

# The Gil Thorp® Interview

For fifty years now America's Coach, Gil Thorp, has been coaching and counseling his charges at Milford High School, and a legion of fans, as the leading man in the longest running sports serial comic strip in history. To get a closer look at the icon who proclaims that "character development is my prime aim" sports talk radio host and WDIG play-by-play man Marty Moon recently sat down to interview the legendary coach and give readers a look behind the scenes.



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MM- Congratulations on your 50th. You don't look a day over 49!

GT- (chuckling) Thanks, Marty.

MM- Take us back to the beginning. What originally brought you to Milford High School?

GT- After finishing my time in the service I returned to the family farm in Windsor and began searching for a teaching and coaching opportunity.

MM- Wait a minute you were in the service?

GT- Correct Marty.

MM- What did you do? Kitchen Patrol?

GT- Good old Marty! Actually I was a fighter pilot.

MM- You've got to be joking!

GT- Sorry Marty but it's true.

MM- Hmmf. OK. Well, why Milford?

GT- Evidently Milford High School had been struggling for years with its athletic programs especially football. They had been winless the previous two seasons and the coach resigned. When I heard about the situation I contacted administration and applied for the position. I'm just grateful that the school board gave me the opportunity.

MM- So what qualified you to teach and coach at Milford?

GT- Well I majored in education and kinesiology at State and had been involved in some sports activities as well.

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MM- Like what?

GT- I played a little football, some baseball, and wrestled as well.

MM- Don't sandbag me Thorp. You were captain of the baseball team, an all-conference halfback on the football team, and a division wrestling champion. I'd say you were qualified.

GT- Why thank you Marty.

MM- All right. Once you got the job what was your biggest challenge?

GT- Getting upper classmen to try out for the football team.

MM- What are you talking about?

GT- At our initial varsity practice sessions we only had four juniors and three seniors try out for the team.

MM- Why?

GT- Well, the older boys were more interested in after school jobs to support their cars than in playing football for a perennial cellar dweller.

MM- So how did you solve the problem?

GT- A gifted athlete by the name of Bobby Watkins decided that participating in school activities like football was more important than having a car to impress girls. He became our quarterback and his success helped attract more upper classmen to the team and, in the last game of the season, they helped lead us to a victory over our arch rival, Valley Tech. Bobby went on to star at State and is now the owner and operator of *Camp Pinewood*, a boys camp that I used to manage during the summer. I'm proud of the type of man that Bobby turned out to be.

MM- That seems to be your credo, to develop character.

GT- At the risk of sounding corny, that's exactly what coaching is about, I want to win as much as the next guy but not at the expense of developing our boys into young men who grow up to be citizens we can be proud of.

MM- Alright, alright. Be careful you don't fall off your high horse.

GT- (Smiles wryly and gently shakes his head) I'll be careful, Marty.

MM- Speaking of character and star players, name some of the most memorable you've coached.

GT- Wow, that's a tough one. In football I would say Bubba Joe Tilwell, Daren McBride, Jimmy Nevins, Josh Sterling, Ox Hartly, Lonnie Baylor, Dean Dalton, Luke Bunkin, Bobby Watkins, Wally Lamb, and Brick House. In basketball it would be Clyde Bean, Ernie Fenton, Joel Frost, Rod Simmons, Curtis Wade, Lou Wassel, Jay J. Judd, and Billy Bunkin. Baseball would be Joe Sharky, Larry Cutter, Binky Peel, Joey Webb, Woody Willis, Jose Ardenes, Chip Jordan, Zip

Gust, and, of course, Elmer Vargas. I could go on but those boys, most now grown men with families of their own, stand out.

MM- Those are some great names from the past. A few are before my time in Milford but I can remember all of them. Fenton and Bean were an unstoppable combination on the court and Sharky could hit the ball a country mile. You got lucky with the Bunkin cousins moving to Milford to live with relatives and the same with Bubba Joe Tilwell when his old man was transferred to Milford.

GT- Like they say Marty, if you can't be good, be lucky.

MM- Let's take the bad with the good. Not every kid you coached turned out to be Wally Cleaver. Are there any players that you failed to develop their character?

GT- I won't single out any individuals but suffice it to say that I haven't always been able to achieve my objective of building character. When that happens it really eats at me.

MM- Do you see much of your old pal, Tod Andrews, who now coaches at Oakwood?

GT- We get together for a few rounds of golf in the summer and grab a lunch during coaching seminars but we're both pretty busy. He was a great assistant coach while he was at Milford and is an excellent head coach now.

MM- Does it bother you when you lose to him?

GT- Understanding that I'm not personally playing Tod when our teams meet, I don't feel any worse about losing a game to Oakwood than I do a game against Tech or any other Valley Conference opponent. They all feel bad.

MM- Remember back in '82 when the football team was winless? I'll bet that stung.

GT- Thanks for bringing back such a pleasant experience. If memory serves me correctly both you and Steve Wilcox, the booster club president at the time, tried to get me fired.

MM- Er, well you...um

GT- And our last game of the season got canceled...

MM- Whatever. If you had to pick the most memorable game from each sport, which would it be?

GT- Of course there have been many great contests over the years but in football I would have to say our season ending victory over undefeated Tech in my first year ranks right at the top. In basketball it would be the title game against Shelton when Billy Bunkin was able to rebound his own missed free throw attempt and then score the winning basket as time ran out. In baseball it

was Chip Jordan's no-hitter against Central that he had dedicated to his younger brother Timmy, who was recovering from leukemia.

MM- What about the greatest plays for each sport? Do any stand out?

GT- There has been hundreds of great plays over the years. To narrow it down to one per sport is difficult but I'll give it a try. In football it would be the game winning TD pass Daren McBride threw with his left hand (his passing hand was broken) to Andy Tabor against Tech after a botched snap on a field goal attempt. In basketball it would be Tony Rizzo's last second steal and pass to Jay J. Judd for the game winner against Salem in the state title game. Baseball has got to be the most unique: Bubba Joe Tilwell crashing through the left field fence while making a game saving catch against Madison.

MM- Was he hurt?

GT- No but the fence needed medical attention!

MM- What do you do to relax?

GT- I enjoy spending time with my family. Mimi and I like to play golf together and I work out whenever possible. When time permits I also like to read.

MM- Really? I'm surprised that you read anything besides a playbook. Which authors do you read?

GT- There are a couple of guys, Jack Berrill and Neal Rubin, who have written some very interesting and entertaining real-life stories that I can relate to.

MM- What's your favorite treat at *The Bucket*?

GT- These days I have to watch the calories but I still love the root beer floats!

MM- How about music. What's in your iPod?

GT- Believe or not I don't have an iPod. Music isn't a huge priority for me although I sometimes listen to an old tape my ex-assistant, Vince Packard, gave to me by a band called *Razor's Edge*.

MM- I remember Packard. Shaved head with a beard, right? Whatever happened to him?

GT- He married fellow faculty member Rita Minton and left teaching for a job with an industrial firm. I believe they live in Buffalo, NY now.

MM- Other colleagues of yours have moved on as well, including your old principal Myron Booth and ex-assistants Roy Gillen & Jon Dowd. What are they up to these days?

GT- Well, Myron is enjoying retirement. I see him occasionally at reunions. Roy is doing a great job as head basketball coach at Forest View and Jon is turning Bellaire's football program into a powerhouse.

MM- Have you ever thought about leaving MHS?

GT- No, not really. As you remember Powell College had recruited me to be their head football coach and while it was flattering the process reinforced why I love doing what I do.

MM- How about your ex-flame Holly Dobbs? Do you know what she's up to these days?

GT- I suspect you already know what she's doing Marty but I haven't spoken with Holly for years.

MM- Yeah, well after she married her agent I lost track of her but I heard she might be making a comeback on a reality show. Maybe she will return to MHS. Now that would spice things up!

GT- (Smiles and shakes his head) I'm sure *you* would it enjoy it, Marty.

MM- I understand there is new book, *Tales From The Bucket*, that has been published in honor of your milestone. What's the deal?

GT- All I know is that it chronicles various seasons and events from my career at MHS. I think you might be in it as well Marty!

MM- Alright, well that just about wraps it up. Anything profound you would like to say about your 50<sup>th</sup>?

GT- I would like to thank Myron Booth for believing in me when he hired me all those years ago and I would like to thank each and every student athlete that I have had the privilege of coaching. It has been an honor and one that look forward to continuing for many years to come. I would also like to thank all of you who stop by every day and spend a little of your time with us at Milford High. Your support is appreciated.



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