



Retiring East Mecklenburg coach Dick Williams is surrounded by some students in his

fourth-period physical education class. Williams has been at the school 31 years.

J. WES BOBBITT/Staff

Williams Looks Back At 31 Years

By **MIKE PURKEY**

Staff Writer

A story: **MAY 1, 1988**

A few years ago, exactly when is not important, a young man returned to his former high school to visit his old coach, a man named Dick Williams, a man who had much influence in his life. He didn't realize just how much until it was nearly too late.

For a handshake, he offered his left hand and an apology.

The young man explained by recounting a tragic tale. His squad had been wiped out in a Vietnam battle. Everyone had been killed. Everyone, that is, but him.

He lay in a daze, bathed in blood, a deafening drumbeat crumbling the inside of his head, which threatened to escape through his ears. He looked down in horror to the spot where his right hand should have been, and wished to God that he, too, were dead.

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Coach Williams Reflects On 31 Years

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As if a switch had cut the current, his head cleared and the echoes of his sound were replaced by his coach's words, uttered more than once as motivation on an athletic field.

"The easiest thing you can ever do in life," Dick Williams's voice said, "is quit."

The young man immediately rose and walked away.

Just walked away.

It has taken 31 years for Dick Williams to walk away from East Mecklenburg High. And when that time arrives with finality, he will be looking over his shoulder.

Not at what he has left behind, which is considerable. He is retiring this year from an institution that has evolved from a tiny 2A school to the largest high school in the state. From just three sports to 18, and three coaches to 23.

Now, he will sneak a glance at what else could have been.

The anticipation of one more athlete to teach, to advise, to encourage, to motivate, to baby-sit, to be proud of, to feel frustration toward, to console, to cheer, to berate, to develop, to harness, to let run free.

To care about.

That is Williams's job. There are better-paying professions and certainly those that offer better hours. Spending your days in a chilled, dank, smelly gym in February or on a sun-scorched field in the steamy August swelter doesn't come under most people's idea of a dream job.

But no occupation offers the rewards Williams believes he has stockpiled, his own investment portfolio.

You can't spend it, but neither can it be bought, because it has no price.

Being a coach is all Williams ever has done or wanted to do. And with the exception of the few times all of us wrestle with the course of our lives, he hasn't questioned his decision.

Williams, 60, has toiled 36 years in the business of teaching other people's children. Now it is time, he says, to "turn it over to the young bucks."

When the bell rings on the last day of school, when the physical education office door clanks shut and the key securely clicks the lock, Dick Williams won't have his regular job any more.

Coach, you got a minute?

mally do."

Williams endured the daylight-to-dusk hours, the winning, the losing, the joy, the frustration. He simply endured.

"You do so many things just because you love doing them," he said.

Coach, we have a position open on our staff...

East Mecklenburg had no coaches when Dick Williams came to Charlotte in 1957 from Catawba College.

No coaches, three sports. Williams was it. He signed on as the fifth football coach in five years, and also took on the baseball team. His first hire was Baker Hood, who still is at East, to run the basketball team.

He immediately added track to the program, and coached it for 17 years. Now, from an enrollment of 2,292, nearly 600 students com-

pete in athletics.

Williams was athletic director at East for 26 years, and has coached just about every sport.

He slowly whittled his duties away, leaving track in 1971 and giving up the athletic director's job in 1983. His only coaching chore this year is golf, a sport he loves to play.

But his reduction in schedule doesn't limit what he considers his real responsibility.

"You always influence somebody, whether it is good or bad," he said. "The thing I always thought about teaching and coaching is that (students) are going to copy what you do. 'I either want to be like him, or I don't want to be like him.' It's the opportunity to have been part of so many kids' lives.

"When you meet that guy on the street 10 years after he graduates and he says to his little boy, 'Son, I

want you to meet my coach.'"

That's the rub. To Williams coaching is more than a number game where the bottom line determines success. It's relationship. For every bad one, another good one comes along.

"Will I miss it? Yes. Every day. No."

Time. It's a currency that helps fuel an athletic economy, and there is never enough to go around.

"In this business, you do everything by the bell and the clock," Williams said. "It's time to do the things I want to do.

"All my life I have wanted to take a week off in October, go to the beach and just golf and fish. On the other way around. Just what ever strikes me."

Coach, it's time to turn the lights off.

Coach? Coach?

Organized chaos. Yes, it's a contradiction in terms, but an economical and accurate description of the condition of the office Williams, the physical education teacher, occupies this day.

Papers randomly find their place on the desk the same way leaves cover a lawn. Same goes for the walls. Posters, calendars, newspaper clippings and folksy sayings create a patchwork wall covering, a slapdash adornment to painted cinder block.

Nylon gym bags are piled against a bookcase and retrieved one at a time by a steady stream of students, all of whom pause for a word with coach Williams. Some get advice, whether they ask for it or not, some just say hello. But they all stop.

Organized chaos. It's a coach's schedule.

Stop and go. Home and away. Don't forget your uniform. Is everybody on the bus? Where's the equipment? Two minutes to kick-off. Fumble! We got any clean towels? Get a good pitch. Who's got the adhesive tape? Remember to get out of the blocks clean.

Williams tried to make sure his athletes got a good jump off the starting line — and not just on the playing field.

"You hope everybody comes to school for education," he said. "Athletics is just a supplement to that. Athletics gives pride for kids to do better than they might nor-

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