

John McKenna: VMI's Winningest Football Coach

John McKenna (1914–2007) was head football coach at Virginia Military Institute for 13 seasons, beginning in 1953. An iron disciplinarian whose players admired and always respected him, McKenna led his teams to four Southern Conference championships, six consecutive winning seasons and an undefeated season in 1957. Named the SCC's Coach of the Year three times, he became and remains a VMI legend.

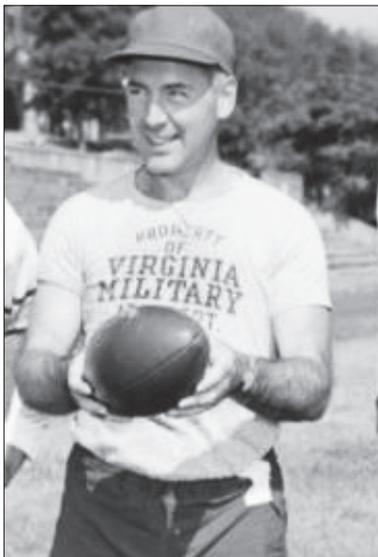
In 2005, former players, friends, colleagues and other admirers gathered with Coach McKenna in Cameron Hall to honor him and to reminisce. Among the speakers was Richard B. Sessoms, who was a McKenna watcher first as a sportswriter for the *Roanoke Times* and then, beginning in 1960, as VMI's business manager for athletics and its sports information director — all of it giving him a unique insider's look at McKenna and his coaching ways. This article is adapted from Sessoms's remarks at the banquet.



HERE IS SOMETHING about this occasion that suggests reflections of the greatest men of VMI — Stonewall Jackson, George Catlett Marshall — and makes one think of the leadership and personality traits they had in common. They were iron-willed, merciless disciplinarians, stern as the Old Testament by which they fought and committed to the New Testament by which they lived. They were focused — in command of their battle plans, down to the

smallest logistical detail — respected by their troops, and hard on them — and harder on their foes.

And so we come to tonight: a night for remembering old gridiron glories, old dreams and legends. We come to honor another in the company of the great men of VMI: John



Coach John McKenna in 1953, at the start of his VMI career . . .

McKenna, a spiritual son of Jackson and Marshall, and so much more than a winning football coach — a teacher by the most exacting of standards, a lifelong mentor not only to his players but to his fellow coaches and to all of us privileged by our association with him — a great and good man whose place among VMI heroes is assured.

But you know all that. My job is to lighten things up. I was asked to talk about the lighter moments of working with Coach. Lighter moments? What an incredible request! My first thought was that every man in this room would love to be given that *carte blanche* — and not one of you would dare exercise it! There's just too much respect.

Then again, we're all friends here. Maybe some of the McKenna family will chuckle, and maybe the main man will forgive me.

So let's get right to his nickname: the Eagle. We may never know the player who first discovered Coach was all-seeing on the practice field. But we do know that whoever he was, he was amazed when Coach saw him skip that one lousy pushup.

Of course, we all experienced his sense of humor, ever laced with devastating sarcasm. For example, the day things couldn't get worse at practice and one of our backs got a cleat on his left shoe tangled up with the shoestring on his right shoe coming out of the play call. He tripped so hard he was nearly knocked cold. "Oh my God," Coach

. . . and in 2005, at the banquet in his honor





*McKenna's undefeated
1957 team*

exclaimed, “we can’t even get out of the huddle!” Another time, I was stuck for words trying in a brochure to describe one of the finest guys on the team, though not our greatest athlete. But he was a leader in the cadet corps, a class officer, and he wore academic stars, so I decided to go with his character and heart. Straining for the superlative, I wrote: “Players like [him] are the reason for so many VMI second-half comebacks.” John read that and said. “Yo, Dick, players like him are the reason we’re behind at halftime.”

Ever the realist, John toned down my writing and taught me to love linemen. I can hear him now: “It isn’t the VMI Spirit that wins games. It’s the beef up front.”

Such anecdotes flood Cameron Hall tonight as we all recall personal exchanges with him. Outside of Eileen and possibly the rest of his family, how many know that for a spell his favorite country song was “El Paso” by Marty Robbins? There became something real Freudian about that after the 1957 team turned down the Sun Bowl to play in El Paso.



*The undefeated 1957 team in action
against the University of Richmond*

Eileen, ever the selfless strength and quiet influence, shaped the kinder, gentler John at home — along with the quintet John called his “three cheerleaders, a center and a fullback.” That would be Kathleen, Mary, Margaret, Steve and Peter. For their poise and demeanor, the McKenna kids were the envy of every parent in Lexington.

For many years Eileen got John to relax on Thursday evenings in season with an uncompetitive hand of bridge with their good friends, Tina and Bob Jeffrey. Of course, everything else John did during the week put the capital P into Preparation for the upcoming game. For example, I had three special jobs for him on road trips:

- Find a blood-and-guts war movie for the team to see on Friday night — preferably John Wayne, but Gregory Peck in *Pork Chop Hill* would do.
- Locate the nearest Catholic church and find out the times for Mass.
- Make sure that no one tried to serve us colon cloggers at breakfast. (Doughnuts, for the benefit of you ladies.)

And woe to the dining room manager who failed to follow John’s advance menu instructions, and I mean *precisely*. Example: “Our contract calls for a cup of soup, not a bowl. Take this back and serve it in a cup!”

Attention to detail — that’s what he taught us all. Perfection, or as close as we could come to it, on and off the field, was the slim margin he needed to win. Look at all those close scores in the winning years. It wasn’t always talent, and certainly never VMI’s depth. It was focus and commitment. It was skill and determination. And the pre-game dressing room wasn’t for inspirational pep talks. Herb Patchin, the longtime Keydet athletic trainer, called it communion time, when “John

communed with the team.” And Coach never forgot the text of his sermon, the last-minute rules he drilled into his men before they took the field.

Quote: “Be a 100 percenter all the time. On defense do your job – hit the man you are on. Remember that a blocked punt can be advanced by either side. Be alert for fumbles, get that loose ball. Keep the blocker off your legs. Huddle discipline is absolute, no one but the quarterback talks! Cover kickoffs hard, stay in your own lane. Fire out on blocks, keep your feet moving. Point out your man on punts – you *must* get the kick away.”



Herb Patchin, 1961



ELL, IT ALL COMES BACK on a night like this, doesn't it? John's dapper dress on game days, his businessman's hat. Herb's old black satchel and the smell of his training room. Henry Johnson, the equipment manager, God bless him, washing the game-day uniforms. Tom Joynes, sports publicist and later VMI athletic director, one of the funniest men ever, laughing and telling the latest hilarious story about Doc Carroll, the irascible, tobacco-chewing biology professor. Quite a few of John McKenna's star football players became physicians, and I dare say most of them were biology majors in Doc Carroll's classroom.



Doc Carroll

What a gift of perspective the great Mr. Patchin had. Once a Sportsmen Club supporter was distraught

because Coach refused to devote one of our precious few scholarships to a certain 6' 8", 240-pound prospect – big kid but not a player in John's book. So the alum complains to Patchin, who set him straight in classic Patchin style. “Let's put it this way,” Herb told him, “I've got 10 fingers but that doesn't mean I can play the piano.”

If I close my eyes I see a totally remarkable picture of the VMI sideline during most of Coach

McKenna's 13 seasons. Army had a lonesome end, VMI had a lonesome coach. There wasn't an assistant coach in sight, much less a raft of offensive and defensive coordinators and position and special teams coaches. During my time here, John's had only two full-time assistants. Clark King would be up in the press box on the phone to the bench; later he became head of the physical education department. And Vito Ragazzo, succeeded in the later years by Bo Sherman, would always be away scouting next week's opponent. In 1966 Vito succeeded John McKenna as head football coach.

Of course, the Rats would be playing somewhere else for Colonel Sam Heflin, professor of physics and Rat coach for 35 years, or later for Charley (Hi Fi) McGinnis. Meanwhile, Louis F. (Weenie) Miller and Chuck Noe before him, would be scouting an opponent two weeks in advance, at least until they had to start coaching basketball. Thus we had to get to the final Thanksgiving Day game against the Hokies before the full staff could join Coach McKenna on the sideline. Only in his final years was John awarded the luxury of a third full-time assistant, allowing coaches like Richard Bell and eventually Dick Harmison to join him. But mostly for nine games a year, the sideline was an unforgettable sight for me – just Herb and the team physician, Dr. Martin D. Delaney, on one end of our bench, with maybe trainer Fred Kelley and a cadet manager or two – and you players. And then there would be the solitary figure of Coach McKenna, standing in front of you – standing, I can say in retrospect, like a stone wall.



S. M. Heflin, 1965

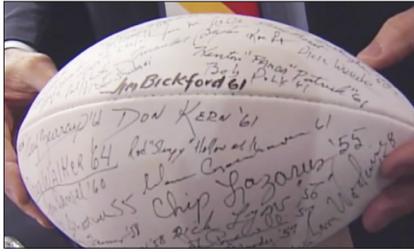
THE BONB (CADET YEARBOOK)



Coaching staff, 1959: McKenna, McGinnis, King, Miller, Ragazzo

ROCKBRIDGE IN 733 WIGNETTES

Sportswriters throughout the South exalted him as a coaching genius and a consummate gentleman. They called him “scholarly” because in interviews, this Villanova philo-



Spheroid signed by McKenna's players

sophy major and English minor sometimes used words or phrases they'd never heard. He might occasionally send them to dictionaries, as when he would refer to a football as a “prolate spheroid.” As the newspaper reporters say, John was good copy, because his words mattered and were easy to quote.

Indeed, I believe they admired him most for his integrity and because they understood what John McKenna meant to college football nationally in the '50s and '60s. The great writers “got it” — that he was nearly peerless in his profession.

His success with limited resources carried the very image of the gallant New Market charge — the very image of the Virginia Military Institute.



AND SO WE who are assembled here tonight, each of us bearing the McKenna imprint in our lives, grope for manly words to tell him how much he means to us . . . how much we and the Institute treasure him. John, surely it is one of the greatest honors of my life to be asked to reminisce tonight about your influence and about what it was like in an era of struggle, yes, but consistent triumph for VMI football.

None of us would have articulated it this way 45 years ago, or perhaps even thought it, but Coach, you've earned the respect, and this collective lump in our throats. There is only one word to sum up the feeling for you in this room tonight. It is love.