



**Memories of Southeast High School
By Former Congressman Tom Coleman
Class of 1961**

To the uninitiated, the Kansas City School District named many of its high schools after the geographic areas of the city. There was a Northeast, Central, East, Southwest, Southeast as well as a Lincoln, Westport and Manual. During my nearly 10 months of attending Blenheim grade school, I became familiar with the area high school, Southeast. In large part that was because my cousin, two years older than I, had already attended the school for two years. We would go to football games and musical programs and plays. So by the time I started at Southeast I was no stranger to the halls to what seemed like a colossal building located across from Swope Park on Meyer Boulevard.

Southeast was more than a building and certainly more than your average high school. It had a unique culture all of its own. At some point after its opening in 1938, students and faculty had adopted an all-encompassing thematic approach, including a student code of behavior. To my knowledge it was the only one of the city's high schools to instill a common code of conduct and philosophy in its student body. The theme centered on the Knights of the Roundtable. The athletic teams were known as the Knights. The student council was the Roundtable. The students were referred to as the Knights and Ladies of the Castle (the building). The student newspaper was the Tower. The yearbook took the moniker, Crusader. After all school assemblies, there was the recitation of the school chant: "A true Southeast knight loveth truth, honor, freedom and fair courtesy."

Every entering eighth grade class was introduced to this culture by way of an annual fall "Induction" ceremony. This consisted of a play put on by the upper classmen which told the story of how one progresses through the Castle from eighth grade to the senior year. The climax of the ceremony/ play was the knighting of an outstanding senior boy selected by the principal and representatives of the coaching staff. In my eighth grade year, Skip Snyder was knighted. As an impressionable 13-year-old, I found him to be the epitome of what Southeast was all about. Movie star handsome, captain of the football team and an all state selection, letterman in three sports and a good student, Skip Snyder was an adolescent demigod. If it is possible to have charisma as a teenager, he had it. He could often be spotted driving his roadster convertible with his cheerleader girlfriend. For me, he was the gold standard of leadership and good behavior. Of course, I never exchanged a word with him, and as my conclusions were totally based on public observation and reputation. He went on to star in football at MU and played on the 1960 Orange Bowl championship team. Years later he would make a significant financial contribution to one of my opponents as I ran for re-election to Congress. I admit there were a few pangs of sorrow knowing that, but I completely understood why-- my opponent was the quarterback on that Orange Bowl team.

Harry R. McMillan served as principle. He was a silver haired balding gentleman who reminded me somewhat of Dwight Eisenhower. Mr. McMillan was soft spoken but firm. He would exhort the students to "be always a member of the construction gang and not the wrecking crew." During my twenty-two years in public service, I would often remind myself of this meaningful phrase and how it related to my responsibilities to the public. When Mr. McMillan spoke he had the full respect and attention of the student body. His vice principal was George R. Powell. Mr. Powell meted out the discipline. While he was more feared than Mr. McMillan, Mr. Powell had a personal relationship with many students and displayed a good sense of humor. This duo kept the school functioning at a high standard. Both were hands-on administrators and would attend most extracurricular school events. They were a class act and contributed much to the development of thousands of young people during their nearly 20 year reign.

Southeast drew its 1,800 student body from a diverse population. There were lower- and lower- middle class families as well as more affluent students. Many of the latter lived on Meyer Boulevard, not far from the

school. I lived in a well kept, middle class neighborhood. While there was economic diversity in the student body, it was not until 1958 that the first black student enrolled at Southeast. He was Preston Washington, who became my teammate on the basketball team and eventually a Kansas City police officer. His younger brother, Russell, would earn All-American honors at Missouri and later become an All-Pro lineman for the San Diego Chargers.

Much of student life at Southeast revolved around athletics, more specifically--the football team. Southeast was known as a football powerhouse under the tutelage of Coach Cecil Patterson. Patterson's secondary responsibility was teaching civics. He ran a single wing offense with a spinner back position instead of a T formation quarterback. The team had a winning season every year I attended Southeast and in 1959, before there was anything known as a USA Today rating system, was selected as the #1 high school football team in the nation by Scholastic Magazine. They allowed only six points to be scored against them that year.

Football was not a sport I was interested in playing--too much contact; too much potential pain. So I gladly watched the varsity games on Friday nights but never participated in them. At one time Southeast was so dominant in football that its freshmen, Junior varsity and varsity had not lost a game in years. It seemed like most of the popular boys were football players—and the most popular girls--cheerleaders. While this is stereotypical of high school, it was a reality at Southeast. Others made their mark by being excellent in academics. As a non-football player and an above average but not great student, I fell somewhere in the middle.

I had long enjoyed the game of basketball. When I moved into our home in the Southeast area, I inherited a basketball goal in the back yard. I spent hours trying to perfect my shot. Surprisingly, this sport that I enjoyed so much--would serve as the vehicle for me throwing in the towel for the only time in my life.

In the fall of my freshman year, I answered the call for tryouts for the freshman basketball team. There were probably 50 kids vying for the ten positions. After several practices I did something that I would never do again in life--I quit. I didn't tell the coach or other players, I just didn't come back to practice the next day. I didn't feel I was as good as the others (and probably wasn't) and didn't want to wait around to be told I would not be

making the team. Unlike my previous baseball and running experiences, I lacked a great deal of confidence in this sport.

But I still enjoyed the game. On Saturdays there was a YMCA league that played its games in the Southeast gym, so I signed up for it. The competition was not up to the level of the freshman team but it gave kids a chance to play. One Saturday morning everything I threw up went in the basket. I must have had close to 20 points. Luckily for me, Joe Wolf, the assistant varsity coach, was refereeing the game, and afterwards he sought me out and said I should be playing for the school's freshman team. He directed that I show up for practice on Monday. I did and was placed on the team. It was embarrassing, however, since all the jerseys had been handed out. They gave me one without a number on it and that year, whenever I got in a game and made a foul (I don't recall any points being made), the referee would look at my jersey and yell out "foul on double zero!" Eeeks! That made me different from the rest, and if there's one thing a teen aged high school kid does not want it's to be different!

Since there was no baseball offered in the public schools, track was the only spring sport. I had always been fleet of foot and had secured my position on my baseball teams as someone with better than average speed and hustle. So I looked forward to my participation in track. Actually, I had a taste of it in eighth grade when they held an eighth grade track meet. I decided to run the low hurdles and the 100 yd dash. During the race, I tripped over a hurdle and landed hands first on the cinder track thereby rolling cinders into my hands. There was some blood and hurt as I picked the cinders out of my hands. That pretty well ruined my day. The scar still appears on my left hand from that experience. It would be the first and last time I tried the hurdles.

Jess Cross, the varsity track coach, set the tone for all levels of participation in track. He was a great believer in having all the track athletes, regardless of their event, start the spring training sessions with cross country runs through Swope Park. Conveniently located across the street from the school, the park provided a challenging run starting on a downward slope through a meadow, around the zoo buildings and back to school. Of course on the way back, the aforementioned downward slope turned into an uphill gut wrenching exercise. Like all of the other freshmen, I had never run further than 200 yards at one time so running 2.5 miles was a new experience. Wanting to impress the coaching staff and my

classmates, I ran out front of the pack during these practices. My first time on the way up the hill to the finish I starting mentally singing the Southeast fight song, which stirred me on. I was half sick when I crossed the finish line but won my heat. There were two heats and the other winner bettered my time, so I cannot claim full victory. We ran the cross country route for a week before beginning to focus on individual events.

Our first freshman meet was at Rosedale HS in Kansas City, KS. Rosedale was in a poor part of town and they had a track that was shorter than the customary quarter mile. Freshman Coach Leon Flappan for some reason entered me in the 440 yard dash, which meant runners would circle the track once and then some more to get to the 440 yard finish line. I had never run the 440 and did not know how to pace myself. I ran as fast as I could for as long as I could and then some. In the process I set a freshman school record of 58.2 seconds. Later that evening after returning home, I was not only exhausted-- but nauseated. Let's just say I lost my appetite that night. I attributed my condition to my run, but I probably caught the flu. I was pretty pleased with myself to know that on my first attempt at the 440, I set a school record. It would stand for several years, but it would be the only record I would set.

Mr. Cross wanted us invested in the track program. He did this by having members of the track team care for the cinder track. This would require raking and rolling the cinders into a smooth surface. On days when meets were to be held, we would roll and mark the track, taking special care to harden (and therefore make faster) the lane in which we would be running. We also managed the various pits for the field events. Of course, there were school maintenance employees who could work the track into shape. That was not the point. The lesson in this exercise was that you take pride in your track, your work and your school facilities.

After the disjointed freshman basketball experience, I looked forward to making the Junior Varsity team my sophomore year. The JV was for sophomores and a few juniors who might make the varsity their senior years but who were not yet good enough to do so. Coach Flappan was once again our coach and I got more playing time than as a freshman but did not start. During the summer before my junior year, I shot baskets for hours to hone my shot and to get ready to make the varsity team. As school started that fall, the big news for the basketball program was that we were getting a new varsity head coach by the name of Nate Roitman.

Mr. Roitman had come from Central High School where he had had a successful career. As preseason basketball practice began with just the players (coaches were restricted until a certain date to begin formal practices) we all would have to prove ourselves to the new coach. One of the things he wanted was a team that was in good physical shape. It was made known to us that those of us who were not playing football should get in shape by running cross country with Mr. Cross. This I willingly did and enjoyed the competition. In the fall of my senior year I took seventh place out of hundreds of runners in the Interscholastic League cross country meet.

As a junior, I made the varsity basketball team but did not start. We had very little height with only two starters over 6 ft. I was a guard. As the season developed, I got a chance to move up to the starting five. It was getting late in a practice one afternoon about half way through the season when Coach Roitman yelled out "Coleman, put on a blue shirt." That meant I could reverse the red/blue jersey and become a member of the starting team. My job was to feed the ball into our center who would shoot or pass it back out. As we practiced the play over and over against the second string players, they were told to play fairly aggressive. On one play, after passing the ball inside, I went up for a rebound after the center missed the shot. I came down on someone's foot, rolling my ankle and giving it a severe sprain. It ballooned up and it was quite painful. I was a starter for less than 10 minutes as I was unable to play for weeks. X-rays showed a stress fracture so I wore a cast for weeks. I was very upset with this development. After removing the cast, I was out of shape and the ankle was tender. I gradually got back into shape but the season was pretty well lost by that time. As a member of the team who had played the required number of quarters, I received a varsity letter. This allowed me to wear a letter sweater and letter jacket which were the biggest status symbols there were. At the same time, I was frustrated with basketball because I saw my opportunity of starting and being a consistent player lost to the injury. As the season came to an uneventful end, I was concerned that my sensitive ankle could affect my performance in track.

My times in the 440 yd. dash became stagnant. I did everything to try to develop a better race but consistently, regardless of the competition, timed in the 55-54 second range. I also ran a leg on the 880 and mile relay teams. I was no longer the best runner in the 440 which I had "owned" in

my class since my freshman run. The Day family had moved into the area and Ned was a senior who had run the 440 and was better than me. So at meets I was now placed in the slower second heat and had to run against myself for the time to place. The track team had some talented seniors supplemented with several good juniors. In the process, we won the Interscholastic League meet for the first time in decades. Coach Cross who was deserving of this honor finally got his championship. I was a member of some pretty good relay teams and between my own points scored and the points allotted to me from the relays' I was able to amass the requisite 10 points to be awarded a varsity letter. I would be one of four lettermen returning the next spring for our senior year.

Meanwhile, I continued to be a B+ student in class. I took the usual math, science and English courses as well as French for two years. I did not work particularly hard in classes. I assumed I would be going to college but had no idea what I wanted to do in life and pretty well remained focused on having a successful senior year. Success would be determined by doing well in basketball, track and, if I was lucky, having a steady girl.

During my high school years, I was fairly popular but not cool enough to attract the affections of the cheerleader class or others girls in the cool cliques. But I tried. Some even accepted my overtures for a date. As a result of this lack of success, many of the weekends were spent driving around with "the boys," cruising the drive-in eateries—Allen's was a favorite-- looking and being seen.

I perceived confusion with my name as an obstacle to my teen popularity and success. Jim Coleman was a classmate for all my years at Southeast. He played football, ran track and was an intelligent guy—and popular. I liked Jim and we got along fine. However, when it came time for student council or class elections Jim would get voted in, but I never did. I would be nominated in my homeroom and my name selected to be considered by the other classrooms, but I never emerged victorious from this process and Jim did. While he played football, which was a big plus, I always in the back of my mind felt there might have been enough confusion to give him the benefit of the doubt for any generic "Coleman" ballots secretly cast. I believe it made me a better campaigner later in life when the stakes were arguably somewhat higher. My theory was given even more credence when, at our 50th class reunion, the first person I saw called me Jim!

During the summer of 1960 on the weekends and after work, I would practice shooting basketball. St. John's Seminary was at the top of our block and they had outside goals located with their tennis courts. I would scale the fence and shoot at will. It was a great opportunity to get ready for what loomed large as my final chance to prove myself in both basketball and track. Oh, yeah, and also figure out what I would be doing after graduation.

School success was usually if not always measured in how well the athletic teams did during their season. Our football team started us off well by winning the League championship, and several of my classmates earned all star honors. My buddy Dan Marcum was the spinner/quarter back and played well. My former freshman locker partner Paul Krebs had beefed up during the summer and won All State honors at guard.

During football season, I would run cross country and ended up taking seventh place in the City Meet where several hundred runners participated. On one occasion Coach Cross scheduled a dual meet during the half time of a football game. There were thousands in the stands so I certainly wanted to do well. We ran eight times around the track for a two mile run. The pace was fairly fast with the adrenaline running high. Eventually several runners came in before me, but I gave it my all. I then had to drive home to shower since the locker room was only for the football team. After showering at home I returned to the game for my one and only date with one of the cheerleaders.

Basketball now loomed large. We practiced without the coach until the date arrived when Mr. Roitman was officially allowed to interact with the team under the rules of the state high school athletic association. I felt fairly confident that I was playing well. We had a lot of good undergraduate talent that was now a year older and experienced joining those of us five returning seniors. To my disappointment, Coach had already in his mind the first day of practice whom he would start. I was not one of them. And from a talent standpoint, I believe he made the correct call. But at the time this was quite discouraging.

As I had always done in athletics, I used my speed and hustle to compensate for lack of raw talent. I played better defense than offense. I got in the games to give a starter a breather or if he were in foul trouble. Once I got a surprise when as we were leaving the locker room before the

game with Lincoln. Coach announced I was to start the game. I believe he must have felt I could play better defense against their quick guards. I did not do particularly well on offense and was replaced during the first half. The quality of our play from the starters increased as the season went on. The three junior starters had developed into good athletes. Our tallest players were 6'3" so it was always a challenge to play against bigger teams. But good athletes find ways of winning. The team went on a hot streak, becoming co-champions of the Interscholastic League while getting set for the regional tournament.

At that time there were 18 regions in Missouri and each would produce a winner that would go to the state tournament. Our team had a 12-6 record going into the tournament. We won our first two games against good teams and then faced arch rival Raytown who had beaten us earlier in the season by 15 points. It was a night where Jack Patterson, son of the football coach, could not miss. His corner off-balance jump shot swished enough to account for 27 points. This unlikely victory made us believe we could possibly go all the way to the state tournament.

Next up, the action shifted to the Rockhurst College field house where the Rockhurst High School team played. This floor was well known in town as the best gym floor because of the springs under it. Even I could come close to dunking during warm-ups. The private Catholic high school always had a good team and this year was no exception. They, too, had beaten us only a few weeks before by 10 points. We were all keyed up. I was hoping I wouldn't get in the game and therefore would be unable to screw up. Even my parents, who never attended games, came to this one. I was real concerned before the game to learn in the locker room that our star player, senior Ken Wood, had a head ache and had taken an aspirin before leaving home. Back in those days, it was believed that aspirin made you sleepy. Just what we needed! Maybe it does, but that didn't slow Ken or the rest of the team down. With an unbelievable come-from-behind effort, the game went into overtime. Talk about tension. A Southeast team had not been this far into the playoffs for years and here we were just about as close as you could get to going to St. Louis and the STATE TOURNAMENT! Somehow we pulled the game out in overtime and won with a convincing 68-56 margin.

As we raced to the locker room realizing we had been struck by lightning to have gotten this far, there was back and butt slapping all around. As we

calmed down, someone, I believe it was Jim Cleary, said we should say a prayer of thanks for what had occurred. He turned to me of all people to give thanks. I don't remember what I said in the prayer, but it was enough to get us into the showers.

The State Tournament in those days was always held in St. Louis at Washington University's field house. We had one week to prepare. Our opponent was to be Chrystal City. We had no idea where Chrystal City was except it was somewhere on the eastern side of the state. It was only a few days later that the Kansas City Star ran a story on our upcoming opposition and its star player Bill Bradley. According to the story he averaged 28 points a game and stood at 6'5". This was sobering news. We were short and young, and it was commonly agreed eastern Missouri teams played better basketball. The week went by in a blur. We had a big pep rally assembly send off and boarded our charter Greyhound Bus in the parking lot. We were off to STATE!! There was simply nothing bigger in high school athletics in those days. On the trip down to St. Louis we stopped in Columbia for a break. There the local newspaper had a story about this Bradley guy. It said he was averaging an astounding 45 points per game and was an out-standing person to boot!

We stayed at the King Brothers Motel on Kingshighway and 40 Highway. We would be playing the next day. To save money, the entire team slept in two rooms with two to a bed. Somehow I ended up with Russell Washington, the freshman brother of junior starter Preston Washington. Russell was a shy 6'6" and 240 lb. kid who was brought up from the junior varsity for the tournament. Suffice it to say, he took up most of the bed. It was also good that as a non starter it was not going to be necessary for me to be well rested for the game. Russell would become a great three sport All State high school athlete, a college All American football player at Missouri and a several time All-Pro player for the San Diego Chargers.

Bill Bradley lived up to his billing. He was everywhere on the court and seemed to score or pass to teammates at will. We were behind the entire game. Coach sent me and the other non-starting seniors in for the final minutes so that we could say we played in the state tournament. While in, I attempted to guard Bradley. He was much taller than me and seemed to levitate coming down on a fast break, passing off to a teammate for a bucket. Somehow I got myself fouled and had the chance to get in the box score. I made the first free throw but missed the next. Within seconds the

buzzer sounded, ending our Cinderella run. We had held Bradley to somewhere between 30 and 40 points. Final score was 74-49. It was hard to believe when we heard Chrystal City and Bradley were defeated in the finals.

After the game we immediately showered and got on our bus and left for home. It was a losers quiet that enveloped the bus as we sped westward in the darkness. We pulled in the city after midnight and the bus dropped us off at school. The coaches had cars there and dropped us off at various homes for the remainder of the night. I stayed at Dan Marcum's house. It wouldn't be the last time we would share a room. Although we had no idea of it at the time, within six months Dan and I would become freshman college roommates at William Jewell.

Several weeks later, we got word that the St. Louis Post Dispatch did a big story in their Sunday magazine on Bill Bradley. It featured several big photos of him playing in the state tournament against us. Apparently the photographer got there late because I am in several of them, including one where Bradley is leaping high in the air to shoot while I have jumped in a pitiful effort to block the shot. The picture was titled: To Little, Too Late. Once while in Washington, DC when we both were serving in Congress, I told Bradley about our shared experience in the state tournament. He was fairly non-plussed about it, which is what you can be when you are one of the greatest college basketball players ever, an All-Pro player with the Knicks and enshrined in the basketball Hall of Fame.

Our basketball season had been extended by the tournament so it was now time to immediately focus on my last year of running track. Coach Cross liked to start off the season indoors during the inclement weather by running in the hallways. I always enjoyed this because the sprinters would be repeatedly timed on the 60 yd. dash. The hard floors were good to run on and the time would be determined by whether you had a good start or not. I always had a great out-of-the-blocks start so I excelled at this short sprint. As I recall, my times were invariably in the 6.5 range. The 60 yd. dash was only run indoors and never by high schools. My problem was that I did not have the natural ability to continue on that pace for 40 more yards during a 100 yd. dash. But I was unbeatable in a start because an exceptional start is made up of good form and reflex reaction. I had both.

Sitting on the bench for basketball, even during an exciting run, can take its toll. I found myself out of shape and not doing very well in the sport in which I had my most natural ability. As usual, I ran the 440 and a leg on the 880 and mile relay teams. We had good relay teams. Our 880 relay team placed second in the regional meet and we ran a 440 relay at the East High relays to take first. This qualified us to run in the KU Relays in Lawrence and at the state meet at the University of Missouri.

Although most of my memories are of athletic pursuits, I well remember the first time I spoke in front of a large audience. It was at an assembly in the spring of my senior year to nominate Carl Offutt for the following year's student body president. I had known Carl from our time together on the track team. He was a bright fellow and had been involved with student activities. For some reason he asked that I make his nomination speech. I thought about the speech but didn't put pen to paper until the night before. The morning of the assembly I was as nervous as I have ever been in my life. What had I gotten myself into? Of course my biggest fear was that the speech would bomb and I would make a fool of myself in front of the entire school.

Eventually I came up with the idea that had never been done before. I would make the speech humorous. I would use made-up endorsement quotes from members of the faculty. Here's an example: Mr. Harriman was the admissions counselor, short in stature with a fair resemblance to Mickey Rooney. It went something like this: "To see how good a student Carl was, I called on Mr. Harriman. I found him asleep at his desk. I carefully woke him up and he apologized, said he was up late the night before watching his favorite Mickey Rooney movie on television" Ha ha! I went through several faculty members, weaving in their own peccadilloes (and in some cases doing vocal impersonations) while making the case why my candidate had all the necessary qualifications to be a good leader. The students loved it, and after the first burst of laughter, I was off to the races and thoroughly enjoyed the experience. People would stop me all day to say what a great speech I made. Unfortunately, I soon received a call from Mr. McMillan's office to come in at once. I had a fairly good idea what this was all about, and sure enough he failed to see the humor in my remarks. After the "talking to" I conjured up visions of not being able to graduate or some other harsh punishment. In the end, nothing else happened and I was relieved.

Also, unfortunately for my candidate, his speech didn't go so well and he lost. It was the first of many opportunities for me to try to connect with an audience to win them over with my message. Making Carl's nominating speech gave me a measure self confidence that I would never have had but for this experience.

I have emphasized my involvement with sports at Southeast because it was the major part of my experience. But the academic side of life was also solid. We had many dedicated teachers that would routinely turn out high performers in college. I vividly remember what Mrs. Mosman said about her typing class--that one day we would look back on it as the most important class we ever took. How correct she was! Thanks to her I learned to type at an accurate and good speed and have used that skill for over 50 years.

But it is the coaches that I remember so well. I may have been the only senior boy ever to turn down Berle Adams' offer to be the head cafeteria assistant under his watch. He could not believe anyone would turn down such an honor. Maybe I made the wrong decision, but for me, I would rather eat my lunch in the men's locker room, engaging in conversation with Coach Jess Cross. Mr. Cross was a dispenser of wisdom and had a philosophy of life that, if you could get past his gruff exterior, was well worth listening to.

Fate would bring me back to St. Louis and Washington University five years after our state basketball tournament loss to attend law school. This time, however, I would leave a winner—winning the hand and heart of one Marilyn Anderson, a Southeast graduate, class of '65. We received our degrees the same day in June, 1969 and have been married for forty-four years. Through the years, it's been pretty neat to be able to share our common Southeast high school experiences.

Twenty-two years after graduation, Nate Roitman and his wife Mary would become constituents in my state legislative and congressional districts. While both were strong political supporters, Mary especially campaigned hard for me--in spite of being from a family with a long history in the other political party. It was a thrill for me to have my picture taken with them as their Congressman on the steps of the United States Capitol knowing that the competitive spirit I developed in politics undoubtedly had been kindled by the competitiveness of my coach and the experiences I shared with my Southeast teammates in the wonder years that culminated in 1961.