



KINGS MOUNTAIN'S

ATHLETES OF THE CENTURY



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Harris and Baity, two electrifying KM football players

(Fourth in a series of articles on Kings Mountain's greatest athletes of the 20th century. Today, the players who were selected as the two most outstanding athletes of the 1950s - George Harris and Ken Baity.

By GARY STEWART
Editor of The Herald

The score was 0-0. Kings Mountain, en route to its first Southwestern AA Conference championship, was facing a strong Lincolnton team.

The Mountaineer offense approached the ball. Quarterback George Harris barked the signals and took the snap from center.

Harris turned, faked a hand-off to sophomore running back Ken Baity, laid the ball on his hip and bootlegged around end.

It seemed like the entire Lincolnton defense swarmed on Baity, and the officials blew their whistles and went to the pile to mark the ball.

But Harris, who had faked out everybody in the stadium, was going down the sidelines on an apparent 60-yard touchdown run.

Even though they knew they'd made a big mistake, the officials ruled the play dead and spotted the ball on the 40-yard line.

Kings Mountain's fans were furious, but nothing compared to an irate coach, Shu Carlton. Carlton probably would have wrung the officials' necks after the game if the Mountaineers had lost. But, they rebounded from the bad call and rolled to a 27-7 victory.

That play - although not the call - was typical of the 1955 football team and it involved the two men - Harris and Baity - who have stood the test of time as two of the greatest football players in KMHS history.

Both were big play athletes who ushered in an era of championship football in Kings Mountain and also excelled in other sports. Both went on to make their mark in college football.

They were the first two KMHS players to ever be selected to the North Carolina Shrine Bowl team - Harris after his outstanding senior season of 1955, and Baity after his senior year of 1957 in which he became the school's all-time leading rusher. His career record of 3,025 yards stood for over 40 years until current Mountaineer standout Anthony Hillman broke it last year.

Harris was also Kings Mountain's first High School All-American in football - and to this day no other Mountaineer has achieved that status.

In a day when high school football teams played "three yards and a cloud of dust" football, the 1955 Mountaineers opened up their offense quite a bit.

Head Coach Shu Carlton had begun building the Mountaineer dynasty in the late 1940s but his career was interrupted by the Korean War. A U.S. Marine Reserve, Carlton was called into active duty after the 1950 season and the coaching reigns were turned over to former University of North Carolina All-American Art Weiner in 1951. Carlton returned from the War in 1952 and began to realize that the traditional single-wing would soon be a thing of the past.



In 1953 Carlton installed the T-formation offense and with Ollie Harris Jr. (now deceased) leading the way at quarterback, the Mountaineers improved to a 5-3 regular season record. The offense chalked up 1,856 yards in the eight games, and Harris hit 33 of 70 passes for 451 yards in a time when teams threw very little.

George Harris was a back-up quarterback and starting defensive back on that team, and in 1954 he became the starting quarterback and led the team to a 7-2-1 record and second place in the brand new Southwestern Conference.

With a host of talented runners on that team, including Mearl Valentine, Earl Marlowe and Charlie Smith, the Mountaineers went mostly with a ground attack but Harris ran for 140 yards and passed for 190 more.

Very few starters returned in 1955, and the responsibility of team leader fell on the shoulders of Harris. He became the first person in school history to accumulate over 1,000 yards total offense in a single season - rushing for 492 yards and passing for 560 and 10 touchdowns.

If he had wanted to be a one-man show, Harris probably could have passed for a mile. But he was an unselfish player who utilized the ability of some great running backs like Baity and Johnny McGinnis.

The Mountaineers posted a 10-1-1 overall record, winning their first ever conference championship before losing to Valdese 14-6 in the Western N.C. High School Activities Association bi-conference championship game.

Along the way, the only blemish on the Mountaineers' record was a regular season tie with Forest City, but KM beat the Tornadoes in a special play-off game for the conference championship. The Mountaineers blasted their arch rival Shelby, 26-0, when Harris and Company held the Lions' offense to just 26 total yards.

When Harris was inducted into the Kings Mountain Hall of Fame in 1990, he said the success of the 1955 team was the result of Carlton's new "belly" play which was installed to take advantage of the Mountaineers' outstanding running attack.

"It was like today's wishbone offense," he said. "It was a triple option and we threw the ball around a lot with it. We were quite successful with it. It was always good for 10 or 15 yards per play and it really made our team."

Baity, McGinnis or Jerry McCarter usually trailed Harris on the play. The big and strong Harris usually carried tacklers with him and could make a perfect option pitch in traffic. It was tough for a team to defend

that much talent, especially a quarterback who could run, throw and pitch exceptionally well.

"We didn't throw the ball much," Harris said. "But we had a very good running game so when we threw the ball everybody was open. We ran everything off the running plays."

Harris was a complete football player. He was a terror on defense, returned kickoffs and punts, and punted for a 42-yard average.

After his senior year in which he made All-State, East-West All-Star Game, Shrine Bowl and All-American, (he was also All-Conference in basketball and baseball) Harris signed with the Duke Blue Devils. He started on defense all four years there, averaged over 40 yards per kick on punts, and backed up NFL legend Sonny Jurgensen at quarterback. He quarterbacked the Blue Devils in the Orange Bowl game in 1957 and was the starting quarterback his junior and senior years. He was drafted by the Cleveland Browns but passed up a pro career to go into the health care business.

While George Harris was the key player on a group that pioneered championship football in Kings Mountain, Ken Baity was probably the first real superstar running back.

His junior year of 1956 he became the school's first-ever 1,000-yard rusher, gaining 1,071 yards to lead the Mountaineers to their first-ever WNCCHSAA bi-conference championship. The Mountaineers finished 10-0-1 and defeated Lenoir 7-6 in the championship game.

In an era when most teams were still playing up-the-middle football, Baity was a dazzling running back who could electrify the crowd with his speed to the outside and quick feet. For his three-year varsity career he gained 3,025 yards and had a career average of 6.7 yards per carry.

In his senior year of 1957 he gained 1,089 yards and averaged 7.5 yards per carry. He was named All-Conference, All-State, and played in the Shrine Bowl Game.

Baity's single season rushing record stood for over 20 years until Kevin Mack, who went on to play in the NFL, broke it with 1,585 yards in 1979. Baity's career mark stood until last year when junior fullback Anthony Hillman reached 3,897 in just two years of varsity play.

Baity's career scoring mark of 144 points also stood for over 40 years until Joseph Bell broke it two years ago, and Anthony Hillman topped Bell's mark last year.

Baity was also a star in other sports. He was All-Conference in all three major sports (baseball, football and basketball) were the only sports played in the fifties, and he was a very outstanding baseball player.

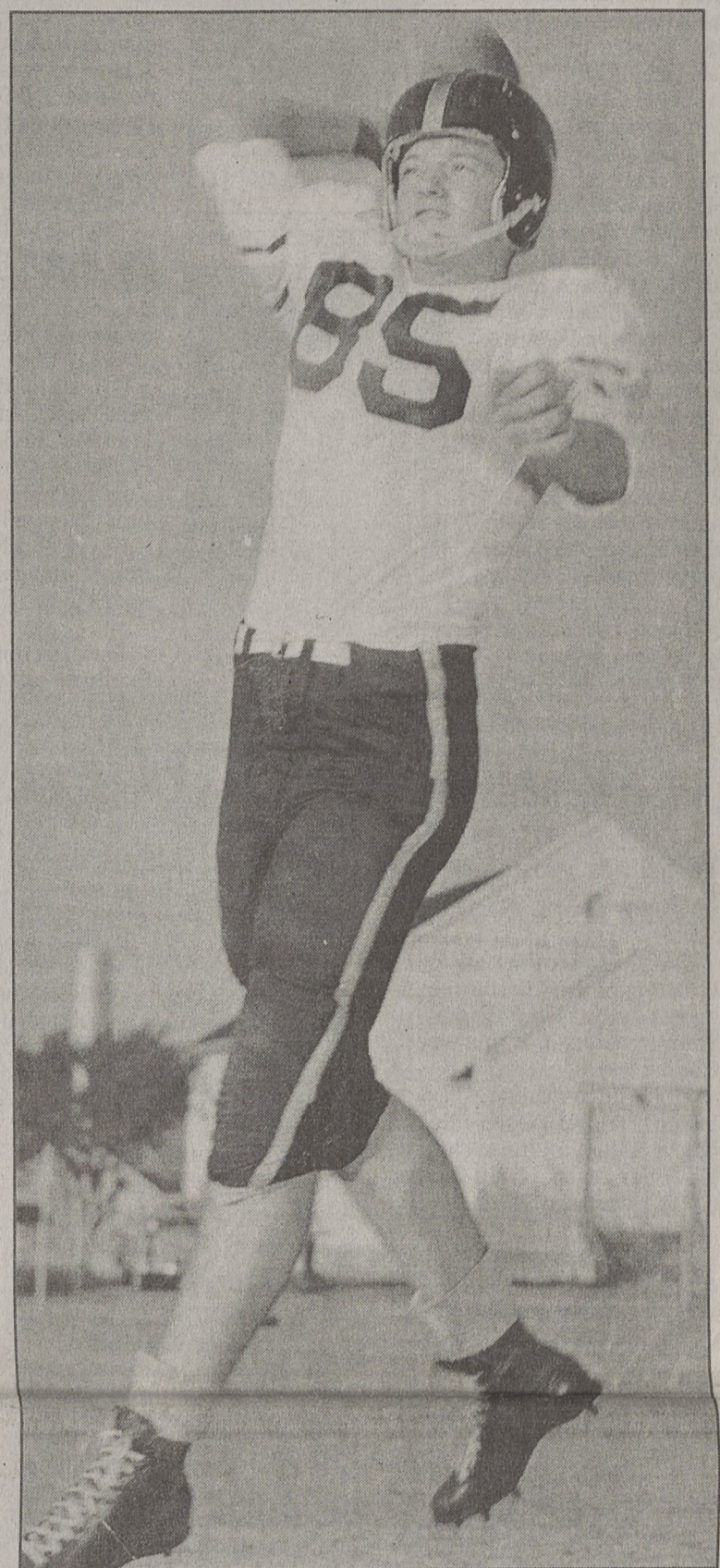
After his KMHS career ended, he signed with the University of South Carolina. He was a starting defensive back and was a back-up running back to superstars Alex Hawkins and Billy Gambrell.

His biggest play in college came during his freshman year when the Gamecocks were playing N.C. State and its heralded quarterback, Roman Gabriel, in Raleigh's Carter-Finley Stadium.

Gabriel had already thrown four touchdown passes in that game and had the Wolfpack on the USC 10 yard line. Gabriel dropped back and threw an out-pass to one of his running backs. The typical Gabriel bullet was right on target, but Baity broke in front of the intended receiver, intercepted the pass and raced 102 yards down the sideline for a touchdown.

That electrifying run was just one of many for the multi-talented Baity, who 42 years after his high school graduation is still remembered fondly by KMHS fans as one of the best and most exciting running backs in the school's history.

Next Week: The Sixties



George Harris was an All-American quarterback at Kings Mountain High School, and later played quarterback and defensive back at Duke University.



Ken Baity was Kings Mountain High's first 1,000-yard rusher and his career rushing record of 3,025 yards stood for over 40 years. He went on to play running back and defensive back at the University of South Carolina.