

Buff Nation: A Tale of Two Seasons in Boys' Athletics

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with Cindy Rivas Alfaro



The 1958-59 football team met its challenges head on, as the coaches worked to turn the students into polished athletes.

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, Milby High School yearbook, 1959.

Nestled in a low-income neighborhood today, Milby High School, which opened in 1926, shines as a beacon of academic and athletic excellence. For a century, the school has fielded teams in many sports for boys and girls, which have received overwhelming community support. Each fall, the boys' football team opens the season, followed by other sports, including the boys' basketball team, which has won two state championships.¹

The coaches cultivate skills and sportsmanship in the student-athletes, earning Milby recognition locally and beyond. For example, head football coach Lee Beeson (1947-1959) taught players the importance of leadership, perseverance, and teamwork. Prominent coaches leading the Milby boys' basketball team included Hall of Famer Boyce Honea (1973-2003) and Jim Duffer who led the 2003-04 team to the 5A State Championship. Current baseball coach and alum Carlos Morales has led his teams to the playoffs and recognizes the importance of closeness that comes with a high school led by many alumni staff members. These role models have and continue to make their presence known in the Milby community where they grew up, made a name for themselves,

and created a legacy by developing young men and women for future success.

Milby's sports teams were built on this foundation of sportsmanship, camaraderie, and faith, as was the neighborhood. Many of Milby's most talented players began their athletic journey with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) that helped host afterschool sporting events. Before and after the games, everyone came together to pray for player safety, lasting memories, and unity through Christ. This continued similarly in 1967 under Milby basketball, football and baseball assistant coach Boyce Honea. A religious man, he encouraged the student-athletes to participate in prayer circles before and after games and to always keep their faith with them. If they did not want to participate, Honea respected their choice, but most of them joined in prayer, which strengthened the foundation of solidarity and sportsmanship.²

Battle of the East End

Entering junior high school, East End students attended either Deady, Edison, Stevenson, Hartman, or Jackson (now Navarro), and that determined if they started tenth grade at

*Athletics are the backbone
of the school spirit,
and without them
a school can have no spirit.¹*



Lee Beeson served as the head football coach from 1947-1959. Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1959.

Milby or Stephen F. Austin High School, which opened in 1936. Thus, the players set aside their FCA bonds every time they met as opponents,

and the winners earned bragging rights in the neighborhood.

Students felt pride in representing their school, with Milby Buffs wearing blue and gold and Austin Mustangs in green and white. The rivalry grew, whether through an argument, a foot race, or a sporting event, leading to the Battle of the East End. Today, this rivalry still brings the community together to compete for the sought after trophy, especially at the homecoming game.

Summer practices were brutal for the football players with the sweltering heat reaching 100 degrees. For athletes playing on both offense and defense, Coach Beeson made it clear that conditioning was their biggest priority. A quarterback and 1959 graduate, Dr. Les Fullerton said of Beeson's favorite workout, "Coach loved to run suicides, and he would not let us give up."³ At the time, the training included things that would not be allowed today. For example, Beeson did not let players drink water or take off their helmets during practice as these were considered signs of weakness. Even with such tough conditions, players practiced in full pads and uniforms. Although lifting weights had not gained popularity at this time, players who wanted to lift weights did so at home or at the nearby YMCA.

Fullerton has memories of the 1957 season in which the Milby Buffs broke an eight-year drought against the Austin Mustangs. Having lost their starting quarterback to a broken collarbone, the Buffs started off their 1957 football season with a 1-2 record leading up to the Battle of the East End. The coaching staff applied pressure on the team to secure a big win against Austin.

On game day Milby hosted a pep rally to get everyone excited for the big showdown. The band brought energy to the auditorium, and students loudly sang their school's fight song. With fans from both schools turning out, attendance reached 4,000 strong. The game remained at a standstill until three minutes before the half ended, quarterback Les Fullerton managed to sneak in a touchdown. Throughout the game, the defense stood its ground, holding the Mustangs to a touchdown with no extra point. Thanks to Jimmy Jones and Don Mitchell, who caught multiple interceptions, the Buffs beat the Mustangs 7-6, breaking their curse. They lost to Sam Houston in the playoffs and finished the season 6-4.⁴



Les Fullerton was the starting quarterback at Milby in the late 1950s. Photo courtesy of Les Fullerton.

The community remains divided when it comes to Milby and Austin, and students did not want to get caught

wearing the wrong colors in the wrong place. Josette Glaze, a Milby COED Cadette in the 1980s recalled, "We would throw toilet paper in the trees outside of Austin High School in the middle of the night." Other students would drive by Austin High School as class ended and yell, "Losers!" Principal Ruth Peña said one of the more recent East End games ended in a forfeit because a bench-clearing brawl broke out before halftime. Nevertheless, it remains a friendly neighborhood rivalry. Kelly Lejia-Guzman graduated from Austin in 1981 and fondly reflected, "That [rivalry] was the highlight of my high school years at Austin High School, being a cheerleader and being involved with the band and football and the Mustang Misses." But her daughter Gabriella is now a Milby Cadette, so come game time, her motto is, "I love blue, but I bleed green."⁵

Although not coached under Beeson, Donald Driver is a Milby alumnus who learned a great deal during his high school years. As a youth, he lived out of U-Haul trucks and hotels until an incident with his mother's boyfriend sent him to live with his grandparents during high school. In his memoir, *Driven: From Homeless to Hero, My Journeys On and Off Lambeau Field*, he recalls getting in many fights at Milby. "It was one of the crossroads of my life. I could have



The rivalry between Milby and Austin drives the student culture at both schools.

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1984.



Donald Driver had a difficult upbringing but that did not stop him from becoming a wide receiver for the Green Bay Packers, writing an autobiography, and winning a season of Dancing with the Stars.

Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

gone either way. It would have been very easy for me to drop out of school and turn to selling drugs full-time,” he wrote. “But I had two things going for me. I was a good student, and I was an exceptional athlete. I could run like the wind, and I could jump higher than just about anyone in the school.”⁶

When Driver came back to host a free two-day camp for Houston Independent School District (HISD) students in 2012, he emphasized how Milby coaches and teachers shaped him into the athlete and role model he is today.⁷ Even if the trainings had Milby athletes sweating and begging for them to end, the physical skills they learned during those hot days transferred over to create their even stronger character traits: The resilience and confidence to pursue their goals.

Basketball

Milby has won two championships in boys’ basketball over the years. The team has appeared in twenty-two state or city championships since 1945, playing in 2A, 4A, and 5A divisions, and winning state championships in 1950 and 2004.⁸

The 5A State Championship run in the 2003-04 season was nothing less than magical. First-year head coach Jim Duffer had big shoes to fill when replacing hall-of-fame head coach, Boyce Honea. Honea retired the previous year after leading the Milby Buffs for thirty years and compiling a 739-258 record. Born and raised in Houston’s East End where Milby is located, Honea is well-respected in his community.



The Milby boys’ basketball team won the statewide City Conference in 1950. They are shown here with the team sweetheart, Betty Jo Barum.

Photo courtesy of The Buffalo, 1950.



Coach Boyce Honea began his thirty-year career at Milby in 1973.

Photo courtesy of The Buffalo, 1977.

He pushed his student-athletes to be great day in and day out, teaching them how to hold themselves in an honorable manner and keep faith with

them. He showed them there is more to basketball than being a good dribbler; they also needed to show respect and treat others the way they want to be treated. Robert “Rob” Williams was one of the athletes mentored by Honea. After leaving Milby, Williams attended the University of Houston (UH) and continued dominating the court just miles from his home. Williams earned multiple awards at UH as part of the Phi Slama Jama era, and the Denver Nuggets drafted him nineteenth overall in the 1982 NBA Draft.⁹

Coach Honea not only focused his attention on the athletes but also his mentees. His assistant, Coach Duffer, collected considerable knowledge playing for and then working under Honea before being tapped as the new Milby head coach in 2003. Duffer had known he wanted to be a coach since childhood. At Milby, he played several sports but found someone always one-upped him. When he arrived at UH, he became a student manager where he did everything from setting up before games and practices to taking care of inventory, and, during his last year, scouting prominent high school athletes and showing recruits around campus.

When Duffer took the reins at Milby, he remembered Honea’s dream of having an all-Milby alumni coaching staff and added three assistants, Sam Hines, Lee Hardy, and Sam Benitez, to fulfill that dream. The coaching staff kept it simple, running plays from their time at Milby. Duffer also incorporated plays he learned under hall-of-fame coach Guy V. Lewis at UH, using the more fast-paced style while focusing on Honea’s techniques. The Milby coaches knew their upcoming season would be special, being ranked number 1 in the state and number 25 nationally in boys’ basketball. Coach Duffer said, “Our motto was to try and take everything one game at a time.”¹⁰ This had to translate throughout the team’s daily routine. Whether inside or outside of school, keeping a humble mentality when the nation knows you are the greatest gives a player the power to stay calm under any situation.

When the season kicked off, Milby steamrolled its competition, scoring more than 100 points in each of five games and more than 90 points in nine others. They beat Hightower in the Academy National Invitation 65-57.¹¹ The Buffs had to stay composed with every victory to avoid getting cocky because they had not finished the job. Entering the

semifinals, Milby crushed Klein Collins 85-62, but their next opponent, Cedar Hill, was a formidable 35-1 and had won their semifinal game by double digits.

Entering the championship game, Milby started off slowly, scoring 10 points in the first quarter and remained behind at the half 31-38. Coach Duffer rallied the team, and the Buffs outscored Cedar Hill in the last two quarters, winning the 5A State Championship 72-67.¹²

The 2003-04 Milby boys' basketball team finished the season ranked first in the nation among public schools. The bulk of their varsity roster consisted of graduating seniors, making it a bittersweet moment.

Looking to the future, sophomore Houston Posey had to fill his brother Larry's shoes.¹³ It was poetic to have one brother walk off the court and another walk on after the undefeated season. Always having someone ready to step in and shine characterizes Milby athletics and the East End community. When Coach Duffer resigned, another Milby alum, Sam Hines, took over.

Coach Duffer returned later when his former student Ruth Peña became principal and convinced him to come out of retirement. Valuing the legacy Milby alumni bring to the school, Peña said, "I see plenty of my old students come by and bring me their kids. 'Come meet my kid. This used to be my teacher.'" She adds, "That is a good feeling, and hopefully, whoever takes over after I leave is able to carry on and keep up with everything we have established so far. Because it needs a lot of work, time, and love toward the kids to keep it up."¹⁴

From Students to Staff

Today, current baseball coach Carlos Morales, 1988 graduate, highlights the unique nature of Milby High School with much of the faculty and staff being previous Milby students. Morales's wife, Mary, and their two sons are also Milby graduates, which adds to the deep ties his family has to the school. Morales played baseball while a student

Milby's baseball team went 12-0 in district play in 2022 under the leadership of Coach Carlos Morales, at left, who is a Milby alumnus and has served as head coach for over twenty years.

Photo courtesy of Mario Punte,
@LifeOfMarioP.



Holding their 5A State Championship trophy, the Milby Buffs became the eleventh team in UIL history to go undefeated and win the state championship. Duffer, second from left, was named District Coach of the Year.

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 2004.

at Milby and even though he considered himself to be an average player, his time on the team shaped him.¹⁵

The culture at Milby is unlike any other in Morales's eyes. To him, it is like an extended family to have alumni from different graduating classes come back and want to give back to the school that nurtured them. When he thinks back on fond memories of being on the baseball team, the fact that he got to play baseball at all was what moved him despite all the accolades.

For a lot of the staff, the community brings them back. "I feel like they [alumni staff] are invested into the neighborhood a little bit more ... than somebody that doesn't have that background," said Coach Morales. He remembered one teacher saying, "I'm comfortable with these kids, and these are the kids I want to help. They don't have everything financially or whatever, but I want to help them move on and continue."¹⁶

Even though this tale of two seasons focuses on boys' football and basketball, the ethos applies to other Milby sports over the past century – and girls' as well as boys' athletics. These strong sentiments instill a sense of commitment that makes alumni like Morales, Peña, and Duffer want to return and keep the larger alumni body engaged and supportive. Milby might not have all the high-tech facilities like other Texas schools, but the rich history it carries is invaluable. Current students can feel the decades of love and dedication to the Milby spirit. From its earliest days, alumni viewed Milby "as a beaming star which they have left behind, but which they will never forget." They are, as Coach Duffer says, "Buffs for life."¹⁷ 🏀

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