



Leon Harrell Smoak

September 15, 1935 - January 8, 2024

Leon Harrell “Pete” Smoak passed away January 8 at Clyde Lassen State Veterans Home in St. Augustine, Florida, at 88 years old.

A devoted husband, father, teacher, coach and mentor, Pete will be remembered for his legacy of teaching and coaching hundreds of students and student-athletes over a long career in education and athletics.

Born September 15, 1935 in Hiltonia, Georgia, Pete grew up in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. Starting at a young age, he was a gifted natural athlete in baseball, basketball and football, lettering in all three sports at Elizabeth City High School. He was a regular at the local Boys Club, hanging out there with his friends and looking after his baby sister Betty Jean in between school and ball practice. Young Pete’s passion for sports helped him win an essay contest and serve as a ball boy for a Cleveland Indians game where he warmed up famous pitcher Bob Feller.

Upon graduating high school, Pete enlisted and served in the U.S. Marine Corps as a reconnaissance marine, did tours in the Pacific, and achieved the rank of Lance Corporal. Afterward, he returned to North Carolina for college. A Chowan College standout, Pete covered the infield playing shortstop on the baseball team, and he was a small, but lightning-fast defensive back on the Braves football team. It was at Chowan where he met his wife Deborah, before junior-transferring to Wake Forest University to earn a bachelor’s degree that would prepare him for a teaching career. Participating in a program to recruit new teachers to rural areas, Pete and Deborah moved to

Gatesville in 1964, where they lived for four decades.

Pete taught numerous subjects at Gates County High School, including biology, where he would sometimes prop his young daughter up on the lab table during class. He also taught geography, P.E., and driver's education, petrifying many 15-year-olds behind the wheel with his stone-faced, taciturn approach. He coached the baseball team and basketball team. But most people who knew Pete know that football was his greatest passion. As a teacher of football and lifelong student of it, he was recognized for his creativity, and there was nothing he didn't know about the game.

Pete coached the Gates County High football team starting in 1964. In 1971, he led the Red Barons team to its first and only state championship (so far). The team used its powerhouse defense to go undefeated 13-0 that season. A few years later, he was selected to coach in the North Carolina All-Star Game, where as defensive coach he helped lead the East team to victory.

Over the years, Pete turned away offers to coach at larger high schools, or colleges, or return for graduate school, not because he wasn't ambitious, but because he was devoted to coaching and mentoring the young men of Gates County. Coach Smoak spent countless hours, with the help of his outstanding assistants, promoting players to colleges, helping them obtain scholarships, sending tapes, writing letters, making phone calls. Many of his players earned college scholarships, athletic or academic, and a number of them played professional football in the NFL. Pete was proud of his students in whatever they chose to do in life, as many of his players became doctors, accountants, lawyers, policemen, teachers, ministers, mayors, tradesmen, farmers, salesmen or coaches themselves. He believed that education and athletics could be the key for many of them, as it had been for him.

Those who knew Pete well knew he was a unique personality – curmudgeonly, at times short-tempered, with high expectations, but also fiercely loyal and quick-witted, the master of the amusing anecdote, with his teaching and coaching adventures often the source of many funny moments that he loved to share again and again. He enjoyed nothing more than getting

together with friends for a round of golf or an oyster roast in the backyard, often including his former students, and reliving the glory days. To jam with one of his musician friends, he even took up the guitar, which is when it became apparent his talent at athletics did not in fact extend to music.

After retiring from teaching and coaching, Pete had more time to spend on leisure activities like fishing on the river or down at the beach, and following his beloved UNC Tar Heels and New York Yankees. An accomplished golfer on the links, he won many amateur tournaments and made not one, but four holes-in-one. From bowling, to water-skiing, to roller-skating with his kids, to shooting pool even at age 88 from his wheelchair (and sinking the shots), there seemed to be no sport or game he couldn't master.

In a nod to legendary coach Bear Bryant's quote: "Win games with your strengths, not your weaknesses," he often focused his children and his players on the idea of playing to your strength, using the most of your God-given talents, and rising above your circumstance to find the way to win, which is what Pete Smoak did in his life.

Pete's dedication to his family, his friends, and his students was unwavering. He is survived by his wife of 63 years, Deborah, daughters Allison Pearsall (Chuck) of Charlotte, Adrienne Frederick (Brent) of Columbia, two granddaughters, Claire and Corinne Pearsall, and sister-in-law Betsey Folkner.

Graveside service will be held at 2:00 p.m. on February 16, 2024 at Jacksonville National Cemetery, 4083 Lannie Road, Jacksonville FL 32218. Contributions in memory of Coach Smoak may be made to The Boys and Girls Clubs of America or the Gates County High School Athletic Booster Club.

Previous Events

Graveside Service

FEB 16. 2:00 PM (ET)

Jacksonville National Cemetery
4083 Lannie Rd
Jacksonville, FL 32218-1247
(904) 766-5222

Tribute Wall

RJ

“ Coach Smoak would pick me up for driver's ed. then Billy Carter. then Rachel Vann and we would go to the high school and work on football equipment. I owe so much of who I am to this man. He taught you the benefits of hard work and determination. Teamwork. Confidence. I was part of that 1971 State Football Championship. One of my proudest moments in life. And it all came together because of the brilliant mind of Coach Smoak. I loved him. I thank God that he was a part of my life. Rest in the peace and glory of our Lord Coach. Rev. Walter Johnston, 111.

Rev. Walter Johnston - January 19, 2024 at 04:57 PM

AF

“ Thank you for teaching me driver's ed back in 1993 & coaching Dad (Nelson Felton) when he played for the Gates County High School Rams back in the late 60's. My condolences with love goes out to the family and friends of Mr. Smoak.

Anthony Felton - January 18, 2024 at 08:58 PM

KC

“ Pete was my football coach, baseball coach and driver's education instructor. Once you got to know him, you could tell he was a man of knowledge, desire and wanted to see you succeed. My condolences to the Smoak family and the Red Baron family who knew him.

- Ken Crawford. Class of 78.

Ken Crawford - January 17, 2024 at 02:47 PM

KB

I never stepped on a football field until my sophomore year. I underwent two operations on my hips when I was in the 7th grade. Although the Doctors at Duke University Medical Center told my grandparents that I could play all contact sports, for some reason they wouldn't let me play. Coach Pete Smoak allowed me to play. Yes, he gave me and others a fit at times, but following just two seasons where I had become a starter, I had 5 schools to offer me scholarships. I've often thought where I might have gone if he had been my Jr. High coach as well. He taught me respect and teamwork as well. I had been asking for years concerning his whereabouts, but nobody seemed to know. I surely hate having to find out about his transition the way I did. RIP Coach. RIP 🙏 ☐

Kevin Briggs - February 12, 2024 at 08:17 AM

WJ

“ I was student trainer on that 71 State Champion Football Team. What a powerhouse talent of country boys, but winning against larger schools was no doubt because of a Coach who knew how to use that talent. The person(s) who wrote this obituary really knew Mr. Pete Smoke well.

Watson Lawrence, Jr. - January 17, 2024 at 11:55 AM

TR

“ I too took driver's Ed. under Mr. Smoak. My memories are of him reviewing offensive and defensive plays on his tablet: I guess he was comfortable with my driving. Most of all I had the privilege of being on the 1971 State Championship roster. A great mentor! Blessed to have journeyed with him during my four years at GCHS.

Tim Riddick

Timothy Riddick - January 16, 2024 at 08:33 AM

J'

“ *What memories of him at Gates Co High. I remember one ofy driving classes, he told the other girl driving to pull over and he told me, "Modlin get up here and drive us back to school, so we make it"! Everyone knew who he was and he was admired by most!! God Bless him and his Family.*

Jennifer Modlin Simpson '86 - January 16, 2024 at 08:11 AM

DH

“ *I distinctly remember Mr Smoak trying to get everyone in driver's education to learn the importance of defensive driving as opposed to offensive driving ! The coach in him shone thru with some good advice. Condolences to Allison Adrienne and Mrs Smoak. He touched so many lives.*

David Harrell - January 15, 2024 at 11:43 PM

GH

“ *As many others have shared, Pete Smoak taught me to drive - while I was petrified of him, he did show his softer side at times - I will always remember stopping at his house for him to get a snack and came out with two cookies for my partner and me. I watched him coach many games as a Varsity cheerleader and have heard many stories from my husband who played football. I am sure they are reminiscing in heaven along with many others. My thoughts and prayers are with the family.*

Ginny Taylor Hurdle - January 15, 2024 at 06:36 PM

EH

“ Allison, Adrienne, & family,
I am sorry to hear of your dad's passing. I know you will miss him.
Prayers for peace & comfort during your time of grief.

God Bless,
Edward Ray Hobbs

E R Hobbs - January 15, 2024 at 05:03 PM

RC

“ Mr Smoak was my drivers Ed teacher. At the time he was building his house and we would go by there and he would pick up a cup of coffee. He was always humming a tune and making fun of my driving. I was new to the school and he was one of the funniest, nicest teachers I remember having and will never forget those memories. RIP Mr Smoak

Ruby Bazemore Carrow - January 15, 2024 at 04:28 PM

MR

Deborah and girls: it is with a sad heart that I learn of Pete's passing. Pete was loved and respected by so, so many students and their families here in Gates Co. He was a great teacher and the best coach. Please know that each of you are in my thoughts and prayers.

Myrtle C Rountree - January 15, 2024 at 06:17 PM

JH

“ Mr. Smoak taught me driver's ed and one time I remember the car wasn't moving. He said where are you going Jewel this is a stop sign! Haha, thank goodness he had a brake pedal too! So sorry for your loss family.

Jewel Harrell - January 15, 2024 at 03:52 PM

DL

“ *Mr. Smoak taught me driver's education and said I was one of his best female drivers. (Quite the compliment!) I babysat his girls and enjoyed being in the Gatesville Woman's Club with Deborah. My sincere condolences to the family. He was one of a kind!*

Deborah Baines Lee - January 15, 2024 at 03:15 PM

PE

“ *My football coach, PE Teacher, golf partner, and friend. Can't explain his personality, but I liked it. And I think that Deb had a birthday on September 10, the same as mine. Paul Eure, Class of 1966 Gates Co. High School. RIP Pete. We loved you.*

Paul Eure - January 15, 2024 at 02:48 PM

DS

“ *Coached many football games against Coach during my time at Camden & Currituck. So thankful to call him friend. He was a great coach. Prayers for the family.*

Donnie Simpson - January 15, 2024 at 02:35 PM

SC

I coached many games against Coach Smoak while I was at J.P. Knapp and Currituck. He was a great coach and friend. His teams were always well prepared and hit harder than any team we played! My prayers go out to all his family.

Sam Casey - January 15, 2024 at 05:54 PM

SP

He was hilarious! Took me driving after I had already completed his class.... cool guy who was straight forward with the way he walked, talked and carried himself.

scott powell - January 16, 2024 at 02:58 PM