

Tirrel Burton wasn't rich or famous – just loyal, respected, and good hearted

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January 26, 2017

<http://johnubacon.com/2017/01/tirrel-burton-wasnt-rich-famous-just-loyal-respected-good-hearted/>

Today, big time college football coaches are media stars, with thousands of followers on Twitter. They're rich and famous, whether they should be or not. Even assistant coaches are millionaires. But it wasn't always that way.

This week in Ann Arbor a few hundred people gathered to remember a college football coach who wasn't rich or famous. But he'd earned the respect of everyone there.

His name was Tirrel Burton, but don't feel bad if you don't know him. He seemed to go out of his way to avoid the spotlight.

Burton was born in 1929, and grew up in Oxford, Ohio, home of Miami University. He was a serious student and a great athlete, but 70 years ago, those skills didn't automatically get you into college. So, Burton joined the Army instead, then used the G-I Bill to enroll at Miami as a 22-year old freshman.

As a senior, Burton led the football team in kick-off returns, punt-returns, rushing, scoring, and interceptions. Bo Schembechler said Burton was the best tailback Miami of Ohio ever had—and Bo knew that because he was coaching at Bowling Green when Burton was running through his defense.

When Bo told Tirrell's wife, Sue, that nobody could catch her husband, she said, "I did!"

"Unfortunately," Bo said, "we didn't have Sue Burton on scholarship at Bowling Green."

Miami went undefeated that season, but received no bowl invitations. In 1955, Southern teams wouldn't play against black players like Burton. I can only imagine what he had to deal with over the decades, but I never heard him say a word about it. He just kept going.

The next spring, NFL teams showed some interest, but he signed up with the Ottawa Roughriders in the Canadian Football League. In his first year, he led his team in running, receiving, and kick-returning, and led the league with eight interceptions. But he returned the next year to Ohio to teach and coach at a junior high school, and raise his two children with Sue.

After earning his master's degree in 1962, Burton rose through the coaching ranks. In 1970, Schembechler hired him at Michigan for a whopping \$11,000 – about five percent of what they make now. Burton coached the wide receivers, then the tailbacks, many of them All-Americans.

Coach Burton was not a man you wanted to disappoint, but if you did what he asked, he would defend you – even against the famously demanding Schembechler. If Schembechler caught one of Coach Burton's players missing a block, he'd ask Burton, "Now, what the hell happened there?"

On a staff prone to yelling and screaming, Burton was the quiet one. "That's my fault," he'd say. "I'll fix it." And that's all Schembechler needed to hear.

Over the years, other teams offered Burton higher pay and a higher profile. But he always turned them down to stay at Michigan.

Burton earned 12 Big Ten title rings under Schembechler, and three more after Bo retired. When Burton finally stepped down after the 1994 season, he turned his competitive drive to golf, where he shot in the seventies.

He was one of the few men I know who could give Schembechler a hard time, and get away with it. I was sitting in Schembechler's office one day when Burton strolled in. Schembechler immediately challenged him. "Burton! If you had a back-bone in your body — which you don't! — if you weren't gutless, yellow and just plain scared, Burton — you'd be MAN enough to do battle with Bo Schembechler on the golf course."

“So long as I give you 14 strokes?” Burton asked, with a grin.

“Yeah, that too,” Schembechler mumbled.

Burton always carried himself with a quiet dignity, fully confident without an ounce of cockiness. He had an honest face, and no agenda. He never resorted to gossip, and no one can recall him saying a bad word about anyone. Being around Coach Burton made you want to be a better person.

Last week, Tirrel Burton died of a heart attack, at age 87. His funeral included big names like Jim Harbaugh, and eulogies by Jack Harbaugh, Jerry Hanlon, and three of his former players. He was surrounded by his wife, his kids, and hundreds of people who had known him for years, and loved him for who he was.

Tirrel Burton was not rich, or famous, but he never cared about those things. What he cared about were loyalty, respect, and the people around him. I like to think those things still matter more.

Coach Burton’s funeral suggested they do.