Vernon “Skip” McCain: A Lost Legacy of Excellence

For more than a quarter of a century, UMES was recognized as football powerhouse among Historically Black Colleges and Universities. From 1946 to 1970, UMES had a combined win-loss record of 142 wins, 38 losses and 6 ties or an astounding 77.6 winning percentage. In addition, UMES produced seven (7) undefeated seasons during the period from 1947 to 1960.

No one person was more instrumental in UMES’s success than Vernon “Skip” McCain. The history of UMES’s football program is inextricably linked to Coach McCain’s tenure. During his tenure Coach McCain had a phenomenal success record of 103 wins, 16 losses and 4 ties.

Those who knew him say Coach McCain was the embodiment of the teacher-coach. From 1948 to 1953, he was the most successful coach in the country. Coach McCain, himself a student of the game, did not miss many coaching clinics during his tenure.

In 1950, he was selected “Coach of the Year” by the Pigskin Club of Washington. Coach McCain’s dedication to understanding the deeper qualities and disciplines of the game laid the foundation for what many have called the “Golden Years of Hawk Athletics.”

In addition to being head football coach, Coach McCain was also the head basketball coach and athletic director, thus, giving him almost total control over the UMES athletic budget and pool of athletic talent. Further, during this period of time UMES’s president was John T. Williams. President Williams was an avid football fan and provided the type of supportive leadership necessary to build a winning program.

As a result, during the period from 1946 to 1970, over twenty (20) UMES student-athletes went on to pursue professional careers in the National Football League (NFL). In addition, several others went on to successful careers in the Continental and Canadian Football Leagues.
The most notable of these athletes is Art Shell, eight (8) time Pro-Bowl player, NFL Hall of Fame Player, and the first African American head coach of the modern era of professional football with the Los Angeles Raiders (now the Oakland Raiders).


Vernon “Skip” McCain was inducted into the Hawk Hall of Fame in 1973. If only the television cameras and the media had found their way to the Eastern Shore of Maryland and the tiny village of Princess Anne! What a story they would have uncovered!!! The entire nation would have discovered a football powerhouse that broke both racial barriers and the competitive spirit of the teams they played. Everyone would have known the name, Skip McCain. It is a shame that only a few do.

America would have recognized that this humble, 5-foot-5 man, who never cussed or missed church, who also had a higher winning percentage (82.9%) for a 17-year period than some of his most famous coaching contemporaries recorded during the same era — men such as Woody Hayes of Ohio State University (74.3%), Bear Bryant of Alabama University (72.7%), and Eddie Robinson of Grambling State University.

But, the 1950’s were a time when news of the exploits of historically Black colleges rarely escaped the confines of their own communities. Coach McCain’s record over his 17-year coaching career was an astounding 103 wins, 16 losses and 4 ties. This included six (6) undefeated seasons, four (4) of which were perfect seasons in 1949, 1950, 1952, and 1955. When Coach McCain came to Maryland State College (MSC) in 1948, he was to serve as the head football coach, head basketball coach and the athletic director. It became apparent that this man could build winners no matter what the sport. While concentrating on his football duties, he directed the basketball team to a record of 76 wins and 11 losses from 1948 to 1952.

His love for academics was almost as passionate as his desire to win football games, and he served as an assistant professor of mathematics during his tenure at MSC. He taught and motivated by instilling confidence in his players. Swifty Polk fondly remembers, “Coach made it a point to come by all the players’ dorm rooms. He would check your schoolwork and he would ask for input on the team as far as strategy, practice, etc. He would let us know that our opinions counted with him.”

Coach McCain developed a reputation as a great builder of character. He loved to say, “Not only must you be a winner on the field, but also in the classroom.” Coach McCain is definitely a legend. The fact that few people ever heard of him does not diminish his legacy.
He is a legend that cannot be forgotten. He designed and constructed a football program that had fans and alumni standing proud. Coach McCain’s record and legacy are somewhat overlooked partially because UMES dropped their football program after the 1979 season.

In addition, his records were achieved during an era when the mainstream media largely ignored black college football. It has been said, ‘that it is not how we end up that counts; but more importantly, how we touch and affect the lives of those we come into contact with that matters.’ Coach McCain touched the lives of hundreds of young men to whom he will always be remembered simply as “Coach.”

At the start of his career, all Coach McCain really wanted to do is be a good science and mathematics teacher. He had one annoying habit, though he liked to eat. But for that habit, Coach McCain would have preferred nothing more than teaching mathematics at then Maryland State College. Coach McCain was an All-American quarterback at Langston University in 1930.

Even then, though his heart belonged elsewhere – in athletics and in his choice of professions. His favorite sport was baseball; he couldn’t major in physical education in those days and didn’t want to. He was preoccupied with becoming a math teacher, and, incidentally, graduated second in his class among math students at Langston. Those who saw Coach McCain stride up and down the sidelines wouldn’t have found it hard to believe that as an undergraduate he was president of the dramatic club and president of the student YMCA at Langston.

When Coach McCain graduated from college, he realized that the demand for math and science teachers wasn’t nearly as great as he had hoped. But fortunately he him there were several coaching opportunities in the Oklahoma City high schools at the time. As a result, he eating habits dictated his choice of careers. Coach McCain could ill afford to sit around and wait for a math teaching position to turn up and his widowed mother wasn’t ale to help. In addition, he had distinguished himself as a football player and had developed a tremendous respect for the deeper qualities of the game from his contact with Coach C.E. Anderson of Alabama State College.
Skip’s CEO

Dr. John T. Williams

Dr. John T. Williams was inducted into the Hawk Hall of Fame in 1999. In 1947, Dr. Williams became the first chief executive of Maryland State College (MSC), formerly known as Princess Anne Academy and briefly as Princess Anne College.

For the twenty years that Dr. John T. Williams was president of Maryland State College, the institution in Princess Anne experienced changes touching every aspect of the school’s life. Dr. Williams ably guided Maryland State from a struggling, four-year college beset with academic, financial, and political problems to that of being an integral part of the University of Maryland.

In 1948, Dr. Williams hired Vernon “Skip” McCain as football coach, and a never-to-be forgotten athletic program evolved. For the next 15 years, “Skip” would rewrite the record books for historically Black College football, baseball, and basketball. Born in Minden, Louisiana in 1904 John Taylor Williams was educated in the Muskogee, Oklahoma elementary and high schools, Langston University, University of Cincinnati, and Indiana University.

He was a star football, basketball, and baseball player in high school. President Williams, affectionately called “J.T.,” was an All-American end in football from 1926 to 1928. At Kentucky State, he served as head football coach and athletic director when that institution was in its heyday as a small college power.

He was a member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., a member of Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity, a 33-Degree Mason, a member of Alpha Kappa Mu, and a member of Beta Kappa Xi. Dr. President Williams was the recipient of numerous professional, civic, scholastic and athletic awards, that included inclusion in Who’s Who In American Education. Dr. Williams served as president of MSC from 1947 to 1970.
J.C. “Rooster” Coffee was inducted into the Hawk Hall of Fame in 1975. Vicious blocking and tackling was one of the biggest factors in the success of the Maryland State College (MSC) Hawks in their “hey days” in the 40’s and 50’s. The man who was primarily responsible for this was Line Coach J.C. Coffee. Excellent downfield blocking is what keeps a team off balance. 

As J.C. put it, “That’s the best weapon a team can have. Your rival is not going to take too many chances when it knows you have a bunch of back-breaker tacklers and blockers.” J.C. was an honest talker, ordinarily neither given to over-optimism or pessimism. A large part of the credit for success of the extraordinary teams fielded during the Coach McCain years, without question, belongs to Coach Coffee. During his tenure at MSC, Coach Coffee was undoubtedly one of the most popular campus figures, assumed the line coaching during football, and had the satisfaction of witnessing several of his charges listed on the Pittsburgh Courier All-American squad.

During the basketball season and, as a matter of fact, all during the year the genial mentor ministered to the aches and pains of the athletes and served as “father confessor” for his student-athletes. During the 1949, drawing on his wide athletic experience at Indiana University, Coach Coffee trained his track team for an invitational meet at Howard University, and saw his four-man group garner 18 points.

Then he loaded them into a car headed for Philadelphia and the Penn Relays. An inspirational leader, Coach Coffee always took the problems of all his student-athletes seriously and helped them with their personal challenges as well as their athletic difficulties. Coach Coffee, an excellent football player in his own right, was an all-Western Conference lineman at Indiana University.
Earl C. “Tiger” Banks

Earl C. “Tiger” Banks was inducted into the Hawk Hall of Fame in 1999. A long-time assistant to and colleague of Coach “Skip” McCain, Earl served in several capacities at Maryland State College (MSC) between 1950 and 1960. Earl was instructor, line coach, head baseball coach, assistant to the dean of men and faculty advisor to Varsity “M” lettermen.

During his tenure, Coach Banks helped led the Hawks football to a combined record of 84 wins, 3 ties, and only 4 losses (92.3 percent winning percentage). As baseball coach, Coach Banks led the Hawks to two Central Intercollegiate Athletics Association (CIAA) championships in 1954 and 1958.

In 1960, Coach Banks moved to Morgan State University to become head football coach, and under his leadership the Bears promptly won the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) championships - four of which were consecutive. There were numerous lofty accomplishments in his 14 years at the helm of the Morgan State football program, including a 31 game winning streak, three undefeated regular seasons, five Central Intercollegiate Athletic Conference Championships (CIAA) and four bowl games. Twice under Banks' tutelage, the Bears led the nation in total defense.

It was Banks who sent Willie Lanier to the Kansas City Chiefs, Leroy Kelly to the Cleveland Browns, Mark Washington to the Dallas Cowboys, John Fuqua to the Pittsburgh Steelers and Raymond Chester to the Los Angeles Raiders. Turning out top-notch professional players was a minor part of Papa Bear's job as he saw it. "I want to develop a good citizen, a man who can contribute something - give something back to society," he stressed. I try to treat my players like they're my sons. I want them to tell me their troubles."

While coaching at Morgan State University, in 1965 and 1966 he won two bowl victories: the Orange Blossom Classic and the Tangerine Bowl. At Morgan, Coach Banks compiled an overall coaching record of 94 wins, 30 losses and 2 ties (74.6 percent winning percentage).

Coach Banks was inducted into five sports halls of fame: the Morgan Varsity “M” Club in 1982, the CIAA Hall of Fame in 1987, the National Collegiate Directors of Athletics Hall of Fame in 1992, the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference Hall of Fame in 1993, and the National Football Foundation Hall of Fame. Coach Banks played one year of professional football with the New York Yankees of the Old American Football League.
Theodore “Box” Briggs

Theodore “Box” Briggs was inducted into the Hawk Hall of Fame in 1975. Theodore was the longtime head of the Department of Industrials Arts at Maryland State College (MSC) and the University of Maryland Eastern Shore (UMES). He spent 28 years at MSC/UMES as professor and department head. Theodore served as baseball, tennis, and golf coach during his tenure at MSC/UMES. Theodore remained a loyal supporter of the Hawks athletics until his death. The testimonials from his students were typical of the life he lived as a citizen and as a teacher. His love and enthusiasm for sports as well as his career in building construction hailed him as an unequaled personality among all of his friends.

Theodore, better known as “Box” to his friends and loved ones, was one of the most well liked professors on the campus. This attested to at his retirement banquet. Theodore was considered by many as one of the top athletes of his time, participating in no less than five sports while in college.

Theodore was born in El Reno, Oklahoma, the son of William and Mosses Briggs. He attended the public schools in Kansas City, Missouri and graduated from Lincoln High School. From there, he entered Hampton Institute where he received his Bachelor of Science degree in Mechanical and Industrial Education. Later he earned his Master of Science degree from the University of Michigan. Theodore had a wealth of college experience teaching at Florida A&M University in Tallahassee, Florida.

Roosevelt “Sandy” Gilliam

Roosevelt “Sandy” Gilliam was inducted into the Hawk Hall of Fame in 1999. Roosevelt coached football, baseball and basketball at Maryland State College (MSC) from 1964 to 1968. In addition, Roosevelt served as athletic director from 1962 to 1965.

Between 1964 and 1968, Coach Gilliam built a number of outstanding teams. Many of his players, such as Art Shell of the Oakland Raiders, Emerson Boozer of the New York Jets, and Billy Thompson of the Denver Broncos had outstanding careers in the National Football League (NFL).

After his playing days were over, Coach Gilliam went on to join ranks of the NFL. Coach Gilliam ended his coaching career with the Hawks in 1968 to join the coaching staff of the Denver Broncos.
During his brief time at MSC, three of MSC teams were simply extraordinary. They compiled 34 wins, 2 tie, and 14 losses in football (68.0 percent winning percentage), 211 wins and 15 losses (93.6 winning percentage) in baseball, and 132 wins and 17 losses (88.6 percent winning percentage) in basketball. At one time, Coach Gilliam had coached 18 NFL players, an extraordinary testimony to an exceptional coach.

**Jimmie Mosely**

Jimmie Mosely was inducted into the Hawk Hall of Fame in 1973. Jimmie was the Head of the Department of Art Education at Maryland State College (MSC) and University of Maryland Eastern Shore (UMES) for 22 year from 1952 to 1974.

Jimmie was one of the spokesmen of the developing quest for excellence among African-American artists and led many of his students into the mainstream of American art.

Jimmie was an avid sports fan and was very supportive of MSC/UMES sports programs during his 22 years of service. The annual football Homecoming was Jimme’s “Big show”.

Every year, Jimmie could be observed directing the efforts of the Homecoming float builders and organizations to put on one more fabulous “Big Show”. Jimmie received a Bachelor of Science degree from Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas. He received a Masters degree from Pennsylvania State University and furthered his work on his advanced degree at Pennsylvania State University and Rutgers University.

**Nathaniel “Tennessee” Taylor**

Nathaniel C. “Tennessee” Taylor was inducted into the Hawk Hall of Fame in 1999. Coach Taylor, a student athlete under the late Coach Vernon “Skip” McCain, came to Maryland State College (MSC) as an assistant football coach in 1950.

During his tenure at MSC, Coach Taylor wore many hats. He was the head basketball coach, assistant track coach, assistant football coach, assistant baseball coach, and assistant dean of men in Somerset Hall.
Coach Taylor made his make in basketball. From 1953 to 1965, Coach Taylor compiled a phenomenal record of 172 wins and 58 losses (74.8 percent winning percentage). In 1956, Coach Taylor received Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) Basketball Coach of the Year honors. Coach Taylor’s professional association with Hawk athletics spanned almost 15 years. In football, he coached such outstanding professional athletes as Art Shell, Emerson Boozer, Johnny Sample, and Butch Duncan. Coach Taylor ended his coaching career at Morgan State University.

Richard “Fess” Thomas

Richard “Fess” Thomas was inducted into the Hawk Hall of Fame in 1973. His teaching career spanned 38 years at the former Princess Anne College, beloved Maryland State College, and now the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, where he was an Industrial Arts instructor from 1939 until 1977.

He was a former athletic director and a member of the athletic and homecoming committees. He was also a member of the Phi Alpha Chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, where he was past basilicus.

He was also a member of several industrial arts and other professional organizations. A sports aficionada, “Dick” loved “those Hawks.”

During the crisp days of the fall months, you would find “Fess Thomas” animatedly engaged in preparations for the “big” game. He was either hobnobbing with Charles “Jake” Jacobs and the beloved coaches (“Rooster” Coffee, “Skip” McCain, Earl Banks, and “Nate” Taylor), encouraging the football players, “shootin” the breeze with students and faculty, or laying on the yards on the football field. Family and friends remember with great fondness his increased devotion to this ‘art” as the day of the “big show” dawned.

As Homecoming approached, everybody knew where to find him: ensconced in the “maelstrom” of float decorating, bonfires, prep rallies, and coronations. For “Dick”, Homecoming was the quintessential moment and the “Hawks” the quintessential team! So much so, that one year, he even acquired and cared for a hawk, with interested students and staff helping to maintain this living, breathing mascot over the years.

Though football was his first love, “Dick”, actively supported the “loop shootin”, baseball diamond, and track and field Hawks, whenever the Hawks traveled, you’d be sure to see “Dick” and his family among the coterie of fans awaiting their triumphant arrival on the front steps of Kiah Hall. Richard earned his Bachelor of Arts degree from Cheyney State University and his Master of Arts from Pennsylvania State University. He continued his studies at Rutgers University and several other technical schools.
Harrison “Pops” Watson

Harrison “Pops” Watson was inducted into the Hawk Hall of Fame in 1975. From 1950 to 1962, Coach Watson served as backfield coach, end coach and the line coach.

In addition, he served as Director of Health Education. A key member of Coach McCain’s famed coaching staffs in the 40’, 50’s, and 60s. During his tenure at MSC, the Hawks had an unbelievable combined record of 92 wins, 11 losses and 5 ties (85.2 percent winning percentage).

Coach Watson helped produce some MSC’s most outstanding players including: Sylvester Polk, Sherman Plunkett, Roger Brown, Johnny Sample, Harold Gray, William Gray, Robert Taylor, and Vernon Vaughn to name a few.

He instrumental in helping Hawks to five undefeated seasons in 1950 (8-0-0), 1952 (8-0-0), 1954 (6-0-1), 1955 (8-0-0), and 1957 (6-0-1). In addition, he helped led MSC to three Central Intercollegiate Athletics Association championships in 1955, 1957, and 1960.

Thomas Wiles

Thomas Wiles was inducted into the Hawk Hall of Fame in 1999. Thomas served as the official university photographer during the Glory Years of Hawk football.

Thomas is a retired lecturer and photographer with the Department of Fine Arts. In addition, he is a 1973 graduate of UMES. Thomas’s Campus Queen Collection captures 40 years of University Queens from 1948-1988.

His collection is currently on display on the second floor in the rotunda of the Students Services Center. Hundreds of Thomas’s photographs can be found in the University archives located on the second floor of the Frederick Douglas Library. His photographs are one of the most important chroniclers the life and growth of the campus during the historic Maryland State College era from 1947 to 1970.
## Skip’s Year-by-Year Statistics

University of Maryland Eastern Shore  
Vernon "Skip" McCain Football Team Record  
For the Period 1948 to 1963

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Football Era</th>
<th>UMES/MSC Presidents</th>
<th>Athletic Directors</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Wins</th>
<th>Losses</th>
<th>Ties</th>
<th>Winning Percent</th>
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<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>103</td>
<td>103</td>
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