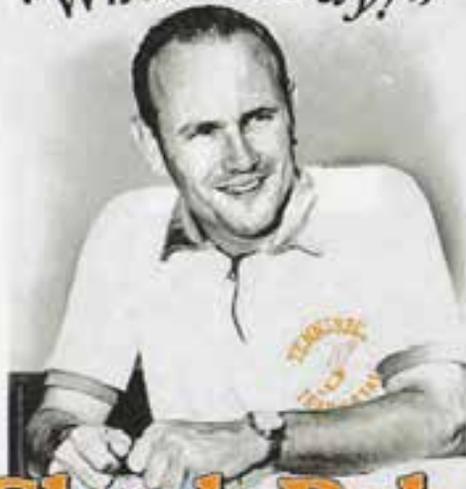
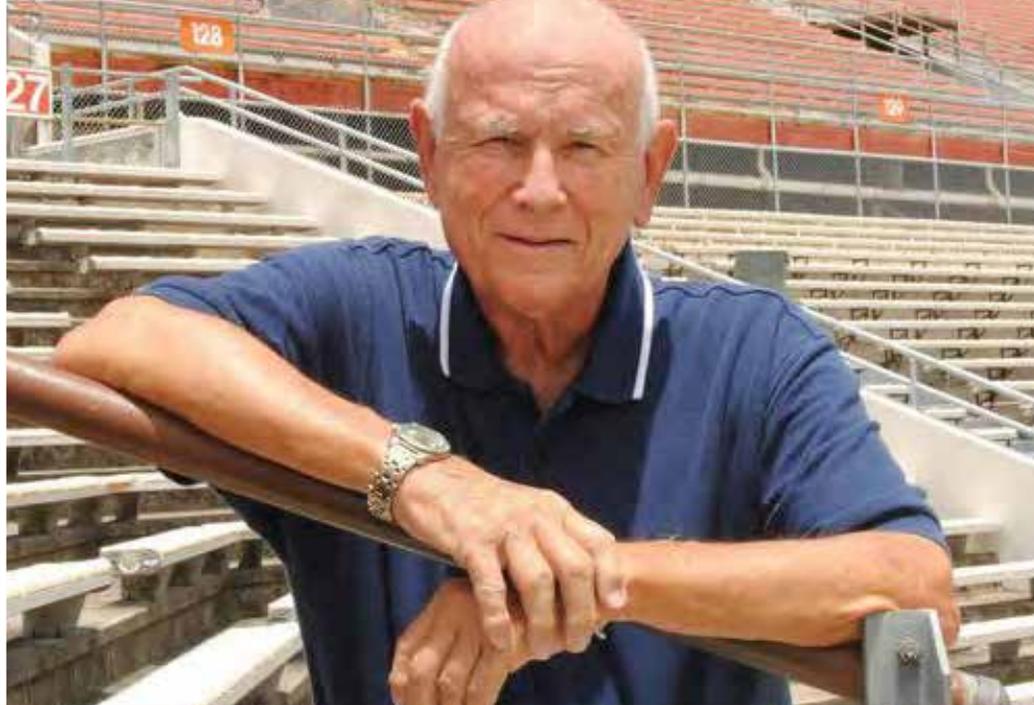


“What A Day!”



Chuck Rohe
HEAD COACH 1962 - '71
21 SEC CHAMPIONSHIP TEAMS



Orange was the NEW Black & White

A short story about the lifelong impact of St Luke's own Coach Chuck Rohe

By Dawn Fleming, St. Luke's Executive Director of Marketing
and Connect Ministries

Let's start in the middle and I'll set the scene for you: it's the early 1960s and while high schools in cities like Memphis, TN were starting to integrate, much of the south remained segregated. No African American athletes were competing at the college level in the Southeastern Conference which included schools like Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, LSU, Alabama, and Kentucky but all that was about to change.

Tennessee's Head Track Coach and Director of Football Recruiting, and St. Luke's member, Chuck Rohe, was determined to field the best track and football teams the school had ever seen. He had spent several seasons convincing the administrators that to be the best, the athletic programs needed to adopt an inclusive set of values and he championed integrating the sports teams. Coach Rohe had grown up in suburban Chicago where he competed in the middle-distance races against both black and white runners and had seen first-hand how good competition could push athletes to the next level.

Coach Rohe began his coaching career at Hattiesburg (Mississippi) High School (1954-56) where he directed the junior high basketball team and high school track team to state championships. The following year (1956-57), he did all the recruiting and most of the coaching for the track team at his alma mater, the University of Southern Mississippi. He then served for the next five years (1957-62) as coach of Furman's cross country and track & field teams. During that time, the Paladins won the school's first Southern Conference (SoCon) Championship ever in any sport when the men's indoor track and field team won the league title at the 1961 championship meet... While Furman was prospering, Tennessee was struggling. Prior to Coach Rohe's arrival in Knoxville in the fall of 1962, Volunteer trackmen had never in the 40 years of its existence won an SEC Track & Field Championship. (Compiled by Paul Scott for RoheTrackEra.com, copyright 2013, used with permission by Coach Chuck Rohe.)

Finally, in 1965, Coach Rohe got the green light from the University of Tennessee's Athletic Director to recruit African American athletes for the school's track and football teams. In a time when states like Alabama and Governor Wallace were making a last stand against integration, Coach Rohe would make headlines as Tennessee became the first college in the SEC to integrate its athletic program.

Audry Hardy, a promising high school senior from the Memphis projects, crossed paths with Coach Rohe in

the summer of 1966 at the Tennessee high school state championship track meet. Hardy was running the anchor leg in the mile relay, but when he got the baton, his team was in last place. The roar of the crowd was deafening as he rounded the final turn and fans that day may have thought a Cinderella story was in the making. If this young man could pull off a come-from-behind win in the last hundred meters it would make for the perfect story...but that's not what happened. Hardy was edged out for the win right as the runners crossed the finish line and his team took second place in the state finals.

“Once you put on the orange, the black and white didn't matter anymore.”



1969 Track



McAlhane, Kelly, Womble, Hardy



1968 Track

Hardy recalls that “Coach Rohe walked right past the first-place runner and said to me ‘how would you like to come and run for the Tennessee volunteers?’” Hardy said he didn't have to think twice, it sounded like a good deal to him. Looking back Hardy says, “I think it was because he was such a good football recruiter that they (UT's Athletic Department) even entertained the idea of bringing on black athletes... anyone else who would have suggested such a thing would have probably been run out of town. In those days, that just wasn't done, he was definitely a pioneer.” Rohe was so good in fact that he was once offered a position under the University of Alabama's legendary Coach Bear Bryant but ultimately declined the role when UT made him an offer he couldn't refuse. “It was the hardest call I ever had to make,” Rohe said. “How do you say ‘no’ to Bear Bryant?”

Hardy was accepted to the University of Tennessee and in addition to securing a scholarship and spot on the roster for Hardy, Rohe offered scholarships to two more African American athletes that year: James Craig for track and field and Lester McClain for football. Rohe's track teams varied in size from year to year but would often include 30-50 runners, jumpers, and throwers. Hardy remembers all the athletes lived in the same building and Coach Rohe would regularly wake the team at 5:30 a.m. by sounding the

bell, signaling it was time to start the day with a long early morning run before breakfast.

Practices with Coach were hard. Those who could hang in there became great runners and champions. During the last 10 years Rohe coached, his Vols never lost an indoor or outdoor track meet. “The practices made me tough and taught me discipline,” Hardy said. “The work ethic I learned at Tennessee was applicable to other parts of my life like my career and my family. Workouts and campus life were not the only challenges facing Hardy, Craig, and McClain, their high school classes had not prepared them for the rigorous college-level courses but Hardy was quick to credit Coach Rohe for connecting the men with tutors to ensure they would be successful in the classroom as well as on the track. “The extra help made a big difference,” Hardy said. In addition to Coach Rohe, Olympic medalist Ralph Boston, best known for the long and triple jump, was another UT coach who made an impact on Audry. Hardy praised Coach Rohe for not only having the ability to recognize great athletes but to advocate for both athletes and coaches of color. “I'm very thankful for that,” Hardy said.

Going away to college is challenging for most young people and even more so when you're a student-athlete but Hardy and his fellow recruits would experience additional

obstacles. He remembers the transition to living on campus and traveling with the team was difficult, “Coach talked to the guys before we arrived to see who was open to rooming with us. My first roommate was from Memphis so we had that and track in common...” Hardy said. He would eventually room with James Craig. “We were all family,” Hardy notes. “We always ate together and there was a lot of camaraderie. Sure we had our difference, that was mostly because of the times, but we navigated things.”

I was intrigued to learn just how Coach Rohe helped Audry and his teammates work through their differences especially considering our current social climate. He reminded me that each generation faces their own uphill battles. In the 60’s, Hardy and others lived in a society defined by the Vietnam war, protestors, Nixon, hippies, cults, the women’s rights movement, the Watts Riots in LA, the civil rights movement, and Detroit burning just to name some of the hot-button issues. Much like today, everyone had their own thoughts about who and what was right.

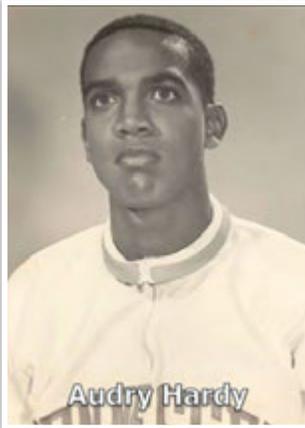
Coach Rohe's favorite saying is "What a day!" He leads by example and embraces responsibility each of us accepts when we claim to be Christians. When we declare that we're on God's team, people take note of our actions. Are we good role models? Are we letters of recommendation for God? Do people see the acts of our hands and hear the words we speak and feel inspired to learn more about Jesus? When was the last time we invited someone to church, especially someone who might not look like everyone else in the pews? What would it mean for you and me to have Coach Rohe's courage and tenacity as we endeavor to impact the Kingdom of God by fighting injustice and oppression? What legacy will we leave for those who will write our stories?

Audry Hardy says most major changes in American ideology have come out of conflict and differing opinions. “America is great,” he says, “because we are able to persevere and move forward.” It’s easier to find common ground when you’re standing on it face to face. We may only find our best teammates if we are willing to take a step outside of our comfort zone and strike up a conversation with someone we perceive as different from ourselves. What a shame it would be if we didn’t put our best foot forward for God because we were not willing to open our hearts or minds to new possibilities. Our best hope for building the Kingdom of God is as Audry says, to remember that, “We are all part of something bigger than ourselves.”

I asked Hardy why he thought Coach Rohe pursued welcoming African Americans to participate in the school’s sports programs and he said Coach, “just wanted winners and champions.” He noted that Rohe sought out well-rounded students and athletes who he knew had



the potential to achieve great things and advance their education and athletic careers through hard work and determination. Clearly, Rohe did not consider race to be a determining factor in one’s ability to achieve greatness. Hardy went on to say that, “luckily at UT, there was a lot of respect for athletic ability over color. Once you put on the orange, the black and white didn’t matter anymore.” I asked Hardy if, at the time, he grasped the significance of being one of the first African American athletes to compete in the Southeastern Conference and he said, “We had no



idea we were making history. I just happened to be in the right place, at the right time, in the right era, with the right coach. I was part of a great tradition; I'm very blessed. Of all the many athletes that Coach could have chosen, he picked me."

Audry Hardy says, "I met my wife as a freshman and we both graduated with business degrees...Coach Rohe made that happen." Hardy's first job out of college was a Manager Trainee position for a food company. He assumed he was setting high expectations for himself with a goal of making a five-figure income. "Back then," Hardy said, "If a man could make five-figures a year, that was really something. I started out making \$9,600 in Columbus, Ohio. My wife was working for Sears at the time and we thought we were middle class." Hardy would set his heights a bit higher as he progressed in his career. He worked for General Motors for 30 years before retiring to spend more time with his family and working on his charitable causes. Hardy's message to young people today: "Get involved in athletics, you might be able to get a scholarship but even if you don't, you'll still be a better person because of it. Athletics teaches you to work hard."

Many of the athletes who competed for UT during the Rohe era get together for a reunion every two years. They swap stories, compare race times, and reminisce about how one man made a lifelong impact on so many. I'm certain I

could fill the pages of many more publications with stories of black athletes who would come after Hardy's recruiting class and have the opportunity to compete at the college-level thanks to Coach Rohe. He paved the way for the rest of the universities in the SEC to follow suit but it would be years before any schools (other than Kentucky) would integrate their athletic teams.

When asked what prompted him to take up the banner for integrating UT's track and football programs, Coach Rohe said, "I didn't set out to take a stand against injustice or segregation. I just wanted the best athletes on the track and on the field." Coach Rohe was resolute when he stated that it wasn't just about integrating UT's sports teams. "The young men that I recruited," he said, "whether they were black or white, they graduated, and became civic leaders. It's not just racial, I recruited young athletes who worked hard, it wasn't easy, they had to overcome challenges, but through diligence, they were successful. What happened was more about the relationship between a coach and his athletes."

Coach Rohe summarized his thoughts on the impact he made on athletics, the conference, the college, and the athletes by saying, "I get dozens of emails each week from alumni who I impacted in one way or another. They tell me I changed their lives and that's very rewarding. ♦

Coach Rohe, is now in his 80s and still works full-time overseeing Nike football clinics and deploying college coaches as motivational speakers around the country. He and his wife Dana attend St. Luke's and you can spot them serving regularly as ushers in the traditional worship services. To read more about Coach Rohe, his years at UT, and related stories, visit RoheTrackEra.com a site compiled by UT's coaches and athletes, dedicated to preserving the history and photos of Coach Rohe, his athletes, and the integration of the Southeastern Conference.