

## GO BRITS!

*What can truly bring together the hearts and minds of the diverse individuals who make up a college or university? Is there some higher concern that can inspire and unite everyone? Maybe . . . or maybe there's football.*

**By Lee Burdette Williams**

FIFTEEN minutes of fame. It's what we've come to expect in America, home of Oprah and Geraldo, a painfully aggressive media, and a population hungry for anything out of the ordinary.

Small liberal arts colleges occasionally have their fifteen minutes, usually the result of a campus tragedy or controversy, a famous speaker, a number-one rating from *U.S. News and World Report*. Our little institution had its moment in the spotlight in December 1994, when our football team beat four straight favored opponents in the Division III playoffs to emerge with a national championship. For the month of December, football mattered to our private liberal arts college in a way people had, in the past, never wanted to admit.

It's not that we haven't had a successful team; 1994 marked its sixth consecutive conference championship, and the team had only lost four games throughout the first half of the decade. But until 1994, the Britons had never advanced beyond the second round of the playoffs, having the misfortune to draw the eventual national champion three years in a row. So it is easy to say we were used to success on the gridiron (is it called that in Division III? The name seems so . . . harsh). But 1994 was the year our team's skill was matched with good fortune. The punts rolled our way. Most of our players stayed healthy. Luck was with us. In one key playoff game against the defending national champions, one point-after attempt by our usually sure-footed kicker went *under* the crossbar. Another hit the crossbar and fell over for a point. Our players of fortune, however, managed to block two extra points, and we won by a single point. It was that kind of year. And with each victory, strange things happened on campus.

Instead of spending their lunch hours in the snack bar loudly griping about our much-maligned president, faculty members talked about the previous Saturday's game. As a trip to the Division III championship game at the Amos Alonzo Stagg Bowl in Virginia grew more likely, travel plans were discussed.

Students compared notes on what their hometown newspapers were saying about the undefeated, unbowed Britons. Each night, they gathered in rooms and lounges to watch the eleven o'clock news do its usual "small town, small college" football story, and hollered at the screen as they saw their friends and familiar campus landmarks.

The head coach's face became a familiar visage on the screen as well as in the newspapers. His humble mantra, "They're a great group of guys, and they deserve the recognition," brought a lump to viewers' and readers' throats.

Alumni besieged the bookstore with phone requests for sweatshirts to wear to the Stagg Bowl. Everyone, it seemed, was going to Virginia. The president canceled classes on the Friday before the game. All employees were given the day off, paid. While this may not seem terribly significant to the casual observer, our campus has been rife with labor problems, plummeting morale, financial woes, and an enrollment crisis. The symbolic gesture of a day off, a holiday to celebrate our team's good season thus far, was profoundly felt. Even faculty griping was rare. Our president is so unpopular with faculty that I've often thought if he could discover a cure for cancer, the faculty's response would be "So what's wrong with cancer? Why does it need to be cured anyway?" During the week prior to the Stagg Bowl, the faculty, well, they didn't seem as bothered by the president.

The town was transformed into an ongoing pep rally. The local paper wrote detailed accounts of the preparations for the game, and the Chamber of Commerce sponsored a send-off before the first away playoff game and again before the Stagg Bowl. A huge banner saying "Go Brits" hung across our main street, gaudily lit by the Christmas decorations. In almost every store (and there aren't many left here) were signs encouraging the team. Even our supermarket's cash registers printed "Go Brits" across the top of each

receipt. Children from around town waited at the door of the field house for a glimpse of their new heroes, and were rewarded with a high-five or smile as the players filed past on their way to practice.

All this from a town that had had, at best, an uneasy relationship with the college. An impoverished factory town that saw its best days end with the American automobile's loss of preeminence, our community views students with equal parts resentment and envy. Students arrive each fall in cars worth more than a typical resident's annual salary, and turn up their noses at the modest offerings of our downtown merchants. Conversely, our students are often harassed by local teenagers, find their cars broken into, and seem to be the recipients of a disproportionate number of traffic tickets by local

police. But December, a month typically animated by more than the usual goodwill, brought town-gown relations to a place college presidents and small-town mayors dream about.

PEOPLE left for Virginia in droves. It was reported that at least two thousand people from the college and the town attended (our enrollment is less than 1,600). Our half of the tickets sold out in two days. Among the students who went was a cross-section of the most diverse of our student body. Greeks and other "Joe and Jane College" types were there as expected, but so were our more counterculture members, radical feminists (camping out, no less), math geeks (as they bill themselves), freshmen, seniors, blacks, whites, those who love their alma mater and those who, except for this particular weekend, rail against it. Dozens of faculty members were in attendance, as were the president's cabinet, big donors, small donors, wealthy alumni who chartered their own planes, our town's factory workers who piled into minivans for the twelve-hour drive.

The game was broadcast on ESPN. Those few of us who had stayed behind stared in wonder at the screen as our team's name appeared next to our college's seal. The announcers mispronounced the college's name at

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first, but eventually got it right. As our players ran onto the field we could hear, in the background, the college fight song. A generous alumnus had paid the \$10,000 bill to send our band, the British Eighth, to Virginia for precisely this moment, and as the notes of "Fyte Onne" (actually the first ten notes of "Rule Britannia") rose above the roar of the crowd, it seemed worth every penny.

Once again, our team was the underdog. As they fell behind 7-0, we paced, we worried, we implored. Two quick touchdowns and we were ahead to stay. The final score was a convincing 38-15, and our Britons were national champions.

They came home to a rousing welcome as students, faculty, staff, and town residents waited in the cold for the buses. As the players got off the buses, they averted their

eyes from the crowd. It appeared they were uncomfortable with the hoopla, undoubtedly the result of being coached by the world's most humble man. They made their way through the crowd, mumbling thanks to the celebrants. An assistant coach stepped off the bus and held aloft the Stagg Bowl trophy. The crowd cheered. The players, carrying their own equipment, kept their heads down but could not hide their smiles as they filed into the field house.

Nothing was back to normal the following week. Faculty came to lunch wearing their souvenir shirts and hats. Championship sweatshirts and T-shirts quickly became the Christmas gift of choice. The purple and gold ribbons that had been hung the previous week on every tree on campus and downtown remained, colorful against the backdrop of a recent snowstorm. The admissions office pondered the effect of all the positive press on application numbers, not an unreasonable calculation given the nature of the coverage. Our team, it appears, may be the best-behaved football team in America. Everyone said it—airline pilots, the game's referees, Stagg Bowl officials.

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*Lee Burdette Williams* is associate dean for student affairs at Albion College.

The biggest story to come out of the game was that Jeff, our star running back, who is black, had been taunted with racial epithets by a white defender. He responded only with an incredible game—166 yards and three touchdowns, one a 70-yard run over and through almost every defender on the field. He was, as he said later, “inspired.” So, not only were our players the national champions, they emerged as some kind of warriors in the never-ending battle against racism. One of our white players was quoted on the front page of the state’s largest newspaper, and again in *Sports Illustrated*, as saying, “He’s as much my brother as any white guy on the team.”

I found myself imagining being employed by the opponent’s school, sitting with colleagues over lunch, and instead of dissecting each play of our team’s victory, feeling the flush of embarrassment as my institution’s values were questioned across the nation. The press was merciless in its portrayal of the incident. It was only one player on their team, it was determined, but the incident nonetheless impugned the reputation of their team and their institution, like us, a small, private liberal arts institution that prides itself more on strong academics than athletics. We knew, as would most institutions willing to look closely at themselves, that such a thing could happen to us by some similar event, though probably not as the result of our football team, being coached as they are by the world’s most decent man. And then one’s fifteen minutes of fame would be spent under the blinding light of scrutiny for a sin too many of us commit too often. As one of my astute colleagues said, “Hey, we’re always one stupid-mouthed kid away from a public relations disaster.” Indeed.

WHEN you work at a Division I school, as I have, you get used to the hype surrounding the athletic program. Pre-season rankings, major bowls or the NCAA tournaments, All-American selection discussions, national coverage; it all becomes routine. But life is different here in Division III, where one of our football

players actually told reporters, “I’m not really going to think about this all until after finals.” Here, a season of such epic proportions becomes a defining event, touch-

ing everyone on campus. For one month, there was a singular effort to support, a cause to cheer, a unifying force on a campus that had become used to a fractious and often mean-spirited atmosphere. Regardless of our differences, we were all behind the Britons, all proudly wearing our college colors. If there were any resentments of the team’s success and the resources used to support them, they were kept silent.

The ambivalence that sometimes strikes those at institutions whose athletes seem little more than hired guns brought in to win a conference or national championship was not present. These athletes are

scholars, as the ESPN announcers graciously pointed out (perhaps to explain to the unwary viewer why the players on the screen seemed so small and so slow). They harbor no hopes of a professional career. They do not take their helmets off to attract the camera’s attention after a play. In fact, after his remarkable 70-yard run, Jeff found himself with a camera in his facemask. He quickly looked away, shrugged, and walked over to a trainer to get his bad hamstring stretched. We in the television audience smiled at his graciousness. He is one of our own.

Our fifteen minutes of fame were fun, inspiring, exhilarating, exhausting. When it was over, and students scrambled to catch up on their studying for upcoming finals, we had a chance to catch our collective breath and consider what had just happened. Our tiny, mostly regional, private liberal arts college, fighting for survival in a society that no longer seems to value what we offer and is even less able to afford it, was the best in the nation at this one thing: small college football. It was, and may continue to be, the only thing we’ve ever all agreed on, and—ESPN or not—that seems incredibly important.

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