

# Death, legacy of former Oxford student Bobby Holcomb

By Edward Brown

editor-in-chief

On top of a little hill in the Saint Peters Cemetery of Oxford, MS. sits a grave marker, accompanied by a miniature statue of a football player. The marker reads, "His fearless buoyant youth will always live, revealing love and truth and radiant joy."

Bobby Holcomb was born on May 21, 1932 and grew up in Oxford, attending and playing football for University High School. Tragedy struck in early Oct. of 1951 when, during a football game, Holcomb suffered a fatal injury. In an interview with HottyToddy.com writer John Cofield in 2017, former friend, teammate and well-known Oxfordian Angelo Mistilis recalled the incident.



Courtesy of Frances Abernathy  
Bobby Holcomb, Nov. 14, 1950.

"We were playing Amory, and one of their boys with the ball got turned around and Bobby slammed into his back, head first, with all he had," Mistilis said.

"The sound of it was terrible, and everyone stopped and looked. Within moments, the coaches and refs knew there was a tragedy unfolding. You could have heard a pin drop; the game didn't matter."

Holcomb passed away later that night in the hospital on Oct. 12, 1951. He was 19 years old.

"In the small hours, the high school held a vigil at the hospital when, with the doctors who had been back there knowing, the town was told at around 2:00 in the morning to go home and get some rest," Mistilis said. "I awoke to Mother sitting on the edge of the bed crying. Bobby had died in the night."

The undefeated University High School Colonels played Amory High School on that fateful night, in a game that was crucial to win the Little Ten Conference. Holcomb was the co-captain of the Colonels. On Oct. 18, 1951, the Oxford Eagle published an article in remembrance of Holcomb's life.

"Football was Bobby's way of expressing himself," the Eagle said. "Physical courage can be a beautiful thing in itself. Bobby was smaller than average and he had to play harder. He loved the acclaim of the crowd; he loved 'being somebody' as the star back and the co-captain of the UHS Colonels."

Holcomb's tragic death shocked the small community and town of Oxford at the time.

"Over the week-end, business and community affairs slowed down to a standstill while we attempted to comprehend the tragedy that had struck,"

the Eagle said. "Youth was shocked at the actuality that one of their friends could be taken away so quickly. To the majority of our children, this was their first experience with the tragedy of death."

With the sadness and mourning that came with Holcomb's death, his peers and community were also able to celebrate his memory.

"Quiet, dependable, respectful to his elders, he was loved by every one of the high school youngsters who he, in turn, respected so much," the Eagle said. "So in his shortened life he contributed more and accomplished more than will be contributed or accomplished by the great majority of men who live to three score and ten."

In remembrance of Holcomb's life and tragic passing on the field, the football field at Oxford was named Bobby Holcomb Field. In addition, on Oct. 19, 2001, his classmates dedicated a plaque at Bobby Holcomb Field to remember him, as well as let others know of his story.

"As a community, we have been brought closer together by the mutual loss," the Eagle said. "Bobby has formed a bond between us that can never be broken."

