

1988 VIGOR WOLVES TOP THE LIST OF ... Alabama's greatest teams

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By MIKE HERNDON

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At the beginning of the 1988 season, Vigor assistant coach James Perine wrote a list of 10 goals on the blackboard.

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Goal No. 1: Zero points allowed.

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"Number one was to shut people out," said Perine, who coached the Wolves' defense along with D.D. Thompson. "The last one was to win."

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The 1988 Vigor Wolves did both. Led by the late Harold Clark, who died of cancer in 1996, the Wolves went 13-0, winning their second straight Class 6A state title and earning the distinction of high school national champion by ESPN. Along the way, they posted eight shutouts, including the first four games in the state playoffs, before blasting Berry 41-7 in the finals.

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Vigor's 1988 team had a rare collection of athletic ability and a burning desire to not only win, but obliterate its opponents, a combination that may come along only once or twice a generation. According to most of the longtime high school football coaches and observers interviewed by the Press-Register, no better combination has been seen before or since in Alabama.

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In researching the state's football history and talking with veteran coaches around the state, the Press-Register has compiled a list of the top 10 high school football teams since integration, which became widespread in the state around 1970. The teams were selected on a per-year basis - not based on what the programs accomplished cumulatively over a number of years - and each school was limited to one team per decade.

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The result is a list of teams featuring players who became known not just in Alabama but around the Southeast and the country: Ozzie Newsome, Jeff Rutledge, Chad Jackson, Mike Washington, Larry Ware, Major Ogilvie.

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There are three teams from the past 10 years: the 2002 Hoover squad, the best of a string of dominant Hoover teams that have won five of the last six 6A state championships; the 2005 Homewood team led by SEC signees Tim Hawthorne and David Ross, which dominated Class 5A last season; and the 1998 Blount squad led by receiver Deandre Green and lineman DeMarco McNeil, which bulldozed its way to a 15-0 record and Blount's fifth state title of the 1990s.

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In addition to Vigor, there are two other teams from the 1980s: the 1982 Hazlewood team led by brothers and future Alabama stars Kerry and Pierre Goode; and the 1986 Robert E. Lee squad, the first of two Generals teams on the list, which finished No. 2 in the country.

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And the 1970s are represented by four squads. The 1973 Banks team, which sent Rutledge to Alabama, and the 1976 Mountain Brook squad, which sent Ogilvie to the Tide, are No. 3 and No. 4, respectively. They are joined by a second Robert E. Lee squad, the 1970 team, which thanks to integration merged members of a talented Booker T. Washington team with returners from Lee 's 1969 state championship squad to form a powerhouse that couldn't be touched. And there is the 1972 Colbert County team led by Newsome, who went on to a Hall of Fame NFL career with the Cleveland Browns and a job as the general manager of the Baltimore Ravens.

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Most veteran coaches surveyed by the Press-Register put the 1988 Vigor team at the top of the list.

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"The best team I ever saw since I've been coaching was the 1988 Vigor team," said Spence McCracken, who coached the 1986 Lee squad and is now the head coach at Opelika. "They had so much speed and the quarterback was so good. They could throw the ball so well back when not many people were throwing. And the defense was so good. They had so much speed on defense. You had to be so selective about what you ran against them."

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Perine, who is now retired after leading Vigor to a 73-22 record as its head coach from 1995-2002, ticks off the Wolves' defensive stats as though they were put up by last year's team: 391 rushing yards allowed (30 per game); 760 passing yards allowed (58.4 per game), 24 interceptions, 14 fumble recoveries, 30 sacks, 48 pass break-ups, and 44 total points allowed, including only seven in the playoffs.

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"The slowest guy on our defense that year was a 4.8, a defensive tackle," recalled Thompson, now the head coach at Bayside Academy. "Starting from game one, I don't think there was any doubt. I never felt like there was any pressure on us, because these guys just believed in themselves."

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Running back Darrell "Lectron" Williams led the offense, rushing for 1,100 yards in dazzling, high-stepping style despite being hampered all year by a sore knee that was injured in the state championship game the year before. Quarterback Kelvin Simmons connected at a regular clip with speedy receivers Kevin Lee, Ryan Blakely and Bruce McGee, whom many fans came to know as "McBlakeLee." Linemen such as big Roosevelt Patterson were road-graders up front.

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"We had that mentality that nobody could beat us," said Blakely, now a Mobile policeman. "We felt like we could play against anybody in the country and beat them."

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Many of the names that dotted Vigor 's roster are familiar to SEC football fans. Williams and defensive end Adrian Jackson went on to Auburn, while Lee and Patterson played at Alabama, where they helped the Tide win the national title in 1992. Linebacker Mitch Davis, a junior in 1988, signed with Georgia the next year. Five members of the '88 team - Patterson, Lee, Simmons, Davis and Marcus Durgin - went on to play professional football in either the NFL or CFL.

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"Most great teams I can remember in high school and even sometimes collegiate teams, there may be four or five players who are outstanding and everybody else is average," said Williams, now the director of fitness at Springhill Athletic Center. "But I can literally say that there was an outstanding football player at every position (on the 1988 Vigor team). From the first kickoff, it was waves of just freakish athletes."

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One of the few people who might dispute Vigor's crowning as the state's best team is Hoover coach Rush Propst. If this were a list of the state's most dominant programs over an extended period of time, the current Hoover program would be at the top. Propst, who was coaching at Ashville High in 1988, said he believes the two teams he considers his best at Hoover, the 2000 team and the 2002 squad, may have been better than the '88 Wolves.

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"Our team speed on defense has been unappreciated the last six or seven years," Propst said. "The 2002 team defense was really good. You throw in our offensive scheme - could Vigor handle stopping what we do with never seeing it? I'm not sure they could."

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"Were we as talented as Vigor? I don't know. That's hard to say. We may have been. I still think it boils down to scheme. That's why I feel like we'd have an edge."

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Tuscaloosa County coach Robert Higginbotham has had a unique view of both teams. His Wildcats were the only team to beat Hoover in the regular season in 2002 before falling to the Bucs 31-0 in a rematch in the playoffs. He also coached the Shades Valley team that lost the 1987 state championship game to a Vigor squad that included many of the same standouts as the 1988 team.

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"It would be tough to call," Higginbotham said. "You're talking about tremendous talent facing good talent at Hoover with the spread offense and the coaching involved. It would have been a heck of a game, I'm sure."

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UMS-Wright coach Terry Curtis, however, doesn't buy the idea that Hoover's spread offense may have given Vigor problems. "Scheme didn't bother them," Curtis said of the Wolves, who could show 19 different looks out of their base defense. "You'd go trips and they'd still stay in a split (base defense) and it didn't bother them. They were so fast and so good, you couldn't block them. They'd lock up man and never play anything but man."

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Curtis, who has led UMS-Wright to 4A state titles in three of the last five years, was the offensive coordinator at Murphy in 1988, and looked on helplessly as the Wolves held the Panthers to five yards of total offense - minus-20 on the ground - in a 24-0 victory. The Panthers were 6-1 going into that game.

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"(Murphy head coach) Larry Henderson walked in at halftime and said, 'We've got to do something,'" Curtis recalled. "I said, 'Have you got any ideas?' We tried three-step drops, five-step drops, running inside, running outside. We couldn't even get out from under the center before they hit us."

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"That's the only game I've ever been involved in where I had no answer for anything they did. We couldn't block them. We couldn't do anything. I felt sorry for my quarterback."

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The Wolves were so dominant that Williams remembers many regular-season games as "boring." Practice was the real challenge.

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"We'd have (a lot of) people come to our practices just to see it, because the only people that could move the ball against our defense was our offense," he said. "The only people that could give our offense any trouble was our defense. When it came game time, we didn't face that caliber of opponent across the ball from us that we faced in practice on a daily basis. Playing against D-I caliber athletes in practice every day just transitioned over to the ballgame and it was like a hot knife going through butter. There wasn't anything anybody could do with that team."

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Perine said the Wolves' attitude toward practice was a big part of the reason they were so dominant.

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"To make a good football team, players have to be able to discipline each other," he said. "That's when your coaching part becomes easy. When you have somebody miss (practice), naturally the coaches are mad at him, but the players were mad with him. They would punish themselves. I wouldn't have to do it. If they gave up so many points, they conditioned themselves a little bit harder. That was motivation for them not to want to give up points. They were a smart group of kids, without an exception."

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It all paid off with a 41-7 demolition of Berry and future Auburn quarterback Stan White in the state championship game, and the subsequent recognition by ESPN as the 1988 high school national champ. Vigor beat Berry - which later became Hoover High School - without the services of Williams, who sat out the game with the sore knee, leaving reserve tailback Ben Gamble to earn MVP honors with 155 yards and three touchdowns.

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"I remember (Berry coach) Bob Finley speaking at a clinic and he said, 'We knew we were in trouble when we kicked off,'" Curtis said. "They were going to pooch-kick it and a Vigor lineman (Darryl Hunt) got that ball and ran all the way across the field and up the sideline and they couldn't catch him."

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Hunt returned the opening kickoff 68 yards to the Berry 21-yard line before being pushed out of bounds to set up the Wolves' first score. From there, as with so many other times in 1988, the rout was on.

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"We were able to score a touchdown right before the half (and) I think it kind of made them mad a little bit," said White, who went on to star at Auburn and play in the NFL with the New York Giants. "We didn't give up a sack the whole day, which was very surprising, but that's not to say I didn't get hit quite a bit. That was a nasty defense."

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It was a nasty team. In the state of Alabama, there have been none nastier.

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"They could run the ball. They could throw the ball. They were just dominant," Curtis said. "That defense was just unbelievable. They'd be just as good today."

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