

APPRENTICES TAKE A STAND

And for good measure – paint it too!

Forty-five years ago, as the 1959 football season approached, an unexpected and shocking announcement was made: the shipyard intended to curtail all Apprentice athletic activities! Hurriedly, Bobby Cook (Class of 1960, and President of the Student Board of Directors in 1958/1959) met with ‘Monk’ White, Director of Education and Training at NNS (and long-time top administrator of the Apprentice School). Mr. White indicated that the yard’s management was apparently dead-serious about dropping its support of apprentice athletics, and - even worse – wanted to tear down the stands at the football field and use the land for other purposes. Obviously, if athletic programs were no more, the Apprentice Athletic Building on Washington Avenue would likely be converted for shipyard business usage. And what was then the social centerpiece of the Apprentice School close-coupled ‘campus’ would be lost.



‘Monk’, our usually cheerful mentor, was not a happy camper. In confidence, he revealed that the decision had come from no less an authority than Mr. Blewett, shipyard president at the time. The very same Bill Blewett who had been a long-time supporter of the Apprentice School’s programs and to whom the 1956 *Binnacle* had been dedicated! This additional bad news quickly raced and swirled through Apprentice School classrooms, the athletic building, the dorm, and in the shops and drawing rooms; and even onboard ships under construction or repair.

Dismayed apprentices were joined in disbelief by numerous apprentice alumni; many of who had participated in the construction of the stands in 1929 and/or the completion of the Apprentice Athletic Building interiors in 1932. Dismay and disbelief quickly turned to anger about such a unilateral decision by management, for apprentices at that time were significantly contributing to the funding of the school’s athletic programs through dues paid as a part of mandatory membership in the Apprentice Athletic Association.

Apprentice – and alumni – reaction was universal; *something* had to be done to save the athletic program – and especially the stands. The Student Board of Directors decided to request a meeting with Mr. Blewett to protest. Bill Blewett’s bulldog-stubborn demeanor (often accompanied by salty language) was well known at the time, so volunteers to form a delegation to meet with him were not in great abundance. Bobby Cook (and Gary McAlister – Class of 1961 and newly elected President of the Student Board of Directors for 1959/1960) were obvious choices, and were augmented by a few others, about five or six in all, including yours truly (at the time I was the Board’s Publications Program Chairman).

Mr. White, apparently feeling the decision was irreversible, reluctantly agreed to request such a meeting with Mr. Blewett on our behalf, but declined to attend (after all, he had learned to stay out of the direct line-of-fire while in the trenches during World War One). He may have been as surprised as we were when an appointment with the shipyard president was quickly scheduled. At the designated time, just a day or two later, we dutifully (and a bit fearfully, I must admit) gathered outside the President’s private office where his secretary tried to make us feel at ease. Not an easy task, for none of us had ever been in such an opulent office before – and certainly not in the shipyard, and we all were beginning to have second thoughts about our mission. At least, I know I was...

The meeting didn’t last all that long. No surprise there. And none of those present got to say very much. Except Mr. Blewett. He told us that he had faithfully attended apprentice football games for years, and the gross lack of attendance in 1958 led him to believe we no longer cared. And that the condition of ‘our’ stands was a disgrace. And that we were wasting our money – and that of the shipyard as well (he knew exactly what the yard’s fiscal participation in recent years had been and it was, of course, somewhat more than what the Apprentice Athletic Association had contributed).



But then, he announced that he would give us another chance! If we could revitalize the program, he’d reconsider terminating the school’s athletic program. He ‘suggested’ – as a first step - that we repair and paint ‘our’ stands (he was well aware that they had originally been constructed by apprentices on their own time), and he promised to make the necessary tools and materials available to us to use – but on our own time.

And with that, we quickly found ourselves back in the outer office. Looking back on that memorable first-time visit to the shipyard president’s office, I now suspect that Bill Blewett artfully set us up. And I wouldn’t put it past wily old Monk White (and “Pop” Lamkin) to have been in on it either. Nevertheless, we were considerably motivated, and immediately commenced making grandiose plans. Committees were set up. And our years of apprenticeship training began to pay off in expected (and not-so-expected) ways. In addition to the planned physical work of renovating the football field’s stands, we engaged in some obvious (and some not-so-obvious...perhaps even devious) planning to really pack those stands for the first home football game of 1959.

On August 29, 1959, a typically warm and humid Saturday, about 25 of us performed minor repairs (led by joiner apprentices) and then scraped and completely painted the northside stands (following the lead of painter apprentices). The following weekend, a similar sized group of energetic apprentices scraped down, cleaned and painted the southside stands. 125 gallons of ‘battleship’ grey, shipyard-manufactured paint was applied with brush and rollers. The yard’s Paint Department then provided decorative touches and new signs.



For the first home game – with Elon College on September 12th – a now-inspired Apprentice School student body conducted a strong campaign to sell season’s tickets during the month of August. In addition to the several hundred tickets distributed to apprentices (previously paid for by their athletic association dues), over 2,000 tickets were sold by the end of the month. Season’s tickets for the four home games that year cost \$2, and many an Apprentice Alumni Association member purchased one or more (and there were rumors some of these sales even took place on company time!). In early September, more tickets had to be printed. Not all of these were sold – but they were well utilized.

A number of complimentary tickets were placed in the hands of various local organizations – including members of several Peninsula high school football teams. Not for recruiting purposes, but because we reasoned that their attendance would not only help increase the size of the crowd – but that they could also be easily mistaken by Mr. B as apprentices! Passes were also issued to members of local Police and Fire Departments in a ‘civic-minded’ attempt to further increase the crowd potential.



Cheerleaders were recruited locally from amongst Apprentices’ girl friends (and even wives) that had high school cheerleading experience. This was necessary because before 1972 apprenticeship was restricted to members of the male gender.

The Virginia Belles, a local group of more than fifty formation-marching girls, ages 15 to 21, were called upon to provide the half-time entertainment. Mindful that many of these youngsters had parents, grandparents and siblings working in the yard, we shamefully sought them out and sold them season's tickets to further entice a large attendance.

Before and throughout the home games that season, music was provided by the Apprentice School Band under the leadership of Don Gilman (Class of 1941). A previously inactive group, the band quickly reorganized and recruited several Apprentice Alumni as well as other musically-minded employees from Newport News' Community Concert Band to augment their numbers. But in their snappy, matching dark blue blazers, each emblazoned with a bright gold "A", no one could tell that the band members were not all apprentices.



Following a lively pep rally on Builders' Field the Friday night before the first home game, many of us that had been involved in the promotional efforts arrived early and waited a bit anxiously to see if our efforts would be rewarded. Oh my YES! Over 6,000 people showed up for that first game, creating a standing-room-only crowd; the largest recorded there since a sell-out in 1942 for a game with UVA.



By most accounts, the most satisfying part of that evening was when Mr. Blewett arrived; almost too late to present the game ball to the Builders' co-captains before the scheduled time for the game to begin. Seems he came at his usual time, but could not find a place to park within blocks of the football field. He eventually had to go inside the 37th street gate to park behind the wrought iron fence on shipyard property! And, after ceremoniously presenting the game ball, he then couldn't find a seat anywhere in the overflowing, freshly painted stands! So we smugly squeezed Mr. Blewett into the field's diminutive press box.



I wish I could tell you that we won the game that night – but we didn't. But we did win our campaign to save the stands – at least for a few more years. In 1972, a new and up-to-date Shipyard Activities Center was dedicated, replacing the venerable decades-old Apprentice Athletic Building and Field.

To this day, shipyard support of Apprentice athletic activities continues, albeit it at a more modern and spacious facility.

And so, thus we taught Mr. Blewett a lesson about Apprentice pride. Or, perhaps, *just perhaps*, it was the other way around...

Bill Lee

Class of 1959

Postscript

This recollection is the result of my stumbling over related articles in a couple of 1959 issues of the *Shipyard Bulletin* about two years ago while looking for something entirely different. That happenstance prompted me to look anew at my copy of the 1959 *Binnacle*, and what I rediscovered there caused some largely forgotten memories of my youth to return to the forefront. In late August, 2004, I suddenly felt very compelled to collect and combine these tangible records, and along with my intangible memories, create the illustrated article you have just read.

Then, just days later, I belatedly discovered that Apprentice Athletic activities' history is curiously repeating itself! In April of 2004, work was started to renovate the current Apprentice Field facilities (which date to 1972, as noted above). By September, that work was completed, and yet another season-opening home game was played by the Builders at a renovated athletic facility. And in case you don't think history does repeat itself, just like 45 years ago, the game was ultimately lost (this time in overtime) by the home team – in spite of the motivation provided by a rejuvenated athletic facility...