

# 100 Years of Leon High football: A lasting legacy

[Brian Miller](#), Democrat staff writer Published 12:24 a.m. ET Aug. 26, 2015 | Updated 4:46 p.m. ET Aug. 27, 2015



(Photo: State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory)

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Homecoming football games shouldn't be so deathly quiet.

But the day's events for Nov. 22, 1963, had changed happy routine into unimaginable reality.

President John F. Kennedy was shot in Dallas at 1:30 p.m. Eastern time. He was pronounced dead half an hour later.

A senior, Jimmy Sauls, was in his Leon High School study hall class when he heard the news.

“Our principal came over the (public address) and tried to do it in a way not to alarm anybody,” Sauls, 69, said. “He basically said, ‘The President has been shot.’”

“And we had homecoming that night.”

The Lions' football team was slated to play Fort Walton Beach's Choctawhatchee High School at Capital Stadium, now known as Gene Cox Field, during Gene Cox's first year as coach.

There was no Interstate 10 in those days. Choctawhatchee, a district opponent, left early to make the nearly three-hour trip eastward. Meanwhile, the phones at Leon were ringing non-stop about the game. Other local games were canceled.

The Lions played.

"As a player, it was very spooky," Sauls said. "Of course, you had it in the back of your head, but you also had a job to do. We played a great game and beat them, and we weren't supposed to, but it was just a strange game."

### [100 Years of Leon High football: Timeline](#)

Sauls described the atmosphere at the homecoming game. It was like a scrimmage.

The Leon band, which normally played "Dixie," did not.

"There was no cheering," he recalled. "It was eerie."

Leon High's 1963 homecoming game stands out as an oddity preserved first in memory and then later through the annals of painstaking record-keeping. It's an illustrious 100-year football history that has seen past players become congressmen, judges, business owners, coaches, bankers, teachers and more.



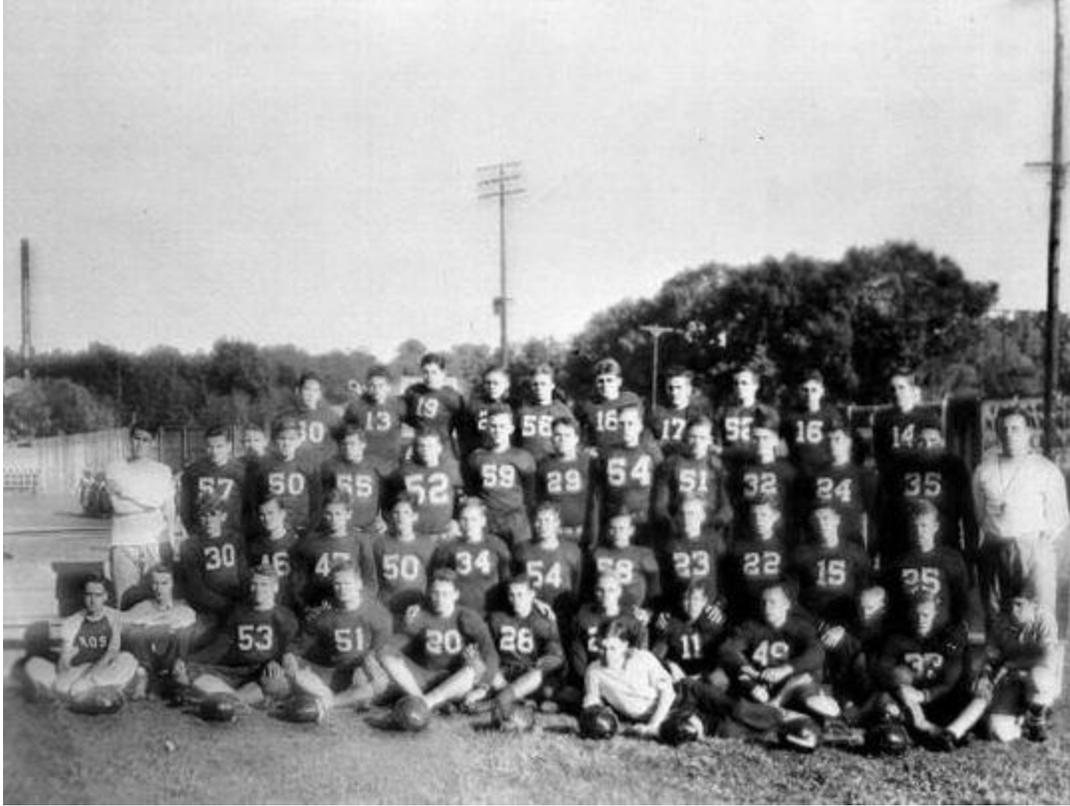
(Photo: State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory)

### **City on a hill**

Leon was founded in 1871 as Tallahassee's flagship school.

Football's popularity rose enough that by 1916, the Lions were playing their first season, though the game was still two years away from the introduction of the forward pass. In 1920, Leon became one of 29 charter members of the Florida High School Athletics Association.

The Lions first won a "mythical" state title in 1937 under the coaching of Amos P. Godby, who later became superintendent of Leon County Schools. The title was unofficial because it wasn't until 1963 that playoffs were created.



(Photo: State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory)

Six head coaches preceded Godby, and 13 followed, including coach Tim Cokely, who enters his third year with Friday's game against Live Oak's Suwannee High School. As it opens the 2015 season, Leon sits on 594 wins.

Sauls has seen or heard much of the expansive history. In addition to his head coaching stint from 1991-2000 following Cox's retirement, his father Jeff Sauls was class of 1943, playing for Godby.

### [100 Years of Leon High football: Fun facts](#)

"Senior year, Leon was (7-1-2)," Sauls said. "There was a school out of Atlanta called Tech High. It was a big school. You think St. Thomas Aquinas was something? Back in the day, they had kids coming from everywhere. Leon had a goal line stand at Centennial Field to beat them, (20-19). My dad was so proud of that."

That's the nature of Leon — three generations, and soon to be four, have come through and played at the high school.

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Photos: 100 Years of Leon High School football

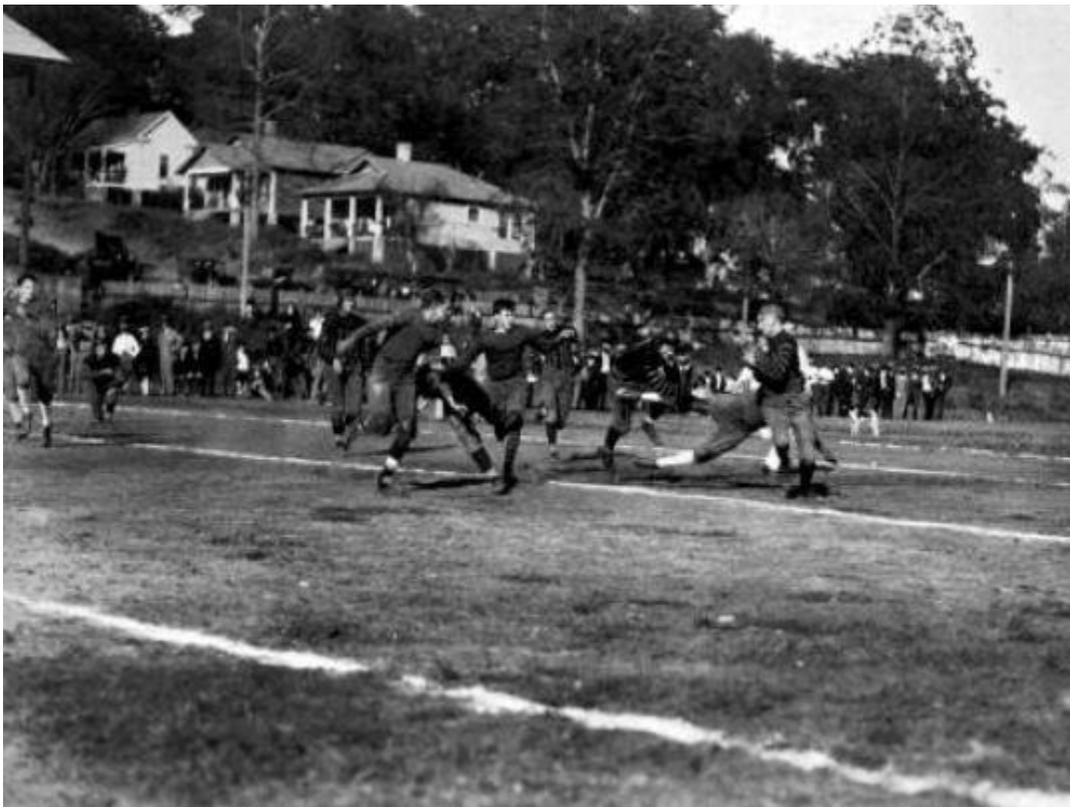
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Leon's 1922 team State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory

Over the years games have been played at Centennial Field, on the soccer field for Florida State College for Women (which would later become FSU), at Doak Campbell Stadium, at Capital Stadium (now Gene Cox Stadium) and at Leon's Bobby Benson Field.

"I grew up going to high school games as a kid," Sauls said. "That's what everybody did. What's historic is FAMU and FSU used Centennial Field, and it was the outfield of the baseball field. They'd bring in bleachers. On Friday nights, that's what we did. The train would come through about twice during a game.

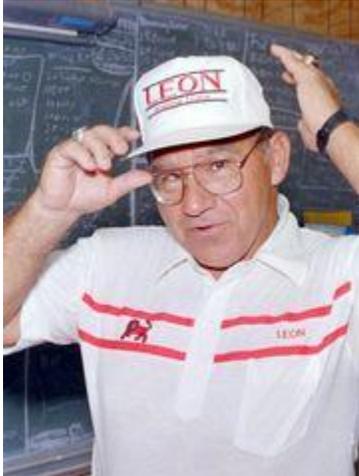
"It was like an old movie."



(Photo: State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory)

### **From past to present**

Gene Cox set the standard, amassing a then-state record with 259 wins, set in 1987 with a victory over Quincy's James A. Shanks High School. Cox picked up 20 more wins before he retired following the 1990 season.



(Photo: State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory)

Leon picked up two state titles during his 28-year reign (1969, 1974) and his late 1980s teams were some of the best.

In 1991, Leon went 8-2 behind Tamarick Vanover, who starred in college for FSU before reaching the NFL. If not for two one-point losses, the Lions would have gone undefeated.

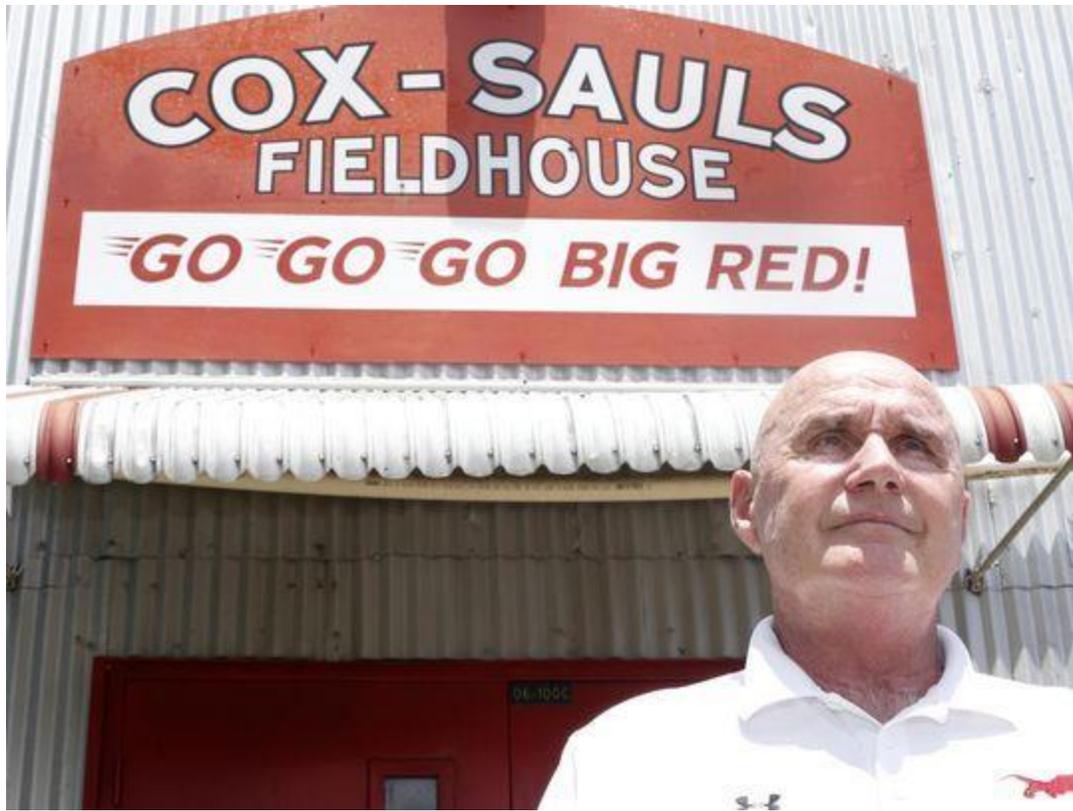
“We had a good schedule that year and played some really good teams, but just the two losses,” Vanover remembered. “One of them, we were in a shootout and lost, and it cost us the playoffs. It was a three-way tie in the district.”

### [100 Years of Leon High football: 1980 comeback vs. Lincoln](#)

Most may not know that Vanover, who was a receiver and kick returner at FSU, was a strong running back his senior year, leading the state in rushing yards. Sauls called him the best player he’s ever coached.

“I started out as a wide receiver, but Coach Cox decided to move me to get more touches at running back,” Vanover said. “We had a lot of great running backs that came through there.”

He checked off the names — Tony Lomack, Tanner Holloman, Darrin Holloman, Mike McClenton, Kelvin Randolph, Keith Gilbert.



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(Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

“I was very lucky to be able to carry on the tradition,” he said. There’s nothing like the honor of playing for two great coaches — Cox and Sauls.

“The opportunity to play at Leon High School with all the tradition is a great honor, and I’m happy to be a part of the history,” Vanover added.

“Go Big Red” is the school’s battle cry, and it’s also the color bled in century-long Leon High School pride.

“It was a special time,” said Rocky Hanna, whose class of 1988 went 29-2. “We never won a state championship because we ran up against Palatka. Coach Cox was brilliant. ... We out-toughed a lot of people. We had guys that would run through a wall for their coach and for their school if that’s what it took to win.

“That’s why we had so much success.”



(Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

### **The next 100 years**

Cox died on March 30, 2009. His legacy and Leon's continues to run strong through the community.

"It's more than just football," said Sauls, because it was just a few weekend's back when he learned about former player Brett Cleveland's father nearing the end of his life.

Cleveland played with Cox's sons, David and Alan, in the class of 1977. Sauls received a phone call from a concerned David Cox and without hesitation committed to visiting Arthur "Jinks" Cleveland, 86, who had been saying his final goodbyes to family and friends.

Showing up on Sunday morning, Jinks lit up as he saw Sauls. Until late that afternoon, the two relived everything Leon.



(Photo: State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory)

Jinks died a day later, but his last hours were spent remembering his son play on chewed up grass just off Tennessee Street, surrounded by old brick buildings.

“We sat outside and we talked about football; we talked about this and that,” Sauls said. “We talked about what it was like to be at Leon, the legacy, and how close-knit the players are even, if they didn’t play at the same time.

“That to me is a big deal, and why we must remind current players of the history.”



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(Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)