

SPORTS

## Winona Tigers play in state title game. Only took them 112 years to get there

BY RICK CLEVELAND, SPORTS COLUMNIST  8 HOURS AGO

The Winona High Tigers will play for a state football championship for the first time in school history when they face Taylorsville for the Class 2A title at Vaught-Hemingway Stadium in Oxford.

And we are talking about a whole lot of history here. One hundred and 12 years ago next week, Winona played at Yazoo City in the first high school football game in Mississippi. Yazoo City won 5-0 and there wasn't a field goal or a safety involved. No, back then, touchdowns counted five points.



Winona High School football team of 1905

Front row, left to right; Clyde Teal, guard; Cliff Fisackerly, quarterback and captain; Tom Patterson, center; and Leon Trotter, guard and center. Center row, left to right; DeWitt Billingsley, end; Earl Pace, tackle; Balfour Staples, halfback; W. C. "Chuck" Trotter, fullback; M. V. "Deeks" Branch, halfback; and John McLean, end. Back row, left to right, Coach Arthur Howze; Tom Wood, center and tackle; Walter "Wild Bill" Evans, tackle; and Herman Teal, guard.

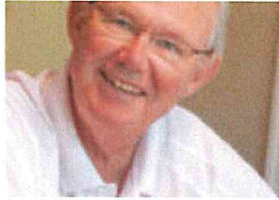
The 1905 Winona High Tigers played Yazoo City in Mississippi's first high school football game.

Winona coach Joey Tompkins hopes for a better result Friday. He knows for a fact there is more excitement in Winona this week than there could possibly have been 112 years ago when the town folk likely wondered what the devil those boys were doing fighting over that odd-shaped ball.

"Everyone in this town is beside themselves," Tompkins says. "I've never seen people so excited about anything. I guess, when you think about it, 112 years is a long time to wait."



They were a scruffy bunch, those first Winona High Tigers. Their uniforms did not match. Some wore striped shirts,



Rick Cleveland

others sweaters with a "W" on front.

A 1965 *Winona Times* story on the 60th anniversary of the game reports that Chuck Trotter, the team's fullback, had the only genuine football jersey, a sweater with a big, felt "W" stitched in. Trotter was a banker's son and apparently the only rich kid on the team. His teammates, not to be outdone, took chalk or paint and drew their W's.

There were no helmets to cover their tousled hair, much less face masks to protect their faces. There were no shoulder pads, no thigh or knee pads, either. No original Winona Tiger appears to have weighed more than 140 pounds.

The current Winona Tigers will take a short bus ride to Oxford. In 1905, the first Tigers traveled by train and had to switch trains twice on the trip to Yazoo City, which took several hours. It apparently was quite a ride.

In that 1965 newspaper article, Deeks Branch, one of the original Winona players, said there were threats to throw the rowdy Winona boys off the train.

"What a trip it was!" Branch said. "The folks on that train probably thought the Jessie James Gang had been reincarnated."

That first game was the brainstorm of H.M. Ivy, the Yazoo City principal, who also coached the team. Ivy had seen the game played at Ole Miss and was enthralled by it. He called Ed Bray, the principal at Winona, to suggest a game.

Bray brought in Ole Miss player Arthur Howze to teach the game to the Winona boys, who were state champions in baseball but didn't know a football from, well, a goat's bladder. That's exactly how one of players described the ball, which was much fatter and more round than today's football.

The *Yazoo Sentinel's* account of that first game ends this way: "Yazoo's entire team played a fine game, the line and backs doing good work. The Yazoo boys have every reason to be proud of their victory."

The Winona boys apparently weren't exactly crushed by defeat. They spent the night with Yazoo players before taking the long train ride home the next day, completing quite the adventure. At least two of them took to the sport. Chuck Trotter, the banker's son, would go on to be the captain of the 1909 Ole Miss team. His teammate, W.C. Billingsley, would go on to be the Mississippi State football captain at the same time.

Sixty years after the fact, at a reunion of that first Winona team, Trotter declared, "As the years go by I have less trouble convincing myself that we were just about the greatest football team ever. And practically all those who could dispute me aren't around any more."

Officially, Winona has never played for a state championship until Friday. In a way, however, that first team did. When Yazoo City beat Winona 5-0, it was, in effect, for the Mississippi state championship.

After all, nobody else played.

---