Players on this year's team didn't hear those words. They were in the home locker room, learning how to improve on their first-half performance from Jamar Lovelace, making his debut as the first Black head football coach at one of the South's oldest high schools.

Crennel's accomplishments are highlighted in the school's Hall of Fame, so any student wandering the hallways can consider them.

They can learn how in 1965 he led Glass to an undefeated season (7-0-3). How he was so talented that he earned a scholarship to West Virginia University — despite not playing organized football until his junior year of high school — where he was a three-year starter at middle linebacker.

They can learn how he was a three-time All-American at WVU, how he was a team captain just a few years after Black players integrated that program.

How he was once MVP of the Peach Bowl.

How he was drafted by the Pittsburgh Steelers, played six games in the NFL and then became an all-pro performer in the Canadian Football League, spending a decade in those ranks.

They can learn how he is a member of the Lynchburg and WVU halls of fame.

And they can learn how, returning to the Lynchburg area after his career ended, he worked construction and became a mentor to young people.

And students looking at those accomplishments can imagine. Imagine what it must've been like to be Carl Crennel, the first Black football player in E.C. Glass history.

He must have endured taunts and slurs. Must have known some people were judging him, others deriding his efforts. He must have swatted aside insults and heard the cheers from fans celebrating his work and others uncertain about his presence in royal blue and white.

He had attended integrated schools in other states before arriving at E.C. Glass, because his father, Joseph Crennel Jr., was a member of the U.S. Army. Breaking the color barrier at Glass may not have been on his mind in 1965.

"That wasn't much of an adjustment," Carl Crennel told this newspaper in 1983. "I was more concerned with whether I had started playing football too late."

He hadn't. Turns out, the timing of his development was just right. He grew up playing baseball on the dusty sandlots of South Texas, with a little bit of youth football sprinkled in. But it wasn't until his junior year that Crennel really gave football a chance, and he did so only because his older brother, Romeo, ribbed him about the sport when the family was living in Fort Knox, Kentucky — one year before Carl came to live with relatives in Lynchburg while his father was stationed in Germany.

"He called me 'chicken,'" Crennel recalled Romeo saying. "He said the reason I didn't go out for it was because I was scared to. So I went out to prove him wrong."

It was a decision that altered Carl's life. One that changed E.C. Glass and the city of Lynchburg. For decades, Black athletes had hailed from Dunbar High. Now the city's most high-profile sport was led by the face of a Black teenager at E.C. Glass.

It was high time. Lynchburg, like other localities in Virginia, for years resisted integrating its schools after the Supreme Court of the United States overturned the concept of "separate but equal" in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Eleven years after the ruling, Carl Crennel walked onto the gridiron as a member of a squad coached by Vince Bradford. A squad no longer separate, slowly leaning toward equality.

His historic season at E.C. Glass occurred in a particular age defined by open defiance to federal law, by ambivalence, by hatred and a potent hostility toward Black existence.

It was an age in which Virginia governors pushed through "massive resistance" measures to block desegregation. An age in which Lynchburg closed its public pools one summer to keep out Black folks, then later filled those pools with concrete rather than integrate them. An age in which a man named Jerry Falwell, operating under the guise of religious freedom in education, began "a private school for white students," as this newspaper reported at the time.

Crennel played through moments like those, for years, at the high school, college and pro levels. It is one thing to simply suit up and keep your head down through difficult times; it is quite another to actively change the course of those times, even if change wasn't on your mind in the moment.

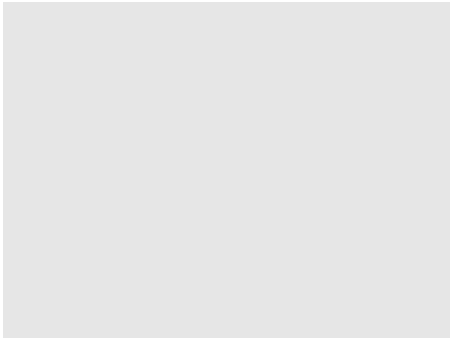
Prior to his induction into the Lynchburg Area Hall of Fame in 1998, Crennel spoke of his season with the Hilltoppers: "At the time, I just really wanted to play. Glass had a very good team, and I'm glad I ended up with them."

He also credited Bradford as an influential figure in his life. Bradford also benefited from Crennel. The coach had the sense to put Crennel on the field, surrounded by white players, knowing he would face taunts and criticism. Crennel knew that too. He played on anyway.

If Carl Crennel hadn't come along, another talented athlete would've broken the color barrier eventually, because the arc of the moral universe ultimately bends toward justice. Still, the moral universe chose Crennel for a particular task, a task he welcomed.

Black progress is human progress. There were scores of young people like Carl Crennel in the middle of the 20th Century. People who took a stand and made history. And for every stand, America took one step — even if just a small one — toward becoming a more perfect and just society.

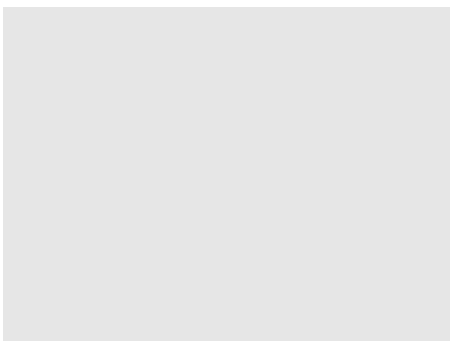
His was not a momentous feat shaking the foundations of American life. But American life is full of people like Carl Crennel. Folks who provided a spark, a spark that became a righteous fire so powerful it could no longer be contained. A fire spreading so far that it lit the way for generations to come.



Carl Crennel, in this photo taken during his time at the University of West Virginia, was the first Black football player at E.C. Glass. Crennel died last week at age 74.

Carl Crennel, in this photo taken during his time at the University of West Virginia, was the first Black football player at E.C. Glass. Crennel died last week at age 74.

Courtesy of West Virginia athletics



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By Ben Cates

ALERT TOP STORY

After Further Review: 'You can't stop The Moose'

Ben Cates

Sep 23, 2023



Jefferson Forest's Josiah Bell rushes forward against Rustburg during Friday's game at Rustburg High School. Paige Dinger, The News & Advance

Ben Cates

RUSTBURG — Early in the third quarter of Friday's Seminole Showdown, Jefferson Forest faced a third-and-3 situation in its own territory when quarterback Josiah Bell took the snap and plunged forward.

He got the first down, stayed on his feet in the pile and pushed. JF's strong offensive linemen, they pushed too. The play continued for 10 yards, then 15, then 20. Finally, Bell was brought down after a 23-yard gain.

That's when the chants began from the JF sideline. To the casual bystander they may have sounded like a chorus of boos. Far from it; they were celebrating their guy.

"Moosooooose," players on the visiting sideline chanted. "Moosooooose." Then they placed their hands on each side of their helmets and spread their fingers to symbolize a set of antlers.

"You can't stop The Moose!" a player yelled from the sideline.

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The guy they call The Moose was tearing up the field. He'd already burned Rustburg for 146 passing yards on three completions in the first half. He finished the Battle of the Seminole Unbeatens with 118 rushing yards and accounted for four touchdowns.

He stands at 6-foot-3, weighs in at 220 pounds and may just be one of the toughest ball carriers in the area at the moment.

"He's just a big guy, he runs through everybody," teammate and running back Wrigley Colling said, explaining the nickname after Forest earned a 45-24 win over the Red Devils. "He's hard to stop."

Indeed. Bell rushed for 118 yards on 23 carries Friday night, bringing his total on the season to 312 rushing yards in five games. Not record-setting stats, by any means. But consider that he's done that work on 60 carries, for an average of just 5.2 yards per pop, and you start to get the picture: this guy isn't afraid to carry the ball into the lion's mouth, running straight up the gut for short gains. And sometimes, he's carried forward by that hulking offensive line for large, impressive gains.

Left guard Tyrese Calloway talked Friday about how his offensive line is basically a family. That may sound cliché, but if you looked into Calloway's eyes, you'd understand he really means it. So when he talks about Bell, a smile creeps across his face. That's the guy Calloway is often protecting as JF pushes forward in its double wing offense.

"Well I tell you what," Calloway said, "Joe — or as we call him, The Moose — he keeps pushin' every play. Every play he's runnin' and runnin'. He runs hard. I tell you what, that's one of the best QBs I've been around."

The nickname didn't originate in the JF locker room or on the field at Sabre Stadium or even from inside the hallways of the school. It came from Daleville, from a program located nearly an hour away, from a coach that may not even remember saying it. Jefferson Forest was scrimmaging at Lord Botetourt and opposing coaches must have been watching the Cavaliers quarterback's moves.

Bell went in for a touchdown, barreled over a defender in the process.

"One of their coaches was like, 'Way to moose it in there' when I scored," Bell said. "It's stuck ever since then."

Even a moose breaks down sometimes, though. And that's what happened to Bell on this same field in Rustburg last year. He played the entire game at quarterback, but he hurt his right foot early, and ended up undergoing surgery after suffering a midfoot injury, referred to as a Lisfranc. He had to have screws inserted into his foot and missed the end of the regular season (and JF's lone playoff game) and faced a long offseason recovery.

But even while recuperating, Bell would still attend weight-lifting sessions at JF, focusing on upper-body workouts. Head coach JT Crews was impressed by the workout Bell, now in his third year as starting QB, showed back then.

And that hard work is paying off now. He's the leader on offense and a main reason the Cavaliers are 5-0.

"It's heart," Crews said. "It's heart from him and it's heart from everybody out here."

In interviews last week, the coach referred to certain times of the game, when JF needs 3 or 4 yards in a cloud of dust, when Bell takes over. He calls it "The Joe Show."

"Those guys [on the offensive line] they take pride in that," Crews said. "They're just as excited about it as he is. ... He's a quarterback but he's one of them, because he's in there every day working with them. That dude lifts with the linemen. His best friend is the center [Britin Whitt] on the team. And so, yeah, it's [Bell's] success, but it's everybody's success. And I think that's kind of how we view it as a team overall. ... Whatever it takes, whoever it takes. It's not about one guy touching the ball a million times and taking the game over or anything like that. It's about everybody pitching in, doing their role, and Joe's willing to do that."

Bell can hear the sideline chants when they start. Sometimes they begin as a low rumble before transitioning to a loud chorus. Other times they begin in unison, like the players are just waiting, anticipating Bell's movements and then breaking out in "Moooooose" when the play dies out.

"It's a little extra motivation," the QB said.

And that type of blue-collar running, that's just what the Cavs needed. They've had savvy, get-to-the-edge runners in the past, but Bell is an example of a much more common type of ball carrier in Bedford County: the guy willing to bust it up the gut, who throws himself forward with force, who is tough-nosed and tough-minded.

"It's so encouraging to have a good quarterback, not only that can throw the ball and be accurate but one that's willing to take on the workload of running the ball. That's not an easy thing to do, especially up the gut so much," Colling said.

Football is fun in Forest these days. It's hard-hitting, too. And it comes with sideline chants and helmet antlers. Tributes to The Moose.

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