



Serving as head coach of the Houston Cougars from 1962 to 1986, Bill Yeoman is the longest tenured coach in UH history. Raking in four conference championships and amassing over 150 wins, Yeoman earned induction into the College Football Hall of Fame in 2001.

All photos courtesy of the University of Houston unless otherwise noted.

THE ORIGINAL BONA FIDE DUDE: COACH BILL YEOMAN AND EARLY UH FOOTBALL

By Ryan Graham

The greatest and most successful college football coaches are those who unlock the hidden potential in a program. Not only do they bring out the best in themselves, they also bring out the best in their assistant coaches and, most importantly, their players. From perennial “P5” powerhouses (Power 5 NCAA Division 1 football conferences) to freshly minted FBS teams (Football Bowl Sub-division, formerly Division I-A), these coaches are all across the country. While many coaches enjoy success at larger, more prestigious programs, some of the greatest coaches in college football cut their teeth coaching smaller, often fledgling teams. For many of these programs, football is largely an afterthought, underfunded by uninvolved administrators and unsupported by indifferent students. Instead of focusing on the program’s shortcomings, these coaches spend time changing the school’s football culture. They are trailblazers, imbuing a new sense of pride, excitement, and admiration in students for their football teams.



Coach Bill Yeoman began his legendary career as head coach of Houston football in 1962. He brought his experience from Michigan State University, but UH offered only a fraction of the support and funding he received at MSU.



Aside from upsets against big name schools such as Michigan State and Ole Miss, nothing demonstrated how spectacular the Veer offense was better than the 1968, 100-6 victory over the Tulsa Golden Hurricanes. Here split end Larry Gatlin carries a Rusty Clark pass toward the end zone.

Photo from the 1969 *Houstonian*, courtesy of the Digital Library, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

These successful coaches, or “bona fide dudes,” have earned great respect in the college football community. Such a coach proves his mettle week after week. He exhibits an inherent, intangible element — a certain moxie and diligent determination — aside from producing results on the field. Bona fide dudes bring out the best in everybody they work with, encouraging leadership and greatness wherever they go.¹

Former head football coach Bill Yeoman completely reshaped the University of Houston football program when he arrived, changing the culture and leading the transformation of UH football from an overlooked, forgettable program to one of the most memorable and storied teams in the country. The original bona fide dude at UH, he brought out the best in his players and the university as a whole.

Yeoman’s time as head coach is defined by one, constant theme: overcoming adversity. As head coach, Yeoman had to fight for every inch of success. Whether on the field or off, no victory could be taken for granted.

Growing up in Arizona, Bill Yeoman knew from an early age that he wanted to be a football coach. Unfortunately, his father had

other ideas. Having been a high school basketball coach in Indiana, Coach Yeoman’s father knew the hardships that accompany the career and stressed that while it seemed like fun, coaching was “serious stuff.”²

After his father dismissed his coaching plans, Yeoman was determined to “at least do something when he got out of school.” Still committed to lead young men and make a name for himself, he enrolled at the United States Military Academy at West Point, and his time there proved to be indispensable to his development as a head coach. He was surrounded by many bona fide dudes, who went on to achieve greatness in college football and the National Football League (NFL). A member of the 1946 National Championship team, Yeoman learned what it took to put together a winning squad. Fortunate enough to sit in at meetings with coaching greats such as Red Blaik, Vince Lombardi, and Murray Warmath, Yeoman was exposed to many different coaching styles and ideas. After Yeoman graduated from West Point, the Army sent the young second lieutenant to Germany as part of the Fourth Infantry Division. Almost serendipitously, his first order was to report to division artillery headquarters and start a football team for his unit.

After coaching in Europe for three years, Yeoman decided that coaching was his destiny. The Army brought coaching staffs from around the United States for coaching clinics in Europe. There, Yeoman first met Michigan State (MSU) coaching greats Biggie Munn and Duffy Daugherty. After Biggie Munn stepped down to become the athletic director at MSU, he named Duffy Daugherty as his successor. Remembering Yeoman from their time together in Europe, Daugherty offered Yeoman an assistant coaching job at MSU. Working under Daugherty proved to be invaluable to Yeoman, providing him a different perspective on how a head coach conducts business. Contrary to Blaik’s authoritarian style, Daugherty approached coaching in a more



Yeoman sought to turn Houston football into one of the “winningest” programs in the state. Winning the Bayou Bucket Classic against Rice furthered his efforts.



Yeoman's intensity was mirrored by his players on the field as they dominated offensively, but he also coached one of the league's best defensive players in 1976 Lombardi Award winner Wilson Whitley (1955-1992).

lighthearted manner. Yeoman reminisced that from time to time Michigan State's staff meetings consisted of Daugherty "cracking jokes for thirty minutes." Yeoman later remarked that experiencing this lighthearted approach was essential to his success when taking over at UH.³

When UH began looking for a new head football coach in 1962, benefactor and supporter of UH Athletics Corbin Robertson had members of the MSU coaching staff on his radar. Originally from Chicago and a former football player at Northwestern University, Robertson knew of MSU's coaching talent and its success in the 1950s. Seeking some of the same success for its relatively young football program, UH hired Yeoman as the new head football coach for the 1962 season.

Taking over at UH was a tall order for Yeoman, who said the UH football program was "unbelievably different" than that of Michigan State. UH football had only a fraction of the support and funding Yeoman enjoyed at his previous job. Knowing that he had his work cut out for him, he hit the ground running. Recognizing that stronger and more established Southwest Conference programs, such as the University of Texas and Texas A&M, had overlooked hundreds of athletes, Yeoman set out to capitalize on their neglect. Yeoman explained that since these schools did not "get off their backsides" and try to recruit these players, he saw a golden opportunity to recruit talented athletes who were otherwise unable to play college football.⁴

As a smaller school, UH had a far more difficult time recruiting than Michigan State. While at MSU, Yeoman marveled at how high school coaches would "jump up and run around" whenever he and Daugherty visited. As UH head coach, Yeoman did not receive the same attention. To overcome this he and his staff traveled to some of the most remote areas of Texas in search of good players. Going to places like Pampa and Sharyland, Yeoman combed the "boonies" and found players who were "as good as you can get."⁵

While recruiting at UH was not easy, Yeoman had a secret weapon: the city of Houston. In Yeoman's words,

"Houston was a good name to the people out in the hinterlands of Texas. If you told them you were from the University of Houston, the kids and the parents were more than happy to sit down and listen to your conversation." UH was the kind of place where one went to college "to get a degree that would let [him] make a living." The people in the isolated Texas countryside were aware of Houston's growing and vibrant economy. Just like today the name Houston was synonymous with opportunity, with jobs in the oil industry being on the forefront of everyone's minds. For parents in rural Texas, sending their sons to play for Yeoman meant more than letting them play a beloved sport, it meant their sons would receive two things the parents never had: an indispensable education and the seemingly limitless opportunities that accompanied it. Put simply, Houston was a place that had "everything a kid could possibly want," Yeoman explained.⁶

Recruiting difficulties forced Yeoman to get creative with his offensive schemes — as the old proverb goes, necessity is the mother of invention. With his team mismatched and outmanned, he needed a system that could help his team compensate for its somewhat sporadic lack of speed and strength. With his characteristic humor, Yeoman says, "The Lord took a look at me and said, 'Kid, you're gonna need some help.'" ⁷ After much experimenting and trial-and-error, he eventually developed the Veer offense. Incredibly innovative for its time, the Veer introduced the idea of "reading" a defensive player, or anticipating his actions, to eliminate the need for blocking him. After reading the actions of a few key defensive players, the quarterback then decides whether to keep the ball, hand it off, or run an option-pitch.⁸

The Veer's origin story is almost as entertaining as watching it on the field. According to Yeoman, one day during practice the offense was attempting to run a simple half-back dive play out of a split-back formation. After failing to see much success against an eight-man front, Yeoman told his offense "since you can't block" the defensive tackle "just get out of the way." After this adjustment the offense gained around fifteen to twenty yards per play. The next day while watching film from the previous day's practice, Yeoman said, "Hold it...there's something here we need to pursue." Yeoman further developed the Veer and refined it by introducing new elements into the offense. In just a few short years after its implementation, the Veer helped the Houston Cougars compete against some of the best teams in the country.

As the Cougars' new look under Yeoman's leadership began chalking up victories against college football powerhouses, students became interested in the team. Decisive victories over Kentucky in 1966 (56-18), Michigan State in 1967 (37-7), and Ole Miss in 1968 (29-7) contributed to growing campus support for UH football. According to the "first veer quarterback" Bo Burris, "[W]e beat Ole Miss, and they were pretty good; and we beat Kentucky, who was really good, when we started running the veer." The most pivotal victory according to Yeoman occurred against Michigan State in 1967, "...that's what mentally turned it all around for the student body, because they knew Michigan State had a team, and our kids didn't beat them gently."⁹ Just as Yeoman overcame difficulties by fighting for recruits



Coach Bill Yeoman discusses a play with Garret Jurgajtis during the Cougars 1978 win over the Baylor Bears.

Photo from the 1979 Houstonian, courtesy of the Digital Library, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

and inventing a new, unprecedented offensive scheme, he also broke barriers in the long fight to end segregation in collegiate athletics throughout the South. With his efforts and the efforts of the University of Houston as a whole, the climate of college football in the South changed completely.

Growing up in Arizona, Yeoman was exposed to a variety of people from different cultures and backgrounds. Reminiscing about these days, he remarked, “In Glendale we had Poles, Russians, and we had a fair amount of Japanese around that helped with the nearby farms. I never cared what people were. My parents instilled that in me from an early age.” As he began coaching, this non-prejudicial philosophy stuck with him. When he first came to coach in Texas, Yeoman was deeply confused by blue-chip college football programs that failed to recruit young black players simply because of their skin color. While he saw the racial prejudice expressed by so many of his coaching counterparts throughout Texas, Yeoman remarked that his only prejudice was against one group of people: bad football players.¹⁰

Fitting with his recruiting strategy up to this point, Yeoman continued to go where other Texas football programs refused to go and decided to recruit black players. This move was unprecedented for a major southern college football program. A fixture of the Jim Crow-era South, college football could not escape segregation, which pervaded every facet of southern life. Yeoman recalled many instances when other Southwest Conference coaches told “some very critical black jokes,” leaving Yeoman to stay behind and apologize for their remarks. Make no mistake, though, Yeoman’s quest to integrate the UH football team was not part of a larger ideological crusade against Jim Crow. In his own words, Yeoman wishes that he had “thought about [the moral responsibility]” to end segregation, but he really “did it to win.”¹¹ Concerned more with improving his halfback counters than integrating lunch

counters, Yeoman’s philosophy was simple: get the players that could best help him win the most games. If somebody could improve his team, Yeoman put him on his list of targeted recruits. Like with any good football team, Yeoman was concerned with building a meritocracy of players. For Yeoman, all that mattered was skill and talent. The best recruits in Texas deserved the chance to play college football, no matter their skin color.

Staying true to his philosophy, Yeoman targeted one of the most exciting players in the 1964 recruiting class, Warren McVea. Coming from San Antonio’s Brackenridge High School, McVea put up staggering statistics in his three years at running back, scoring “just under 600 points,” averaging “better than a first down per carry” and “rushing for 1,332 yards.”¹²

McVea’s stellar performance on the field caught the attention of some of the top football programs throughout the country. Soon a frenzy grew around him as all of these schools went to great lengths to court him. Many coaches resorted to unique methods to persuade McVea, with the University of Missouri even sending him a letter from President Harry Truman detailing the benefits of attending Mizzou.¹³ Impressed with his talent and the attention surrounding him, Yeoman set his sights on McVea. Well aware that integration would be a long, difficult road, Yeoman decided that bringing a black star athlete would help make integration more palatable for doubtful UH students and officials. Almost as important for Yeoman were McVea’s intangible qualities. His off-the-field demeanor and personality made him the obvious choice to integrate the team. As Yeoman put it, McVea “really had all of the things you had to have...He was comfortable in crowds. He could go into a room of people, and in ten minutes, he could tell you exactly what he could and couldn’t do with every one of them... He was a difference maker, and that’s what you had to have.” Due to his skill, personality and football knowledge, “he was the one to get [integration] done.”¹⁴

Yeoman still faced some opposition from university administration, and, after attempting to work through conventional channels, he was stonewalled. Unsatisfied, he eventually decided to use more unorthodox methods when trying to recruit McVea and take matters into his own hands, spearheading the integration efforts. Sick of the foot-dragging from university administration,



Setting precedents both on and off the field, Warren McVea’s presence added premier talent to the Cougar’s roster and made UH one of the first integrated football programs in the South. McVea arrived in 1964, the same year that Don Chaney and Elvin Hayes integrated the UH basketball team under Coach Guy Lewis.



Former players enjoy reminiscing with Coach Yeoman. Standing left to right: Horst Paul, author Ryan Graham, Bo Burris, and Ted Fisher. Seated left to right: Billy Smith, Coach Yeoman, and Calvin Enderli.

Photo courtesy of Nancy V. Clark.

Yeoman “wasn’t really interested in listening to anybody else because [he] didn’t think they understood what had to be done.” Convinced that the only way he would see progress was by his own initiative, Yeoman walked into former athletic director Harry Fouke’s office, knocked on the door and said, “Harry, I’m recruiting Warren.”¹⁵

Yeoman’s successful recruiting of McVea was controversial outside the university as well. Frustrated that McVea chose the University of Houston over other, more established programs, several media outlets published disparaging articles about him and Yeoman’s recruiting process. In 1963 the *San Antonio Light*, which once praised McVea as a remarkable athlete, published an article that overwhelmingly denigrated McVea and portrayed him as a prima donna. According to this piece, McVea was forced to sign with UH after many other programs decided to pass on him, citing rude behavior that was “past the realm of discourteous.” Unwilling to accept such behavior on their teams, these coaches allegedly passed on McVea because “their loss of dignity...would be greater than any good [they] could get” by signing him. Soon, though, many came to McVea’s defense. Gomer Jones, an active recruiter from the University of Oklahoma, insisted that he “would have been happy to have signed [McVea] right up until the moment he signed with Houston” and that he “was never discourteous to our staff in any way.”¹⁶

McVea also faced seemingly incomprehensible barriers when playing throughout the South. While juking and dodging defenders on the field, McVea also had to simultane-

ously face unthinkable discrimination, hearing racial epithets hurled at him in every stadium he went to. Determined to maintain strict segregationist policies in their stadiums, some southerners went so far as to mobilize the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) against McVea. In a supreme act of hatred KKK members in Mississippi issued a threat to McVea, claiming he would be killed and that “nobody would ever look for the shooter.”¹⁷ Ultimately, McVea got the last laugh. Despite the threats and racial slurs, McVea enjoyed great success at UH and became a national college football superstar as a two-time All-American and going on to play in the NFL.

Time and time again,

Coach Yeoman has proven that he is the original bona fide dude of Houston Cougar football. Throughout the course of his career at UH, Yeoman has shown himself to be a pioneer and innovator. His grit and determination in the face of adversity have been indispensable to his development as a head coach and for the growth of UH football as a whole. Whether recruiting capable but overlooked players, developing a new offensive scheme, or working to end segregation, Bill Yeoman has had an undeniable and irreplaceable impact on the University of Houston and his legacy will be fondly remembered for decades to come.

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Coaching Stats¹⁸

Career Record:	160-108-8
Bowl Appearances/Victories:	11/6
Team Offensive Records:	437 yds/game (1966) 427 yds/game (1967) 562 yds/game (1968)
College Football Rankings (Peak):	4th (1968) 5th (1979)
Southwest Conference Champions:	1976, 1978, 1979, 1984