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Family, Football And Bare Feet: 'The Shoeless Wonders,' An Unlikely Football Dynasty

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For more than 30 years, orphans from the Presbyterian Home in Lynchburg, Va. defeated rival football teams while playing in their bare feet. Known as the Shoeless Wonders, the orphanage squads gained national attention, were featured in “Ripley’s Believe It or Not,” and are now the subject of an upcoming movie.

In the 1940s, Glen Thomas and his siblings lived in rural Virginia with their grandmother, who was poor and couldn’t afford to take care of them. Glen and his brother Cliff were taken in by a minister and eventually transferred to what is now the Presbyterian Homes & Family Services and the Family Alliance in Lynchburg. Glen was 6 and Cliff was 4.

Hugh Stallard also arrived at the home when he was 6. These three boys would become part of the third and final incarnation of the Shoeless Wonders, the football team that dominated their rivals while playing barefoot.

After Chores, Time To Play

But work came first. Cliff Thomas said even at the age of 4 the children had chores. “The most amazing thing, people would ask about, ‘How about barefoot when it’s snowing?’ We didn’t even think about the snow.”

– *Hugh Stallard, former player for the Shoeless Wonders*

“I was what you might call a houseboy,” Thomas recalled. “They might give us a wooly rag or something and tell us to shine the floors or whatever.”

Others did laundry or worked in the fields. But during school, when they were milking cows or squirming in their seats during Bible study, the thoughts of the 120 or so children often turned to the field behind the cottages where they lived. It was here they could run and play their favorite sports — barefoot.

“We went barefoot all summer anyway,” said Stallard, who added that the boys would only put their shoes on for Sunday church.

Three Eras of ‘Wonders’

There were three Shoeless Wonders teams. The first began in the early 1920s and was unbeaten and held its opponents scoreless for nearly a decade. The team disbanded in the early ’30s when the boys turned 18 and left the school.

Later in the ’30s, Joe Blackburn played for the next team, which dissolved at the beginning of World War II. Eventually, he became the head of the school and wanted to create another Shoeless Wonders team.

“They went over and started playing and one of the guys said, ‘I can’t run with these farm shoes on,’ so he threw his shoes off,” Stallard explained. “And immediately [they] gave him the ball and he ran for a touchdown. And the other 10 players immediately took theirs off.”

Word got around. There was coverage in the local paper. Eventually the Shoeless Wonders were also the subject of a Universal Pictures newsreel.

“I think Joe wanted to carry on the tradition,” Stallard said. “He said, ‘They played barefoot, and they were Shoeless Wonders. We’re going to play barefoot.’”

‘We Didn’t Even Think About The Snow’

“And the funny thing about it, I don’t think any of us knew the difference,” added Glen Thomas, who says they practiced every night. “On Saturday, we’d spend sometimes two and three hours just kicking field goals.”

Stallard says no one ever stubbed or broke a toe during practice or a game.

“The most amazing thing [was] people would ask about, ‘How about barefoot when it’s snowing?’” Stallard said. “We didn’t even think about the snow.”

Glen Thomas said sportsmanship was paramount on the field.

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“The whole time that I played for the Shoeless Wonders, I don’t remember anyone really intentionally stepping on your feet,” he said. “Either we were moving so fast or something that they couldn’t get a shot at it, but I don’t recall anyone intentionally trying to stomp your feet.”

Glen Thomas noted they weren’t as well dressed as some of the teams they played.

“Our uniforms were something to behold,” he said. “I think we got our uniforms from cast offs from different colleges and high schools and stuff. But I remember some of the helmets were just the leather helmets, guess they had a little lining in there, but if you ever took a blow on that helmet, it’d knock you into next year sometime.”

There were only 11 players and everyone played offense and defense.

“And the names of the plays were very simple,” Cliff Thomas said. “I mean it was just —”

“Quick pitch to the left, pitch to the right,” Stallard added, completing his old teammate’s thought.

“Wasn’t anything like what you hear in college football or even high school anymore,” Cliff Thomas said.

And Cliff Thomas should know. He’s the grandfather of Logan Thomas, the former Virginia Tech and now Arizona Cardinals quarterback.

The Last Of Their Kind

The kids ranged in age from 8 to 15, and the younger ones would get to play once the team was 50 or 60 points ahead. The team disbanded for good in the mid 1950s when interest and the number of boys dwindled.

Glen Thomas says the Shoeless Wonders will never be replicated, no matter how much time teams practice nowadays or how willing they are to kick off their shoes. Living together as a family was the key to their success on the football field and in their lives.

“You can’t go downtown, pull kids in from all directions, once a week have practice and put them on the field and play like we did,” Glen Thomas said. “There’s no way in the world you could do that.”

“I’m not sure mommies and daddies would allow it,” Cliff Thomas added. “In that environment, you’re dealing with families — mothers and fathers. And you think about trying to get 11 or 12, 15 families all agreeing that their kids are going to play barefooted. But it was just a given here.”

A movie based on the Shoeless Wonders is currently in the research and script development stage by Virginia-based Life Out Loud Films with filming to begin in 2016.