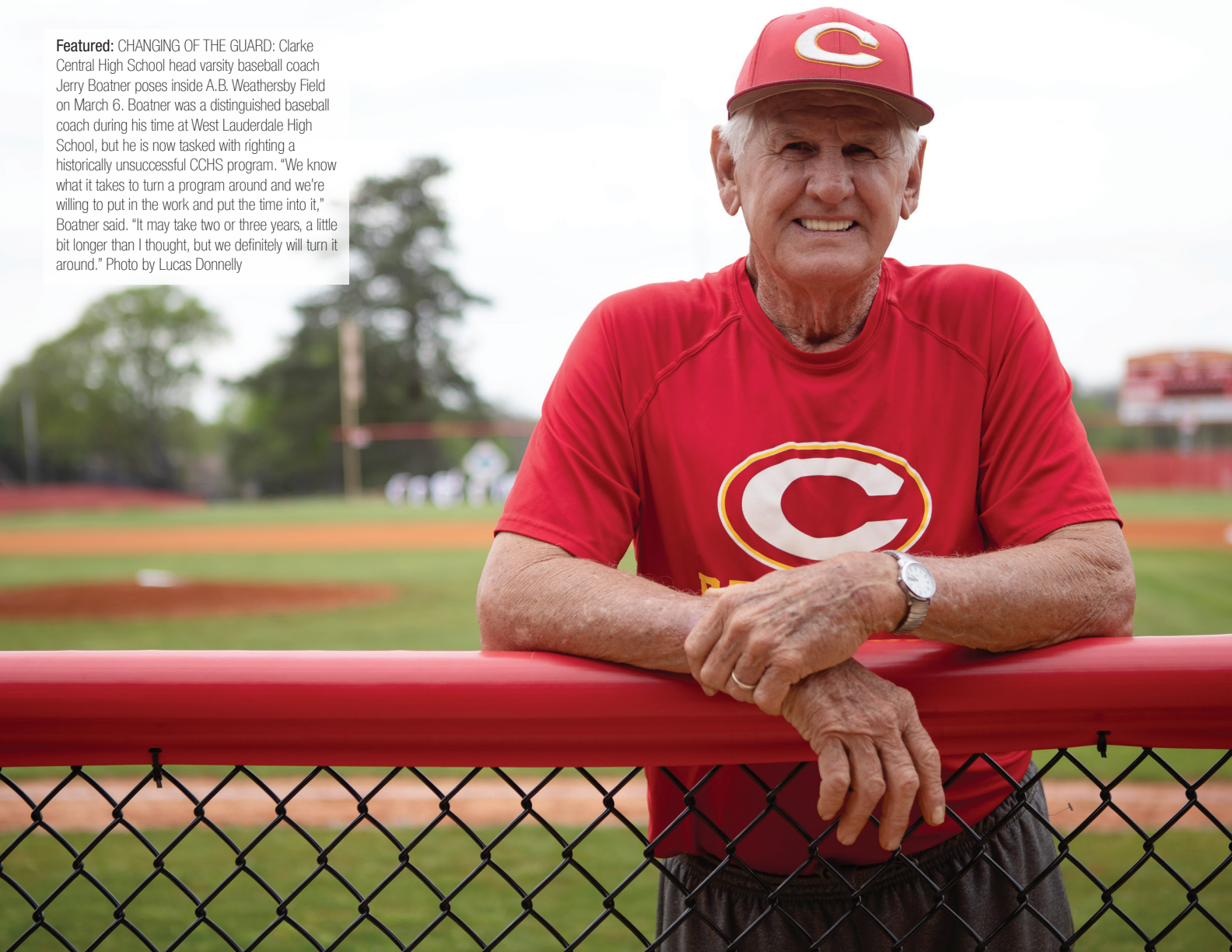


Featured: CHANGING OF THE GUARD: Clarke Central High School head varsity baseball coach Jerry Boatner poses inside A.B. Weathersby Field on March 6. Boatner was a distinguished baseball coach during his time at West Lauderdale High School, but he is now tasked with righting a historically unsuccessful CCHS program. "We know what it takes to turn a program around and we're willing to put in the work and put the time into it," Boatner said. "It may take two or three years, a little bit longer than I thought, but we definitely will turn it around." Photo by Lucas Donnelly



OLD-SCHOOL, NEW SCHOOL

After coaching in Mississippi for over 40 years, CCHS head varsity baseball coach Jerry Boatner has brought his hard-working personality to Athens.

STORY AND LAYOUT
BY WYATT MEYER
Sports Editor

Above all else, Jerry Boatner knows two things: hard work and baseball.

The new Clarke Central High School head varsity baseball coach came to Athens as a 77-year-old high school coaching icon with a mountain of accolades from his time in Mississippi, aiming to right an ailing CCHS program.

But in reality, Boatner's time on the diamond stretches back before CCHS, before his trophies and championships, even before he coached his first game. Rather, Boatner's baseball journey started in his parents' backyard in Meridian, Mississippi, with a world of baseball ahead of him.

As a kid in Mississippi, Boatner didn't always have the best relationship with his parents, but that didn't stop them from being a huge influence on his life

and coaching career. In particular, his father taught Boatner the importance of hard work and politeness.

"(My daddy) made me say, 'Yes, sir (and) no, sir.' We had to wear our shirttails in, wear our socks. If he told us to go get something, we had to run to do it," Boatner said. "The older I got, I realized (that) my daddy was just what I needed."

Boatner played baseball growing up, attending East Mississippi Community College before moving on to Delta State University as a pitcher. There, Boatner met Delta State pitching coach Dave "Boo" Ferriss, a former Major League Baseball pitcher and the man who would become like a second father to Boatner.

With Boatner aiming for the pros, Ferriss taught him about baseball and life in the big leagues. But, when Boatner injured his arm in an incident that would

ultimately end his professional baseball dreams, Ferriss's emphasis on commitment became all the more important to him as a coach.

"My prayer every day (is) that I have just half the influence on these kids that Coach Ferriss had on my life," Boatner said.

After graduating from college, Boatner had to make a decision: would he pursue his baseball dreams from the sidelines or make a career out of something else?

He opted for the former, taking the position of head baseball coach at Clarkdale High School, a program that hadn't won a game in five years. But after a summer of training, Boatner's team came out and won their very first game against local rival Northeast Lauderdale High School.

"I got all excited (and) pumped up, jumping up and down, players jumping up and down, the fans (doing the same)," Boatner said. "I got on a baseball high 55 years ago and I've been on one ever since. I can't come down."

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-- JERRY BOATNER,
CCHS head varsity baseball coach

Boatner coached at Clarkdale from 1969-1973 before moving on to West Lauderdale High School on the other side of Meridian in Collinsville. Just as with Clarkdale, Boatner inherited a losing program: two years before Boatner arrived, the Mighty Knights hadn't had enough players to finish out their season.

Little did Boatner know that he would remain at West Lauderdale for the best part of 40 years, leading his team to 14 state championships while collecting innumerable national honors including being named the National Coach of the Year by "USA Today" in 2007. But Boatner wasn't teaching anything special – just the importance of hard work that he'd learned from Ferriss and his father all those years before.

West Lauderdale Athletic Director and assistant varsity baseball coach Jody Hurst attended West Lauderdale in the 1980s, playing for Boatner. While he returned to the school later, Hurst admitted that

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Right: WHAT IT TAKES TO WIN: Clarke Central High School head varsity baseball coach Jerry Boatner watches his team from the dugout during the Gladiators 17-5 loss to Oglethorpe County High School on March 6. CCHS has made a rough start to his coaching tenure, with no wins in his first eight games in charge. "We never miss practice and I think that's an important part of our philosophy is everybody's got to desire to win," Boatner said. "We're looking for people with the desire to practice to win. And that's the key." Photo by Lucas Donnelly



Boatner's coaching style was a learning curve.

"I had to realize that at first, (his coaching style is) a little different, it's a little bit 'Ooh, okay,'" Hurst said. "But then, you realize that he's (being tough) for you, he's doing it to try and make you the best person off the field as well as on the field."

When the dust settled in 2014, Boatner had amassed the most wins of any baseball coach in the state of Mississippi, which would eventually lead to him being inducted into the Mississippi Sports Hall of Fame in 2020.

Even then, Boatner wasn't done coaching. In fact, the only reason he left Meridian was because of a chance encounter with an old high school sweetheart at Meridian Senior High School's 45th class reunion after his first wife passed away in 2007.

"(The reunion) cost \$100, (but I'd) made up my mind (that) I wasn't coming. But after she called, I changed my mind and said, 'I'm gonna go,'" Boatner said. "To make a long story short, we got married three months later and she'd been a gift from the Good Lord."

After their marriage, the pair remained in Meridian for several years so Boatner could continue to coach at West Lauderdale. But eventually, the pair moved to Braselton, Georgia, so they could see his wife's grandchildren grow up.

Once in Georgia, Boatner returned to the baseball field in an assistant coaching capacity at West Jackson Middle School. But after three years, Boatner wanted a change, a return to the big time: he wanted a head coaching position.

"Some of the travel ball parents (on my grandson's

team) knew that I had coached in Mississippi and had a pretty good resume, so they asked me to coach (at CCHS) a couple years ago and it went in one ear and out the other," Boatner said. "(When) they asked me (again) last year, I couldn't get it out of my mind."

CCHS Athletic Director Jon Ward didn't immediately know of Boatner's baseball expertise when they were introduced to each other by one of his grandson's teammates parents, but when Ward did a deeper dive on Boatner's coaching experience, he was blown away by his history of success.

"I feel very confident that (Coach Boatner is) with

us for years to come and he'll give us everything he can. That's just the kind of person (he) is," Ward said. "(I have) a lot of respect for his optimism and the way he approaches baseball, but (also) life."

Now, Boatner is tasked with rebuilding a Gladiator program that hasn't had a winning season since Maxpreps began tracking records in 2008. In order to change the team's

culture, he's upped the frequency and intensity of practices.

"All three schools that I've had (head coaching positions at) have never had a winning tradition, we had to develop it," Boatner said. "If you go where there's a winning tradition, you don't have to work near as hard, so we have worked hard."

Although the Gladiators started their season a winless 0-16, CCHS first baseman Luke Davis, a junior, believes the team has started to reap the rewards of Boatner's teachings.

"There's really no breaks when it comes to Coach Boatner, which I really like because we're always

"He's (being tough) for you, he's doing it to try and make you the best person off the field as well as on the field."

-- JODY HURST,

West Lauderdale High School Athletic Director
and assistant baseball coach

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Bottom left: WICKED WINNER OF THE WEST: Clarke Central High School head varsity baseball coach Jerry Boatner coaches at his previous job at West Lauderdale High School in his hometown of Meridian, Mississippi. Boatner's biggest influence in the baseball world was former Major League Baseball player and Delta State University pitching coach Dave "Boo" Ferriss, who taught Boatner the value of affecting student-athletes both on and off the field. "The older I become, the more important I see the value of impacting people's lives when in early years, I'd be climbing the ladder of success," Boatner said. "My prayer every day (is) that I have just half the influence on these kids that Coach Ferriss had on my life." Photo courtesy of Jerry Boatner

WHERE'S JERRY?

CLARKDALE:

Boatner's spent the first five years of his coaching career in his hometown of Meridian, Mississippi at Clarkdale High School.

WEST LAUDERDALE:

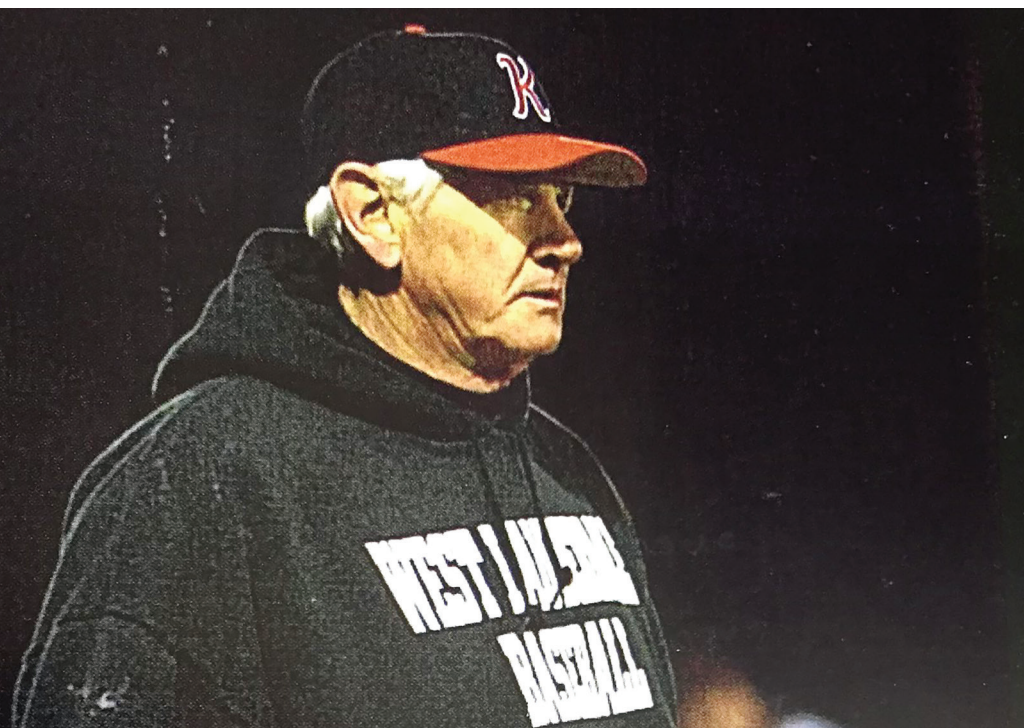
Boatner enjoyed most of his success at West Lauderdale High School, winning many awards and championships.

EAST JACKSON:

After moving to Georgia, Boatner took a step back and became an assistant coach for East Jackson High School.

CLARKE CENTRAL:

Boatner returned to head coaching by taking stewardship of Clarke Central High School's baseball program.



RECORD-BREAKING BOATNER



PLAYING DAYS:

Boatner's team at Delta State University finished runner up in the NCAA Division 2 World Series.



WINNING TRADITION:

Boatner won 14 state championships at West Lauderdale High School, bringing roughly a trophy every three years.



PERSONAL PROWESS:

Boatner was named National Coach of the Year by "USA Today," though he has won numerous other personal awards.



ALL HE DOES IS WIN:

Boatner finished his career in Mississippi with 1,202 wins, the most in Mississippi high school baseball history.



doing something that's going to help us win," Davis said.

Boatner acknowledges that this isn't his most talented team and he believes he will need time to rebuild. He's started by placing emphasis on the little things, the things that don't require skill, the things that all his teams are built upon: hustle, communication and situational awareness.

"(Coach Boatner has) the old-school mentality (that we're) here to work and there's a job to get done. Yeah, (we're) gonna have fun, but there's a mission that needs to take place and it takes everyone," CCHS assistant varsity baseball coach William Lance said.

It would be near impossible for his time at CCHS to overshadow his accomplishments elsewhere and most people his age have long since retired. Yet, here he is, doing it all over again – the summer workouts, the week-end practices, the away-day blowouts, all in the name of a school 300 miles from where his legacy lies.

But for Boatner, baseball is life. The game is his craft,

and he's honed it finely, no matter how rough around the edges his teams are to begin.

"I made up my mind when I was 13 years old: I wouldn't let anyone outwork me and I developed a work ethic second to none," Boatner said. "(To) this

day, at 77 years of age, I still haven't seen anybody (who has) more energy and enthusiasm and work ethic than I do."

Regardless of his performance in Athens, Boatner has established himself as a high school coaching legend. However, if he ends up righting the ship at CCHS, he can dedicate that turnaround to himself, from

"To this day, at 77 years of age, I still haven't seen anybody (who has) more energy and enthusiasm and work ethic than I do."

-- JERRY BOATNER,
CCHS head varsity baseball coach

the little boy in Meridian working tirelessly on the mound to the 77-year-old coach doing the same from the dugout.

"I don't know if anybody loves coaching more than I do," Boatner said. "I don't want to be a coach, I want to be the coach. (I want to) be the very best coach I can possibly be."

Top right: CHEERING THEM ON: Clarke Central High School head varsity baseball coach Jerry Boatner watches his team from the dugout during the Gladiators' 5-17 loss to Oglethorpe High School on March 6. While he hasn't done much winning at CCHS so far, Boatner attributed his career success to his team's implementation of his hardworking and energetic approach to baseball. "The Good Lord blessed us with great success, but we found out early, you get out what you put into (baseball), (so) we developed a great work ethic. (We were) not gonna let anybody outwork us," Boatner said. Photo by Lucas Donnelly

Left: EVERYDAY HE'S SHUFFLING: An infographic displays the schools Clarke Central High School head varsity baseball coach Jerry Boatner has worked at. Boatner plied his trade in Mississippi for most of his life before moving to Georgia after a chance encounter with an eighth-grade sweetheart at his 45th class reunion. "She came down those steps at the Holiday Inn where we was having (the) class reunion and hugged me. Her hip went up against my hip and, lord, I felt electricity, just (an) awesome feeling," Boatner said. "To make a long story short, we got married three months later and she's been a gift from the Good Lord." Graphic by Wyatt Meyer

Above: ROUND THE BASES: An infographic displays Clarke Central High School head varsity baseball coach Jerry Boatner's achievements as a baseball coach. West Lauderdale High School Athletic Director and assistant baseball coach Jody Hurst credited Boatner's success to his energetic coaching approach. "As a person, he cares a whole lot about his family, his friends. He's a person that we all looked up to when he was over here," Hurst said. "It's always been amazing to me, the way he shows up in the field every day." Graphic by Wyatt Meyer