

**MEDIA INFORMATION**



**STAYING AHEAD  
of the POSSE**

**the BEN JOBE story**  
as told to and by **JOE FORMICHELLA**

**RIVER CITY PUBLISHING - MARCH 2008**

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## **STAYING AHEAD OF THE POSSE:**

### **The BEN JOBE Story**

**as told to and by JOE FORMICHELLA**

Ben Jobe is not afraid of starting fires. For kindling he chooses words and deeply personal, historically significant stories. *Staying Ahead of the Posse: The Ben Jobe Story* is history in the flesh, the history of basketball and the Civil Rights Movement, of desegregation and economic exploitation, of HBCUs and the NCAA, of African independence and the modern-day plantation that is the American sports industry. Ben's life—forty-some years of coaching, teaching, nurturing, and mentoring—intersected with and was influenced by all of those developments. And despite a self-described lifetime of “staying ahead of the posse,” he's now ready to take a stand, tell his story, and in the process put a torch to what he considers a few myths, the myth of “integration,” the myth of a “benevolent” NCAA, among many others. Provocative and inspiring both on the fields of play and in the trenches of life, Ben's approach is one which, if followed, could make winners of us all.

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*This press kit contains:*

Author Biographies

Portrait of Ben Jobe by artist Kevin D'Amico

An exclusive interview with Ben Jobe, conducted by Joe Formichella

A 5-page excerpt from *Staying Ahead of the Posse*

River City Publishing contact information

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**STAYING AHEAD OF THE POSSE: The Ben Jobe Story  
as told to and by Joe Formichella**

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***Author Biographies:***

**Ben Jobe**, one generation removed from slavery, was born in Little Hope, Tennessee, in 1933. A 1956 graduate of Fisk University, he spent forty-five years coaching at more than a dozen schools in several different states across two continents, piling up over five hundred victories in the process. *Staying Ahead of the Posse* represents both his life story and his life philosophy.

**Joe Formichella** is a Hackney Literary Award winner and Pushcart Prize nominee whose work has appeared in *Grassland Review*, *Red Bluff Review*, and anthologized in *Stories from the Blue Moon Café II* and *Climbing Mt. Cheaha: Emerging Alabama Authors*. He is the author of a novel, *The Wreck of the Twilight Limited*, and two works of nonfiction: *Here's to You, Jackie Robinson*, an account of the Prichard Mohawks, an amateur baseball team formed in the 1950s, and *Murder Creek: The "Unfortunate Incident" of Annie Jean Barnes*, about the mysterious 1966 death of a young woman from Brewton, Alabama. He lives in Fairhope, Alabama, in the Waterhole Branch Arts Commune.



BEN JOBE

*Portrait by Kevin D'Amico*

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**Interview with Ben Jobe**  
**Conducted by Joe Formichella, January 2008:**

**JF: When we first started talking about this project, you were a little reluctant to tell your story. Why is that?**

Ben: To be honest with you, I didn't think anybody would be interested in what I had to say. If I had been someone like John B. McLendon, that'd be another story, but I'm not. I know what he went through, and it's only because of him that I'm here talking at all, but I'm not him. And I've been black long enough to know—to think, at least—that black people don't want to hear stories like this, don't want to know what's really going on.

**JF: Why the hesitation? Are you finding that not to be true?**

Ben: My thinking wasn't true. Once we got into it, once I saw the rough cut of the movie [*Black Magic*] I began to see the need for the community to hear this story. There's so much naiveté about the NC2A and how the system really works, I now think—I am certain—that the story has to be told, whether anyone wants to hear it or not.

**JF: How about your peers, how have they reacted?**

Ben: [laughs] Not a lot of them know the details of what's in the book, yet. The ones that do, they show a definite interest—it's not anything they would do themselves, but they're *definitely* interested.

**JF: Why wouldn't they?**

Ben: They're afraid. They got too much to lose, or so they think. I suppose I felt the same way at some point, but I say to them: Look at Jim Brown, he never lost anything, and he was always outspoken, always causing trouble, and that's good. We need more Jim Browns, fewer Michael Jordans, if we're going to keep the powerbrokers from owning us.

**JF: Then you're not afraid?**

Ben: What have I got to be afraid of? The NC2A? Like I said, I'll start the fires, and let *them* put them out. Did I tell you that I was mentioned at their meetings up in Nashville last week [mid-January, 2008]? They had a panel about the status of black schools, had Willis Reed and Doug Williams on it—great guys, phenomenal athletes—but what do they know about the NCAA? Anyway, somehow my name came up as someone who “might be able to contribute to the discussion.” Of course, [NCAA] Director Brand doesn't know about the book.

**JF: Does that mean you regret coming down so hard on them?**

Ben: Oh, no. Not at all. I may not have been hard enough. I'm going to be seventy-five years old next month. This may be my last chance.

**JF: That brings up another thing I wanted to ask you. In the book you talked about how you always asked players who came to you the four Ws, Who are you? What are you? Why are you here? And where are you going? I'm wondering how you would answer those questions, how you would have answered them in the 50s, say, and how you would answer them today?**

Ben: In the 50s? I wouldn't have had a clue. I wouldn't have been able to answer any of them, except maybe my name. I was just existing. I take that back. Once I became a Fiskite, I had the *ability* to answer those questions. My life started at Fisk. I learned who I was at Fisk, only because I was around people, other students, the faculty, the coaches, who knew who *they* were. That's the thing about today's athletes and the black colleges: you can't take a ghetto kid and nurture and mentor him at some place like Vanderbilt like you can at Tennessee State. They can't do it. They don't know how. It's not their fault, but they don't know how. That's why we need stronger black colleges and universities, why the NC2A needs to stop chewing kids up and spitting them out, needs to start giving back to the community.

**JF: And today?**

Ben: Today? I'm still asking the questions, still expanding the questions. I ask kids today: Why can't you play forty minutes without getting fatigued? I ask them: What's a hero? I get so bothered by this hero business. Barry Bonds? He's not a hero. He's an entertainer. Heroes are the kids over in Iraq getting their legs blown off. Heroes are the cops who bust in the door and keep your father from shooting your mother. Those are heroes. So I keep expanding the "exam." Avery Johnson inspired me to do that—he was the only kid who could ever answer the four Ws, when I first met him, back in 1986. I want to make it more meaningful, make kids think about it. They still can't answer, just like I couldn't. I don't criticize them for that, but I do encourage them to think about it, to find out a way to discover those answers.

**JF: And you? How would you answer them today?**

Ben: Well, I guess I know who I am, and what I am; not much changing that now, is there. Why am I here? There should only ever be one answer to that. I learned it from Avery, but it should be everyone's answer: to serve mankind. Where am I going? Beside the obvious, I think that answer is always changing, should always change. I had no idea we'd be having this discussion today, just a couple of years ago. So long as you know why you're here, so long as you're trying to serve mankind, I believe God puts people in your path to help you do that, like he put Dan Klores [director of *Black Magic*], and then Doc Newman [of River City Publishing] in my path.

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**The opening passage of**  
***STAYING AHEAD OF THE POSSE: The BEN JOBE Story***  
**as told to and by JOE FORMICHELLA**  
**Due late March 2008 from River City Publishing**

The first time Ben Jobe mentions the phrase, “staying ahead of the posse,” he’s talking about his tenure at South Carolina State University. That stint, from 1968 to 1973, is emblematic of so very much of Ben’s story. He started with nothing. Through guile, savvy, determination, and a sound philosophy, he built a powerhouse. And then he left, on his own terms, and by his own admission, *staying ahead of the posse*.

“When I got to Orangeburg, we had no uniforms, no balls, and no players.” When the previous coach departed, he had taken his best players with him to Alabama State. “I went out to the football field, got Willie Great, two others, and that’s all I really needed.” Jobe claims with three skilled role players he can put together a winning basketball program. “Those other two guys, they could be selling popcorn on the sidelines, and you can still win games.”

As much as that theory was going to be tested at State, 1968 was as pivotal a year for the thirty-five-year-old coach—personally, professionally, and culturally—as it was for the country, and the world. Within the cauldron of assassinations and riots, the rise of the Black Power movement, the escalating war in Vietnam, violent protests, desertions, drop-outs—all of which were driving young black men toward one battlefield or another, anywhere but college campuses—Jobe inherited an essentially bankrupt basketball program at one of the oldest and proudest Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

He wasn’t alone, thankfully. He had his recent bride Regina by his side—the woman to whom he’s now been married to for thirty-eight years, and counting. And he had his faith. And he had unshakeable belief in his system, a system learned from John B. McLendon, Jr., the “father of black basketball,” one of the most significant figures of the past century, for all of basketball, and for social justice, and racial equality. (Take Jackie Robinson, Martin Luther King Jr., and John Wooden—together—and you come up with something close to John McLendon.)

“That’s a big reason why I want to do this,” Jobe says, explaining his motivations for telling his story. “Not enough people know about coach Mac.”

However true that might be, it’s a typical ploy of Ben’s—at one and the same time he’ll tell you that he’s worked hard to stay out of the limelight. “I can walk down this street and nobody knows who I am.” And then he’ll call himself an enigma, suggesting that, because of his “varied experiences,” it’s difficult to get to know him. The absolute truth, of course, is somewhere in the middle. For now, back in Orangeburg, circa 1968: Jobe’s team of three football players and two popcorn salesmen won twenty-one straight games at one point on their way to a conference championship and five straight winning seasons.

“You’d think that’d be a good thing,” he says, and will often say over the course of the story. “It’s not. There’s only one thing worse than losing, *losing*,” he explains. “That’s winning, *winning*.”

He calls that dilemma the ‘crabs in a barrel syndrome’, or the ‘Willie Lynch legacy.’ “People are most comfortable with mediocrity. I tell people all the time, don’t be the worst, but don’t be the best, either. Be mediocre,” he says, with a beguiling grin.

That’s not what Dr. King said. He said, “be the best street sweeper you can be.”

“Yes, but keep in mind,” Ben answers, “he failed. There’s still flesh peddling going on.” But, “That’s another story.” Ben wants to stay with South Carolina State University, wants to illustrate what he means by “staying ahead of the posse.”

“People are all the time asking me, *When do you know it’s time to go?*” a reasonable question of a man who’d had more than a dozen different positions in a career spread out over forty-five years—though not once, he’s quick to point out, did he apply for a new job: “They always sought me.” While there are different contributing factors to each particular departure, there’s one general determinant for Jobe: the posse.

Take South Carolina State: he could have been content there. He immediately started winning, and kept winning. He produced five NAIA playoff teams, including finalists in 1970 and 1973. He was voted NAIA District VI coach of the year in 1968 and was a five-time Colleges of South Carolina coach of the year. The South Carolina House of Representatives commended his achievements on the court.

Additionally, he was in the South, which he knew best, living not too far from his family in Tennessee, or Regina’s in Alabama. He was working at a historically significant black

college—one of the “stubborn remnants of the curdled promises of Reconstruction.” Most importantly, he was a central figure in a movement—integrated collegiate basketball—that would push the South forward, pushing open doors to social justice and racial tolerance, something McLendon had always believed, preached, fought for throughout his entire career—as a university student during the 1930s, a college and then professional coach across the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, and as an author and international spokesman for the game.

When John McLendon, then head coach at what was called the North Carolina College for Negroes, first petitioned the NCAA for integrated post-season tournament participation in 1948, he was told by the executive secretary of the NCAA that “the quality of competition at the present time [among black schools] is not equal to tournament caliber.” Not one to be deterred, or get angry, over the next five of years—years of secret biracial games, just to prove his point—and with the courage and persistence of a handful of men (McLendon, Mack Greene, and Harry Jefferson, principally), the NAIA was finally convinced to allow the participation of a black school in its championship tournament in 1953, years after professional baseball, football, basketball, even the military had already integrated.

But it took the NCAA, fast becoming (by design, according to Ben) the principal player in amateur athletics, another seventeen years to get around to sanctioning integrated regular season competitions in the South. Ben was intimately involved in that change, remembers it well.

1970. Boone, North Carolina. Jim Jones, Athletic Director at Appalachia State and NCAA representative, gathered all the coaches from the NAIA district’s black schools, as well as the coaches from the smaller NAIA white schools, from North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. The NCAA was proposing a division II tier to their organization, made up of traditionally black schools and smaller white ones, and they wanted the competition to be inclusive. “Are you ready to integrate?” the coaches were asked.

“What a terrible word,” Ben says. “It doesn’t exist, integration. It’s a myth. I remember the first time I heard that word,” he says. “But that’s another story,” what was to become a coda of Ben’s tale—fits and starts, detours, lengthy digressions, and non sequiturs. It can be hard to keep up with, at times, and you can never be sure if it’s the result of his functioning so many years as a playmaker in general or if it’s part and parcel of Ben Jobe in particular. One thing is certain: just as in his playing heyday, the end result is almost always a goal, in and of itself.

“The white coaches hesitated,” he says. When Jones turned to the other side of the table, Ben spoke up. “I am.” The others followed.

Still, the white coaches hemmed and hawed, saying their schedules were already set, there were contractual agreements, etc.

“I’ll redo my whole schedule,” Ben piped in. “I’ll drop conference games if I have to, already scheduled conference games,” he said, “if that’s what it takes,” knowing it could mean his suspension.

“We’re doing it this year,” Jones decreed, “Or else.”

And so they did, in no small part because Ben Jobe spoke truth to power, summoned fortitude in the face of risk. “Everybody knew it was a scam,” he says now. “We just hoped it would work out better than it has. ‘You’ll be stepchildren,’ Coach Mac told me when he heard about the agreement.” Still, it was the best hope to get the schools in the big dance, on the big stage, playing for the big bucks.

“The NCAA had conned the presidents of the black schools,” Ben says. They were told they’d be rubbing elbows with presidents from Michigan, Notre Dame, UCLA, and Kentucky. The division II scheme was a means to insure that hardly ever happened, but it did provide those schools—the Michigans and Notre Dames and UCLAs and Kentuckys—an opportunity to pad their schedule every year. “Don’t get me started on buying games,” Ben says. “That’s another story.”

It was a door. Not a very square, or equitable door, just the best door he’d seen yet. So why did he leave Orangeburg?

“You remember those football players?” he asks, by way of answering. “Turns out one of them was a quarterback, and one was a receiver. One day in practice, I don’t remember exactly when, I got the idea for what I called the long ball.” The quarterback would take the ball out on a possession change and throw it the length of the court. The receiver would sprint under the ball and catch it for an easy basket.

“You can’t really defend that,” he says. It worked like a charm, worked so well it wasn’t long before he started taking criticism, from the press, opposing coaches, who were called the tactic “ghetto ball,” “street ball,” etc. Drove him out of town. The five-time Colleges of South Carolina coach of the year quit coaching. “I don’t fight the system,” Ben says. “I move.” That’s what he means by staying ahead of the posse.

A decade later, Mike Krzyzewski at Duke utilized the same tactic in the NCAA tournament in Denver, his big man, Gminski, throwing the ball the length of the court. “They called him brilliant. You understanding yet?”

He took a job with Joe Dean as the Maryland representative for Converse, a company he says he worked for from 1949 to 2003—though he only collected one paycheck in all those years—because of Chuck Taylor’s loyalty to and support of black schools in general and John B. McLendon, Jr., in particular.

But then, a few months later, “Joe Dean says to me, ‘I got to fire you.’ And that’s when I met the Irishman,” one of the four life-changing moves in Ben Jobe’s long career, a life of success and frustration, anger and promise, failure and hope, providence and refusal. A life of great joy, greater passion, and little regret, Ben Jobe’s story, *Staying Ahead of the Posse*, is one for the ages, and for the moment.

This excerpt from *STAYING AHEAD OF THE POSSE*  
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Property of River City Publishing  
1719 Mulberry Street  
Montgomery AL 36106  
334-265-6753  
<http://www.rivercitypublishing.com>

Contact: [jgilbert@rivercitypublishing.com](mailto:jgilbert@rivercitypublishing.com)

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**RIVER CITY PUBLISHING**

**1719 Mulberry Street  
Montgomery AL 36106**

**Telephone: 334-265-6753**

**Toll Free: 877-408-7078**

**Fax: 334-265-8880**

**[www.rivercitypublishing.com](http://www.rivercitypublishing.com)**

Publisher:

Carolyn Newman

[Carolyn@rivercitypublishing.com](mailto:Carolyn@rivercitypublishing.com)

Editorial:

Jim Gilbert

[jgilbert@rivercitypublishing.com](mailto:jgilbert@rivercitypublishing.com)

Ordering:

Kip Curnutt

[kip@rivercitypublishing.com](mailto:kip@rivercitypublishing.com)

for Publicity:

[publicity@rivercitypublishing.com](mailto:publicity@rivercitypublishing.com)

For orders, contact your local bookstore, or visit our website for more information.

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