

## 'Remember the Titans' Resonates 25 Years Later

By Kevin Dauray

"Remember the Titans" opened in theaters 25 years ago this fall. The Disney film, which had an estimated budget of \$30 million, grossed over \$20 million during its opening weekend in the U.S. and Canada. It was the highest-grossing film of Denzel Washington's career until last year's "Gladiator II." But Washington wasn't the first choice to play Coach Herman Boone, who died in 2019, because the studio couldn't afford his \$12 million contract fee. Producers had Laurence Fishburne in mind.

Recounting the story of Washington's casting in 2015 to a group of T.C. Williams High School students, Boone said his on-screen counterpart met with producer Jerry Bruckheimer to discuss a completely different movie. Then Bruckheimer told him about "Remember the Titans." Washington asked to read the script and was immediately drawn to the story about people of different races and backgrounds unifying to accomplish a common goal. Its story was bigger than football.

As Boone told the students, "...he said, 'Give me this role. I want to show the world how you can overcome your fear of diversity. I want to show the world how you can accept the soul of an individual rather than reject an individual.'" Money didn't matter to Washington. So he took the role, spending days before filming with the coach of the 1971 state championship squad to learn his mannerisms, how he thought, and picking up bits of his persona.

"I really didn't try to portray him," Washington told an interviewer on Texas TV station WFAA during the press tour. "I got a sense of his coaching style. I got a sense of his passion for the game. And talking to his wife and how much he would watch the [game] film. And talking to some of the old players and [hearing] how crazy he was. And so I just tried to apply those things to my own style."

Filmed mostly in Georgia, "Remember the Titans" is based on the true story of T.C.'s 1971 season, the same year the three high schools in Alexandria merged into one. Some time ago, writer Jeff Merron wrote a piece for ESPN's Page 2 website detailing what the movie depicts accurately and what it fictionalizes. One difference is that the film includes just one of Coach Bill Yoast's (Will Patton) daughters. He was a father of four. Another difference concerns Gerry Bertier. The film depicts him being paralyzed from a car accident during the season. In reality, the incident didn't happen until after the season. He suited up in the championship game in Roanoke against Andrew Lewis High School, which the Titans won decisively, 27-0. (Bertier died in a second car accident in 1981.)

One very important event depicted accurately was the players getting on the buses to leave for training camp. Boone did integrate the buses, making the offense ride on one and the defense on the other. "I forced them on each other," Boone said of his players. "I forced them to learn each other's culture. I forced them to be a part of each other's lives."

The cast is full of now-famous names. Hayden Panettiere plays Sheryl Yoast. Ryan Gosling plays Alan Bosley. Donald Faison plays “Petey” Jones.

To make the football realistic, actors underwent a crash course. Watching the movie, viewers see real football happening. Not just the hits, but the plays. The Titans offense was based on the option. A quarterback can decide to run or pass as the play develops in front of him. The defense was a 4-4 scheme, not used much now because of faster receivers. It involves four defensive linemen and four linebackers, leaving three defensive backs to defend against deep passes.

Boone admitted in an interview with CNY Central, based in New York, that he was speechless after the championship victory, which was out of character for him, and explained why.

“I realized that all of the challenges that went along with that season had just ended for me in a sense, and hopefully the adversities that went along with that season,” he said. “I created a system that allowed these young people to celebrate their differences rather than allow that difference to become a problem to be solved.”

Boone added the season brought the whole city together, even the state.

The movie eventually grossed \$136.7 million worldwide. Former T.C. principal John Porter shared some of his memories about the film’s release. He called it an “exciting and fun time.” He met cast members and even President Clinton. The school was given an advance copy for a fundraiser.

“I remember students remarking for years how people they ran into throughout the country now knew about T.C. Williams High School,” he said.