

# SUWANNEE HIGH SCHOOL THREE-TIME STATE CHAMPS



Editor's Note: In our last February's issue, I wrote about Key West High School playing for the State Championship in Daytona Beach, Florida. Coach Pat Freeman invited me down for the game. It was sort of a culmination of our past BFS Clinic.

The excitement was intense. The magic aura so unique and special to high school championship football was at its best. Key West exploded to a 10-0 first quarter lead but then the tide began to change. The other team, Suwannee High School, played great error free ball and just before the half, Randy Banner, who was only a junior, kicked a State Playoff Record 56-yard field goal for Suwannee to tie the game at 10 all.

The Suwannee Bulldogs dominated the second half to come away with their third consecutive state championship. I marveled at their confidence and determination. Many of the Suwannee kids weren't that big, but boy were they tough. They did swarm on defense but most impressive was the fact that they just didn't make mistakes.

After February's issue Coach Paul Landry called me to comment on the game and the article. It soon became obvious that we should do an in-depth article on the Suwannee Bulldogs from Live Oak, Florida. Coach Landry was first introduced to the BFS Program and brought it to Live Oak Suwannee in 1987. They certainly made it happen. The Dream. The Goal. The Glory.

**"If You Can't Run  
With The Dogs, Stay  
On The Porch."**

**By Paul Landry  
Assistant Football Coach and Strength Coach:  
Suwannee High School**

Suwannee is the largest 3A school in Florida (5A is the largest classification). We have 910 students in grades 10-12. Live Oak is a small town of about 10,000 people. Suwannee County is mostly rural and agriculture is the number one industry.

Suwannee High has had brief periods of success in football over the last 30 years. When Coach Pittman came here in 1985, the previous 14 seasons had been under .500. I had been here from 1978-1980 and we were 2-8, 0-10 and 3-7 respectively. Our Head Coach at that time had won 3 State Championships at other schools. Even coaches with college experience were not able to put a winner on the field here. The average stay was about two years. When we came in 1978, we were the fourth staff our seniors had played for. Suwannee high was known as a "coaches graveyard."

In 1985 the program got off on the right foot. Coach Mike Pittman, a native of Suwannee County, had been hired for his first head coaching job. His team finished 7-3 that year with a squad of only 25 players. In 1986 the Bulldogs finished 5-5 with as many as 7 sophomores starting. In 1987 the dream became a reality as we finished 11-2 and won our first State Championship. We returned about 17 starters in 1988, finished 12-1 for our second Championship. In 1989, we returned only 3 starters on offense and 3 on defense. Our kids played well all year. We finished 11-2 in our third straight State Championship year.

## **Strength Program**

Unlike many schools in Florida, we have not been able to have our football players scheduled into one P.E. class. From 1985-1988 our players were scattered in classes throughout the day, not always with a football

*Continued on the next page*



# THE STRENGTH OF THE



*Ralph Lott #7 returning one of his 10 punts for TD's in two years against 5A Lakeland High School. Leading the pack are #62 Jimmy Jean and #44 Terry Williams. Protecting the flank are #41 Billy Plummer and #60 Mantrell Brown.*



*Top Dog Matt McMillan doing Front Squats. All-State Middle Linebacker Chad Mobley is spotting.*

## SURVIVE SUMMER CAMP

coach or in a weight lifting class. At best, we would have 15-18 players (mostly juniors) in one class with a coach. In 1989, we were able to schedule about 30 of our varsity players into one period. We were allotted this "football period" after registration had been completed, so many of our players had schedule conflicts. We hope to eliminate these conflicts this year and get all of them into that same period.

Most of our weight training is done after school. We try to get our core lifts in during P.E. All our auxiliary lifts are done after school. Coaches volunteer their time in order to keep the weight room open till about 5 p.m. At this time of year, January till May, we get our eighth graders involved in the program. This program is suspended during spring training in May, except for those in P.E.

Some of our coaches are hired through the Community Education Program to keep the weight room open during the summer. This, along with volunteer time by the coaches, allows us to make the weight room available to our players and the entire community.

In 1987 and 1988 we only asked our players to come twice a week for workouts. We did not give them anything specific to do and any running they did was on their own. In 1988 we had them come in four days a week for weight workouts. Nearly all of our players have summer jobs so this represents a great sacrifice on their part. An outline of our summer program follows:



# DOG IS IN THE PACK



## Monday:

|          |                   |               |
|----------|-------------------|---------------|
| Lineman: | Squats*           | Power Cleans* |
| Backs:   | Bench Press*      | Dips          |
|          | Behind Neck Press | Pullups       |
|          | Upright Rows      |               |

## Tuesday:

|          |                   |               |
|----------|-------------------|---------------|
| Lineman: | Bench Press*      | Dips          |
|          | Behind Neck Press | Pullups       |
|          | Upright Rows      |               |
| Backs:   | Squats*           | Power Cleans* |

## Wednesday:

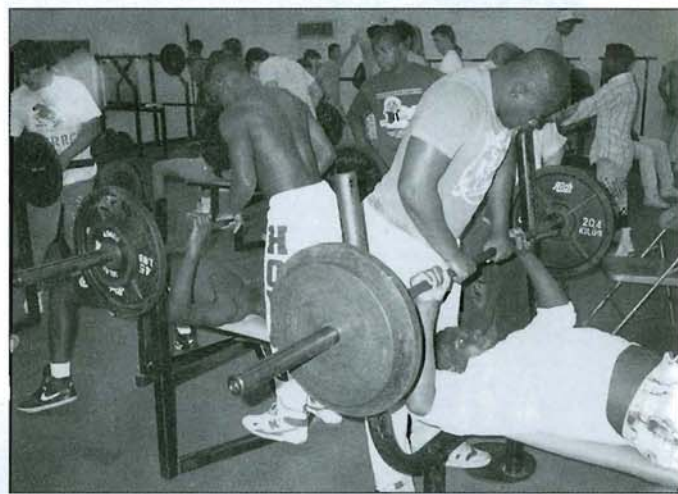
|          |                     |          |
|----------|---------------------|----------|
| Lineman: | Front Squats*       | Thruster |
|          | Bench (Box) Squats* |          |
| Backs:   | Same as Monday      |          |

## Thursday:

|          |                     |          |
|----------|---------------------|----------|
| Lineman: | Same as Tuesday     |          |
| Backs:   | Front Squats*       | Thruster |
|          | Bench (Box) Squats* |          |

\* On these lifts we follow the BFS cycle of 5 x 5, 5-4-3-2-1, and 5 x 3 Reps. The fourth week we will max on Monday and Tuesday, and go 10-9-8 Reps on Thursday and Friday. All other lifts are done 3 x 10 Reps. On Dips and Pullups we try to get as many as we can. When a player can do 10 reps, he adds as much weight to his belt that he does 3 x 10 Reps.

*Continued on next page*



*The Dogs in the Pack usually come out on top. Chad Hale #59, Mike Dabney #38 and Mantrell Brown #60 for the QB sack.*



# 3X STATE CHAMP SUWANNEE HIGH SCHOOL



*Chad Hale #59 blocks a pass.  
Mantrell Brown #60 and #65 Sammy Starling.*



*All-Stater Terry Williams #44 Squats 500 and Benches 295.  
He is 5-8, 185.*

**Notice that some players have a white stripe on their helmet and some don't. Those that do have, won their stripe by administering a hard lick on an opponent. The kind of lick that earns the respect of their teammates and coaches. However, if you don't live up to your reputation in a later game, you lose your stripe.**



*Freshman Billy Plummer #41 returned a punt 62 yards for TD  
in State Title Game. Daryl Harrell #61 on the Quick Pitch.*

Many of our players do additional work with dumbbells, etc. We have some players that lift together at their homes after school or go to the Spa in town. However, during the summer we try to keep them coming to the weight room together.

In 1985 T-shirts were given for accomplishing certain goals on the weights (200 lb. club, etc.). This practice was discontinued after that. It has now gotten to the point where our kids know they have to come to the weight room in order to be successful. That has been motivation enough. They know if we win State, they'll be getting Championship rings and jackets.

When school starts we try to maintain our strength



*QB John Palmer #5, FB Terry Williams #44,  
HB Marcus Nelson #40, OG Chad Hale #59.*

program through out the season. We lift on Monday and Wednesday, cutting back on the sets and reps, concentrating on just the core lifts. The ones who are not fortunate enough to have P.E. don't get a chance to lift.

## **Running and Agility Programs**

We have not done enough in this area in the past. We have had 2-4 week periods, prior to spring practice, where we have tried to get our players ready to practice. We have done some plyometrics during this time, some standard agility drills and some running on the track. We encourage all of our players to go out for the track

*Continued on page 11*



# SUWANNEE HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL *Continued from page 6*

team, but this has never been mandatory.

This past summer we ran more than we have in the past. Some nights we may run 2 miles after our workout. Other nights we may run sprints. We also have weighted sleds they pull within a harness, for 40 yd. intervals. This running is supervised from a distance, since we are not allowed on the field with the players at this time of year.

## Other Group Work

We are very committed to the passing game. Our QB's attend a camp every summer where they learn the mechanics of throwing the football. When they return, they throw everyday using the drills they pick up at the camp. They will team up with the receivers twice a week to throw routes. Again, they pretty well supervise themselves because they learn so much at camp.

Starting in January, our QB's start coming to school at 7:00 a.m. They get in all their drills before school starts at 8:10 a.m. We try to get the receivers in twice a week to start learning their routes. This continues Monday-Thursday until spring practice starts. Many of our skill people are involved in spring sports. By coming in early, they do not have to give that up. Having them together in P.E. would eliminate these early morning sessions.

## Summer Camp

In 1985, Coach Pittman began the tradition of going to summer football camp. This practice is common in Georgia but no one in Florida was doing it at that time (to my knowledge). A number of teams in North Florida have since followed suit.

Summer football camp involves taking the team out of town for a week of intensive practice. It is usually some remote, out of the way place. The camp was fairly primitive the first two years. The practice area had been cut from a field of dog kennels and sand spurs. The sleeping quarters consisted of one large bunkhouse with a tin roof. There was no air-conditioning, no television, no phone just the team. Last year we took the team to Camp Blanding, which is a National Guard Training Facility. It too was out in the woods. We slept in Army barracks, on cots, no air-conditioning, no television, no phone and fell asleep every night to the sound of "Taps" being played. Conditions like that will really bring a team together.

A typical camp schedule is as follows:

### Monday-Thursday

05:45 a.m. Fat Patrol - Heavy weights and those needing extra work run the 1 1/2 miles to the Mess Hall. They do situps, etc. before breakfast.

06:30 a.m. Breakfast



*Jr. Larry Rogers 6-0, 235 has Squatted 450 and Cleaned 260. He started at Offensive Tackle, spotters are Darrell Harrell (left) and Matt Newsome.*



*Matt McMillan spotting All-Stater Chad Mobley.*



*Mike Dabney 5-8 165 started Defensive End. Only a sophomore, Mike has Benchded 325 and Cleaned 220 pounds.*

*Continued on next page*



# SUWANNEE HIGH SCHOOL

- 08:00 a.m. **Morning Practice** – (Full Gear) – Stretch, Agility Circuit, Groups (35 min.), Offense vs. Dummies, Defensive Pursuit Drill, Sprints.
- 11:00 a.m. **Showers**
- 11:30 a.m. **Lunch**
- 12:30 p.m. **Siesta.** By now it's 95' in the barracks.
- 03:30 p.m. **Afternoon Practice** – (Shorts and Sneakers, No Pads) – Stretch, Specialties/Group work (20-25 min), Kicking Game, Cross Country Run (2-6 miles).
- 05:00 p.m. **Showers**
- 05:30 p.m. **Supper**
- 07:30 p.m. **Evening Practice** – (Full Gear) – Stretch, Tackling Circuit (20-25 min), Inside Drill (all plays from tackle to tackle offensively and vs. our defense – 25-40 min), Defensive Scrimmage and Goal Line Defense (45-50 min), Offensive Scrimmage (45-50 min), Sprints.
- 10:30 p.m. **Showers, Snacks.**
- 11:00 p.m. **Taps**

## Friday

Same morning schedule. Clean up and return to Live Oak after lunch.

## Saturday

Intrasquad game at the stadium.

Note: Rest assured we give them plenty of water breaks during practice. We also make water available to them on the cross country runs. We keep cases of apples, oranges bananas, grapes and peaches in the barracks so they can eat at will.

Camp is quite rigorous as you can see. It has become a tradition for us, a rite of passage. Until you've survived summer camp, you're not really a part of the program. Attrition was high the first year but now it has become rare for a player to quit during camp. Most players will quit during spring training or before we left for camp (we had a week of two-a-day practices before we left for camp this year). We've even had a few who quit immediately after returning from camp, although I can't tell you why.

We do reward our players after camp with T-Shirts. Examples are: "I survived Summer Camp", "If You Can't Run With The Dogs, Then Stay On The Porch", and "The Strength Of The Dogs Is In The Pack".

## OFFENSE

We run primarily from the Pro-T and Strong Twins formations. We keep our running game simple and believe strongly in throwing the football. Our running

game consists of trap, quick pitch, belly and counter, throwing off each series. We throw a lot of 3 and 5 step dropback. We do not option.

Even though we like to throw, we have rushed for as much or more yards every year. In 1987, we rushed for nearly 3000 yds., passed for over 1600 yds., and averaged 32.2 points per game. In 1988, we passed for over 2600 yds., rushed for over 2000 yds., and averaged 34.8 points per game. This past season we rushed for over 2800 yds., passed for over 1600 yds. and averaged 26.4 points per game.

## DEFENSE

We run a multiple defense based on the 5-1 and 7-diamond alignments. Our philosophy is to attack hard at the LOS with our front five, trying to get penetration. We stress pursuit and gang-tackling. We try to get our best eleven on defense. Although our offense has gotten a lot of attention from the public, we as coaches stress defense. We feel if we can keep things close, not give up the big play, our conditioning will win out in the fourth quarter.

## OUTLOOK FOR 1990

Offensively, we return seven starters and an eighth player who started most of '89. Key replacements will be at QB, FB and TE. Our sophomore QB went the distance in three key games and feel he will be able to handle the job next year. We have several candidates for the TE and FB positions. Spring training will tell us a lot about those players.

Defensively, we return six starters and two other players with significant experience. We will be completely rebuilding our LB corps. Two of the three LB's we had were three and four year starters at their positions. We will be taking a hard look at several players to fill those vacancies. The reserves on the defensive line should be able to step forward and contribute next season.

Our kicking game should be sound. Randy Banner returns as our punter and place kicker. The confidence he gained by kicking that 56 yarder (State Playoff Record) will really benefit him.

The key in 1990 will be winning our district. Our district has produced the 3A State Champion since 1986. Madison, Rickards and Wakulla are always tough. Madison returns probably the best running back in the state. Rickards has always been loaded with talent and their defensive line will probably average 260 lbs. next year. Wakulla was runner-up to us in '89 finishing 8-2. They are always one of the strongest teams we play. The other two teams are always capable of upsets too. We set our goal the same every year – win the district, then think about State.



# SUMMER CAMP

"Sometimes when you're out here, you wonder why you're doing these things.

Everyone thinks about quitting at some point. By Wednesday your brain is dead anyway and you walk to practice knowing what's going to happen. Even my senior year I considered quitting. I cried out here a couple of times.

**Jay Jernigan: Survivor of three camps.**

"They all have to pull together in this thing. They have to live, eat, work and sleep together. It tends to make you a close team. Sometimes all a kid needs is a pat on the back and a little reassurance. But football isn't a sport for everyone. There are some kids who just aren't cut out for it."

**Mike Pittman: Head Football Coach**

"There was one game where I had a cut in my head and every time I'd hit the guy in front of me, I'd spray him with blood. He was getting real concerned about me and told me I should check with the ref or get stitched up. But I'd just wipe the blood out of my face after every play and line back up. After going through this camp, you're not going to worry about being hurt in a game. It's something you know you can handle."

**Gantt Gouch: Now at University of Florida.**

"People always ask us about camp, but there is no way to describe it. It would be like someone who went to Vietnam trying to tell someone who hadn't been there what it was like. You have to be there to understand. You have to be there in the middle of the night when someone wakes up screaming with a cramp. That tends to happen a lot.

"But there's no question that this camp helps. We might have been able to win state last year without the camp, but the first two years of camps built this team. I know that 20 years from now when I talk about camp I will cuss Coach Pittman for what he made us do, but I'll do it with a smile."

**Jay Jernigan**

"I know this camp really does help. There's more to playing football than just athletic ability. This camp sets the tone for the entire season. During this week we work as hard as any team in the state. When the kids come out of this camp, after doing all that work, they sure don't want to lose. Losing is a lot harder when you've made that kind of dedication."

**Mike Pittman: Head Football Coach**

"People don't understand the obsession the town of Live Oak has with football. On Friday nights, there is nothing else happening except football. People come out early to get a good seat and it's standing room only by 7:30 for an 8 o'clock game. Other teams hate to play here because our fans are just like Florida Gator fans—obnoxious. The players love that."

"Live Oak is just one big family on Friday nights. After we won the state title, I didn't have to pay for a meal in town for a long time. I could walk in any place in town and get a free meal. I'd rather win the state title here than any place in Florida. Where else would you get more than 100 people out to watch you practice?"

**Jay Jernigan: Former Player – Assistant Coach**

"It's hard to believe that what we are basically doing out here is three-a-days. But it's really a whole lot more than that. This is something you can use every game during the season. You know that the boy in front of you hasn't gone through what you've gone through, he hasn't paid the dues you've paid. This camp makes you a winner."

**Jay Jernigan**

Before one afternoon practice Coach Pittman stopped by the bunk of one of the freshman who was having serious thoughts about going home. The kid had taken plenty of hard licks from much bigger players during practice.

"Coach those boys are possessed," the youngster told Pittman. "They hit me so hard I hurt in seven different places."

But the kid didn't go home. After talking with Pittman, he decided to stick it out.

**Thanks to Coach Mike Pittman, Coach Paul Landry and the Suwannee Bulldogs from Live Oak, Florida for this article. Can they do it again in 1990 for their fourth State Championship in a row? The odds say no, but I'm not going to bet against them.**

**Greg Shepard: Editor**