

“The Joey Robinson Legacy: Building More Than a Program”



Coach Robinson celebrating success on the field.

By Cougar Touchdown Club

BURNSVILLE — The Yancey County community came together as one on Saturday, May 10, gathering to celebrate a man whose impact extended far beyond the football field. After 23 years as head coach at Mountain Heritage High School, Joey Robinson announced his retirement following the 2024 football season, but his legacy is certain to continue to shape the community for generations to come. Known for his uncompromising faith, remarkable vision, and unwavering commitment, Robinson embodied the rare leader who changed the culture of the Yancey County community for the better in many ways.

Early Growing Pains

When Robinson first arrived at Mountain Heritage High School in 1998 following stints at Mitchell High School and a year at Unimin Corporation, few could have predicted the transformation that would follow. His early years tested his resolve and vision, winning only one game and dropping 21 in his first two seasons, including two winless campaigns in his first five years. The path was not always easy for Coach Rob.

Early Career Record (2002-2006):

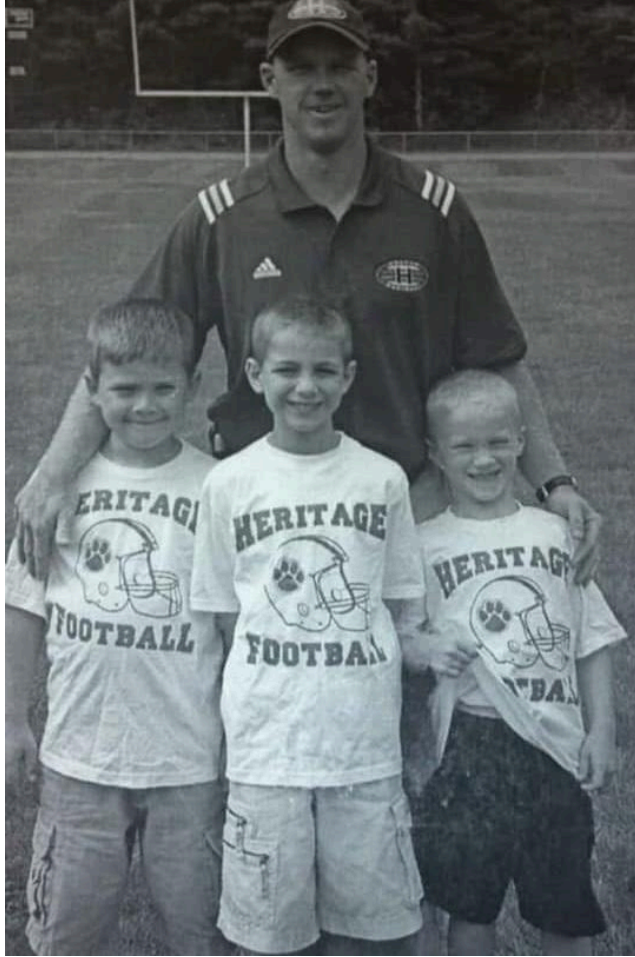
- 2002: 0-11, 0-8 in conference
- 2003: 1-10, 0-8 in conference
- 2004: 3-8, 2-6 in conference
- 2005: 4-8, 1-5 in conference
- 2006: 0-11, 0-6 in conference

First five years: 8-48 overall record, 3-33 conference record

Where others might have seen failure, however, Robinson saw opportunity. "Joey saw light at the end of the tunnel," Robinson's longtime assistant varsity coach and JV head coach Ronnie Randolph recalled. Robinson's unwavering vision, grounded in faith and family, sustained him through those challenging early seasons, laying a foundation for an era of success rarely experienced in North Carolina high school football.

A Foundation of Character

Above all, Robinson has remained steadfastly a man of conviction and faith, of doing the right thing, and someone whose principles are founded in service and valuing others. Those who know Joey best understand that his beliefs and values, instilled during his youth, formed the bedrock of everything he did. His sister, Sarah Virnelson, Joey's parents, as well as sons, Trevor and Trey, provided crucial support during the difficult early years of coaching the Cougars, allowing him to become the man he is today.



Coach Robinson, Jake, Trevor, and Trey in the early years.

What distinguishes Robinson isn't just his coaching acumen, but his willingness to handle any task, no matter how small. As much or more striking than his ability with Xs and Os has been his genuine humility—a quality increasingly rare in competitive athletics and society as a whole. "Joey is a humble person, selfless and doesn't crave the center of attention," new head coach and longtime varsity assistant Jered Pope shared. "He's the first to acknowledge people around him and praise them as opposed to self." When victories came, Robinson invariably redirected acclaim to his players and assistants. Yet when the team struggled, he was the first to step forward and shoulder the responsibility. This servant leadership approach resonated with players, fellow coaches, and the community alike. "For Joey, no job was too small. He cleaned toilets, prepared fields, and every task required in between, exemplifying leadership by example," noted Pope.

Robinson's indelible mark left on the high school and Yancey County community is unmistakable. Although he isn't perfect, authenticity is a hallmark that Robinson exhibited to whomever he encounters, whether to impressionable students on a field or in the classroom, or whether a parent or peer. "I'm a better man for my years spent with Joey. He provided inspiration to me, to his coaching staff and to the Mountain Heritage family," former Mountain Heritage principal Kevin Huskins said. "All of them would tell you they are better people today because of Joey and have the ultimate respect for him. His character and faith are unquestioned."

Robinson's authenticity sets him apart. "He is the definition of 'authentic.' Joey's authenticity is uncommon," current head JV coach Wade Shehan explained. "Many might aspire for that work ethic and commitment, but his is lived and it's real, which is incorporated through his faith. As a leader Coach Robinson always held himself accountable above all."

Building the Vision

When Robinson first approached MHHS Athletic Director and head football coach Pete Peterson in 1999 about starting a free youth football camp, he was laying the groundwork for something much bigger. He envisioned expanding the youth league beyond just fifth and sixth graders to include third and fourth graders, creating multiple teams in each age group.



Coaches Robinson, Jered Pope, and high school players assisting youngsters in flag football during the annual Cougar football camp.

But Robinson didn't just draw up an idea then delegate these responsibilities; he immersed himself in every aspect. He raised money for equipment, collected admission at the gate prior to the start of home games, officiated the youth games, and even sold concessions at the games during halftime. This hands-on approach exemplified the vision that would eventually transform Mountain Heritage football.

The youth program became the cornerstone of his strategy. By 2007, the first wave of players who had started in the youth league as second and third graders were entering high school as freshmen and sophomores. A pattern of consistency began to emerge. While Mountain Heritage had previously aspired merely to be competitive within their conference, Robinson's vision extended further—to becoming a state-recognized program.

His system wasn't rigid. Robinson displayed remarkable adaptability, evolving his offensive schemes to match the talent available. Starting with a double-wing formation under center, he transitioned to a double-wing shotgun formation in 2007, eventually incorporating triple-option elements to the formidable power game by 2014-15, creating an unpredictable attack that opponents struggled to counter. Defensively he was a true believer in the shade 50 until later converting to a 3-5 scheme to better defend modern offenses.

The Breakthrough

The seasons of 2007 through 2009 marked turning points in the MHHS program. "2007-2009 was the establishment of the program, but it was also where he wanted to see the program as a regional and state champion contender," recalled Randolph. The feeder programs from the youth league and middle schools were taking effect. After beginning the 2009 season 3-2 with consecutive losses to Erwin and Hendersonville, the Cougars made the playoffs and embarked on a remarkable run that culminated in facing powerhouse Tarboro for the state championship. This team represented the first full class of players who had progressed through Robinson's youth system from their earliest days.

Program Establishment Period (2007-2009):

- 2007: 4-8, 2-4 in conference
- 2008: 11-3, 5-1 in conference, Notable Players: Jesse Ballew (RB, NC Preps 2A All State), Zach Howell (DE, NC Preps 2A All State)
- 2009: 13-3, 6-1 in conference, Asheville Citizens Times-WNC Coach of the Year, WHC Coach of the Year, WHC Championship, 2A Western Regional Championship, 2A State Championship Runner-Up, Notable Players: Casey Randolph (RB, AP All State and NC Preps 2A Player of the Year), Taylor Fender (OL, NC Preps 2A All State and NC East vs West All Star)

The program Robinson built wasn't just about winning football games—though he certainly did plenty of that. It was about developing young men of character. "He had an impact on every kid in the school during his tenure, more than just football players," Huskins said. Robinson's focus remained on building beyond football, using it as a vessel to help build productive young men who would grow to be good husbands and fathers. To this day, Robinson desires for his players

to be positive contributors to their communities and he loves each and everyone of them unabashedly.



Coaches Robinson and Joe Bell strategizing with members of the 2009 2A State Championship Runner-up team.

A Decade of Excellence (2010-2020)

Following the breakthrough 2009 season, Robinson's program established itself as a perennial contender:

Middle Career Highlights:

- 2010: 10-3, 6-1 conference, WHC Coach of the Year, WHC Championship, Notable Player: Austin Rice (LB, NC Preps 2A All State)
- 2015: 11-3, 5-1 conference, WHC Coach of the Year, WHC Championship, East-West All-Star Game (West) Assistant Coach
- 2016: 11-2, 5-1 conference, WHC Coach of the Year, WHC Championship, Notable Players: Devan Woody (OL) and Adam Shuford (LB) - both NC Preps 2A All State
- 2017: 13-1, 5-0 conference, WHC Coach of the Year, WHC Championship, 2A Western Regional Runner-Up, Notable Players: Trey Robinson (QB) and Zeb Virnelson (OL) - both NC Preps 2A All State
- 2018: 11-2, 5-0 conference, WHC Coach of the Year, WHC Championship
- 2019: 11-2, 5-0 conference, WHC Coach of the Year, WHC Championship
- 2020: 7-2, 2-1 conference, 2A Western Regional Champions, 2A State Championship Runner-Up, Notable Player: Kason Hall (RB/LB, HighSchoolOT All State Third Team Two Way Players), Grady Brooks (NC East vs West All Star)

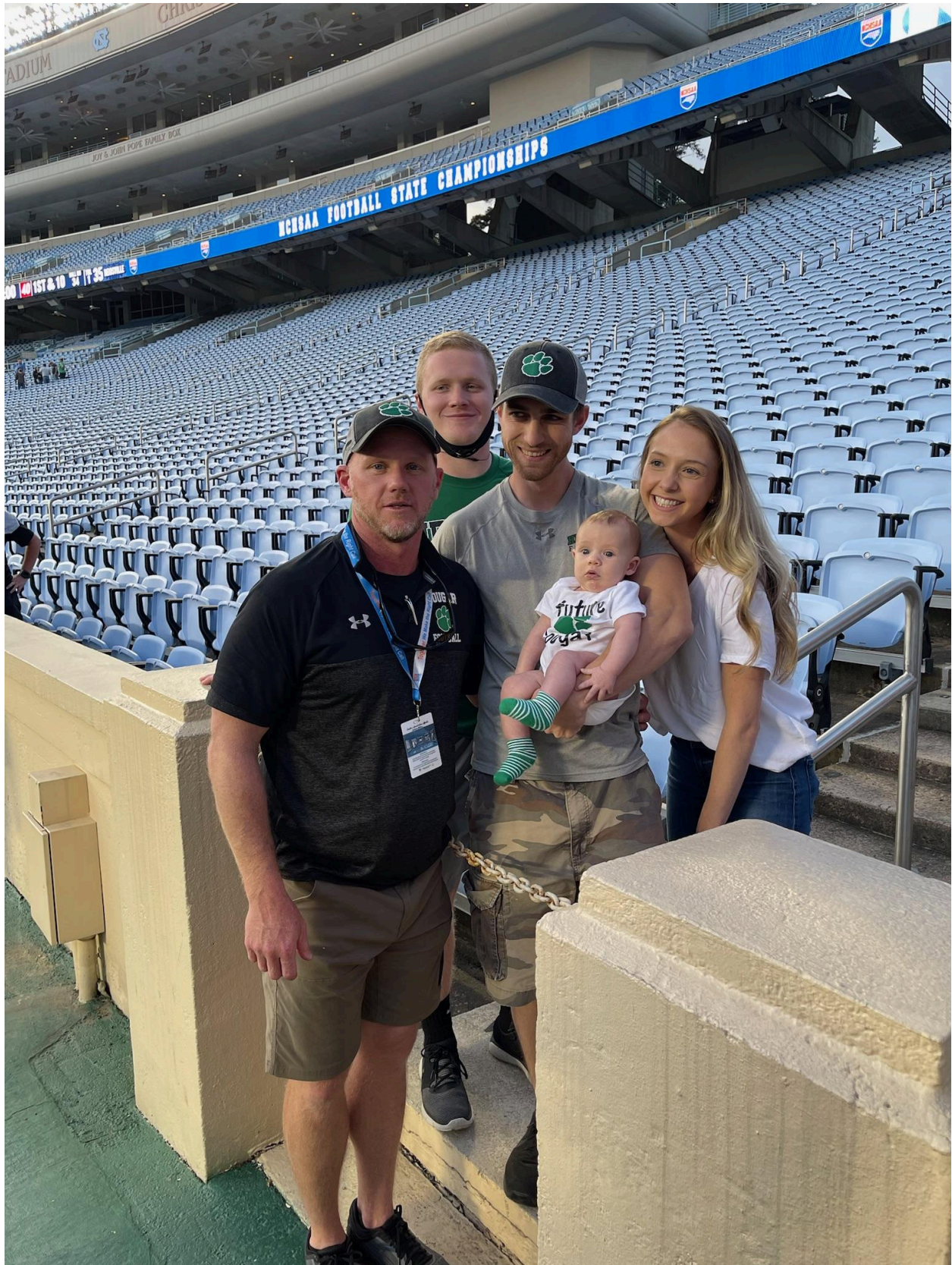


Coach Robinson addressing the 2010 team at halftime.

Championship Legacy

Robinson's teams achieved remarkable success at the State Championship playoff and Conference levels:

- *NCHSAA 2A State Championship Runner-Up: 2009, 2020*
- *NCHSAA 2A Western Regional Champions: 2009, 2020*
- *NCHSAA 1A Western Regional Runner-Up: 2024*
- *NCHSAA 2A Western Regional Runner-Up: 2017*
- *Career State Playoff Record: 28 wins, 18 losses*
- *Conference Championships (WHC): 2009, 2010, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2023, 2024*



Coach Robinson with sons Trevor and Trey, daughter-in-law Bailey, and grandson Riley at UNC Chapel Hill prior to the 2020 State Championship game.

Final Years and Career Totals

Robinson's final years at Mountain Heritage showed his continued excellence and ability to develop championship-caliber teams:

Final Seasons:

- 2021: 8-3, 5-1 conference
- 2022: 5-7, 4-2 conference, Shrine Bowl of the Carolinas (N.C.) Assistant Coach
- 2023: 10-3, 6-0 conference, WHC Coach of the Year, WHC Championship
- 2024: 12-1, 4-0 conference, WHC Coach of the Year, WHC Championship, 1A Western Regional Runner-Up, Notable Players: Brandon Quinn (QB, HighSchoolOT All State 3rd Team Offense), Cason Jones (HB/LB/RS, HighSchoolOT All State 1st Team Two Way Players), Lawson Higgins (NC East vs West All Star)



Coaches Robinson, Pope, and Britt Burseson intensely awaiting the outcome of a play during the 2024 playoffs at EL Briggs Stadium.

23-Year Career Totals:

- Overall Record: 166-115 (.59 winning percentage)
- Conference Record: 80-60 (.57 winning percentage)

Final 18-Year Totals:

- Overall Record: 158-67 (.70 winning percentage)

- *Conference Record: 77-27 (.74 winning percentage)*
- *9 (WHC Championships)*
- *1 (2A Western Regional Runner-Up)*
- *1 (1A Western Regional Runner-Up)*
- *2 (2A Western Regional Championships)*
- *2 (2A State Championship Runner-Up)*
- *9-time WHC Coach of the Year*
- *1-time WNC Coach of the Year*

Lasting Impact

Perhaps the most telling sign of Robinson's influence is how many of his former players have followed in his footsteps. Numerous youth league coaches are Robinson alumni, carrying forward his methods and values. Two former players, Britt Burleson and Jake Virnelson, are currently coaching at MHHS and one former player, Matthew Kardulis, serves as an assistant coach at Kansas State after stints at Emory & Henry, Campbell and Virginia Tech. "When the players complete the high school program, they have been well prepared with his methods and systems, understanding the commitment needed to maintain the program," said Randolph.



Coaches Robinson and Pope along with coach Pope's daughter Addie visiting, former player and current assistant coach at Kansas State, Matthew Kardulis during his playing days at Emory & Henry.

Robinson's approach to success and failure leaves an unmistakable mark on those around him. He created a culture where accountability wasn't just expected—it was modeled from the top.

"He would give credit for the man he is today to his Savior, family, faith leaders, work family, former coaches, and former teachers" noted Shehan, highlighting how, even in discussing his own achievements, Robinson consistently directed attention away from himself. This selfless leadership style fostered deep loyalty among his staff and players, who witnessed firsthand a man who practiced what he preached about humility, dedication, loyalty, integrity, and hard work.



Coach Robinson and the 2023 team, fellowshiping with Crossfire Ministries founders Randy Shepherd and Jamie Johnson in the Dr Chapman Field House.

As the sun sets on Robinson's remarkable coaching career, the light he kindled continues to shine brightly across the mountains of Yancey County, illuminating a path forward for all who follow in his footsteps. Robinson's influence extends beyond Mountain Heritage and beyond county borders. Coaches across North Carolina have sought his counsel, respecting his wisdom and approach. One assistant, Brandon Allen, went on to head coaching jobs at Freedom, Tuscola, and North Buncombe, bringing Robinson's principles to new communities.



Coaches Robinson, Mike Houston (TC Roberson, Lenoir-Rhyne, Citadel, James Madison, and East Carolina), and Kenny Ford (Owen) enjoying good times.

Robinson's commitment to Mountain Heritage was all in, despite opportunities to leave for other coaching jobs with higher pay and better facilities along the way, and his dedication wasn't limited to football, as he invested in all athletic programs at Mountain Heritage during his tenure as Athletic Director. "No one put more hours into serving the kids and serving the school than Joey, putting in the time to make every sports team at the high school successful," Huskins recalls.

A Legacy That Endures

As Joey Robinson steps away from the program he built, he leaves behind not just a winning tradition but a blueprint for developing character. His legacy lives on at MHHS through longtime assistant and new head coach Jered Pope and through countless young men whose lives he helped shape. "As long as there are people in Yancey County who were touched by Joey, his legacy will thrive and remain," reflected Randolph. "And it will live beyond that as others who were affected by him continue to pass on his legacy, keeping that chain unbroken." Like a sourdough starter that continues to produce new batches of bread long after its creation, Robinson's influence will continue to grow and nourish the Burnsville community for generations to come.



Coach Robinson leaving the Ben Deyton Field at Mountain Heritage High School for the last time.

In a world that often celebrates flash over substance, Robinson has built something genuine and lasting at Mountain Heritage High School. His story isn't just about football—it's about how one person's faith, vision, and commitment to service can transform an entire community, one young life at a time.

Photos by: Keith McCurry, (welcome to the pit), Jessica Whitson Bryant (prints on the paw), David Phillips (Phillips photography), Asheville Citizens Times, and highschool OT