



LEAVING A LEGACY

Friends, family and teammates remember the life and accomplishments of Athenian icon Billy Henderson.

BY ALEXANDER ROBINSON
Sports staffer

On Feb. 14, former Clarke Central High School head varsity football coach Billy Henderson passed away in his home in Athens at the age of 89. Henderson, who served as the CCHS football coach for 23 years from 1972 to 1995, won a total of 222 games at CCHS and three football state championships over the course of his career.

Photo from the 1979 issue of the "Gladius"

"When I got home, he wasn't my coach anymore. He was simply my dad. We handled everything on the field. Everything he did on the field stayed on the field."

-- JOHNNY HENDERSON,
Billy Henderson's son

This record made Henderson one of the most successful high school coaches in Georgia football history, but to many, his legacy is much more profound.

To those who knew him best, Henderson was a mentor, teacher and optimist. To his granddaughter, Stephanie Brooks Hunt, Henderson was less a legend than he was an affectionate grandfather. Brooks Hunt spoke about her personal relationship

Above: READY TO LEAD: Former CCHS head football coach Billy Henderson poses for a photo at his desk for the 1979 "Gladius" yearbook. Paramount Consulting Group founder and CEO Tharon Johnson, a former player of Henderson's, reflected on Henderson's coaching style during the memorial service on Feb. 25. "One thing that Coach Henderson taught me as a player is always figure out how to persevere," Johnson said. "(He) always cared deeply about his players." **Below:** BATTLE STRATEGY: Former CCHS head football coach Billy Henderson instructs a player while on the sidelines during a game circa 1980. During Henderson's memorial service on Feb. 25, Johnny Henderson, Billy Henderson's son and former player, reflected on having a father as a coach. "Coming off the field, one time my daddy heard, 'At least we don't have to go home with him.' But you know what, when I got home, he wasn't my coach anymore. He was simply my dad," Johnny said. "We handled everything on the field. Everything he did on the field stayed on the field."





Above: ONE FOR ALL: Former CCHS head football coach Billy Henderson poses for a photo with the rest of the coaching staff for a Gladius yearbook issue circa 1980. Henderson's granddaughter, Stephanie Brooks Hunt, reflected on how he was able to balance his work and personal lives well. "He loved peaches, bananas, Nike, yellow legal pads and was interested in everyone," Hunt said. "He did everything he said he was going to do. He has pictures of his family covering the walls of his house, and savored quality time."

with Henderson at his memorial service on Feb. 24 at the Classic Center.

"He did everything he said he was going to do, and had pictures of his family covering the walls of his house. He savored quality time," Hunt said. "He was solid, deliberate, truthful and attentive -- a trooper and a missionary. (He was) thoughtful, earnest and punctual. He loved writing letters. Most endearing was his affection for his family. His affection for that love is demonstrated in the hundreds of letters he wrote over the years. He was always writing on his infamous yellow legal pad, and not for any other reason than to say, 'I love you.'"

Henderson's son, Johnny, once played on his father's team. At the memorial service, he recalled how his father managed to balance his work and family life.

"Coming off the field, one time my daddy heard, 'At least we don't have to go home with him,'" Johnny said. "But you know what, when I got home, he

he did on the field stayed on the field. I hope this really captures what he embodied. He always said, 'You have a choice every morning when you wake up. What kind of attitude will you embrace today?'"

Johnny was also thankful for the Athens YMCA, which kept his father in high spirits in his latter years.

"Probably the most significant part of my father's life was in his latter years was the YMCA," Johnny said. "I cannot begin to tell you the gratitude our family has to the YMCA of Athens. (They) literally added 10 years to his life, at least. He'd always say, 'I take all of these pills, but the YMCA is the best medicine I have.' I would take him into the Y in his wheelchair. He'd look at everybody in the hallway

and ask, 'Wanna race?' I thank the YMCA from the bottom of my heart."

"He did a lot of healing for the Athens community. I think our community as a whole owes a lot to Coach Henderson's ability to bring a sense of togetherness and focus. Football was just a tool that he used. It went way beyond the football field."

-- DR. JON WARD,
Clarke Central High School Athletic Director

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Above: GUIDING VISION: Former CCHS head football coach Billy Henderson instructs some of his players during a football game in the late 1970's. CCHS Athletic Director Jon Ward reflected on how he saw Henderson's coaching style as a model. "I guess the primary area that I try to emulate Coach Henderson is being positive and trying to provide opportunities for each person to succeed to their fullest potential," Ward said.

Current CCHS head football coach David Perno also saw Henderson as a paternal figure on and off the field, but one who helped him pursue a career in coaching.

"He became more of a father figure over the years," Perno said. "I had shoulder surgery after my junior season, so I couldn't practice that spring. He told me to coach the C-team. It used to be just (a job) for seniors, but he trusted me enough to do it my junior year. I then did it again my senior year. I knew at that time what I wanted to do just because I played for him and had technically worked for him at such a young age."

According to Perno, Henderson continues to serve as a coaching inspiration, as one who encour-

ages distinction.

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CCHS Athletic Director Jon Ward, who first met Henderson in 1986, says that he quickly became a lifelong friend who always saw the best in others.

"I consider Coach Henderson to have been a mentor and a friend," Ward said. "I think he had the ability to see the potential in every person, not just (an) athlete. He was able to give that person confidence to utilize their abilities to their fullest potential. He was the most positive person that I've ever encountered. He was extremely insightful as to how to handle people and how to motivate them."

Ward also says that one of Henderson's greatest accomplishments was helping ease the integration

of Clarke County after the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s.

"Coach Henderson came in the early '70s, and integration had (just) occurred within Clarke County. There was, from my understanding, a lot of tension," Ward said. "He did a lot of healing for the Athens community. I think our community as a whole owes a lot to Coach Henderson's ability to bring a sense of togetherness and focus. Football was just a tool that he used. It went way beyond the football field."

Paramount Consulting Group founder and CEO Tharon Johnson, a former player of Henderson's, agrees with Johnny's sentiments and remembers how Henderson remembered him long after he graduated from CCHS.

"You know, my mother still lives here in Athens," Johnson said. "She went to the YMCA every week to work out. She, all the time, would see Coach Henderson around town. She would say to Coach Henderson, 'I'm Tharon Johnson's mom--' He'd say, 'Oh I know Tharon! How's he doing? What's he up

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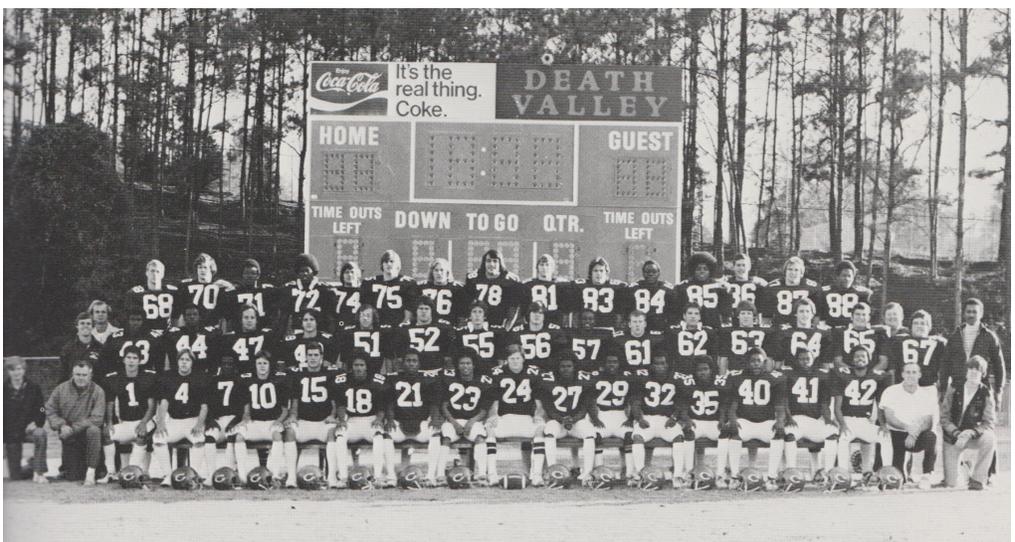
to? How's he treating his family?' She would always come back and tell me that he always cared deeply about his players."

Seleem Fathalla, a freshman who currently trains with the varsity football team, believes that Henderson's legacy will continue to thrive through the athletic programs of Clarke Central High School.

"He obviously meant a lot to our school. The stadium's named after him, (and) our coach right now, Coach Perno, was coached by him," Fathalla said. "I think the way Henderson coached stayed in our system, and his legacy will always live on through players and how we play. That's why Clarke Central is Clarke Central at football, because of him."



Above: TEAM EFFORTS: Former CCHS head football coach Billy Henderson (bottom right) poses for a group photo with the rest of the CCHS varsity football team. CCHS Athletic Director Jon Ward, who first met Henderson in the '80s, remembered how he had an innate ability to connect with others. "He was extremely insightful as to how to handle people and how and how to motivate people and how to bring the best out in people," Ward said. "Not just in Clarke Central or athletics, but (also) in the Athens community." **Below:** COACHER-IN-CHIEF: Former CCHS head football coach Billy Henderson enacts a play during a game circa 1980. Current CCHS head football coach David Perno remembered how he and Henderson always stayed connected, preserving the bond they developed on the field. "I always kept in touch," Perno said. "I went into coaching right after that, but I always kept touch as much as I could to see him. He was just very instrumental in me being a football player and obviously developing me as a coach. He helped me through my whole career."



Below: EYES ON THE PRIZE: Former CCHS head football coach Billy Henderson intently watches a football game in 1979. Current CCHS head football coach David Perno, who played under Henderson, reflected on how Henderson's methods still influence him. "You try to do the things that worked from his view, but you can't," Perno said. "I can't be Billy Henderson. That was one thing he was adamant about. You gotta trust your own instincts. You gotta be you, you can't try to be someone else." Photo from the 1979 issue of the Gladius.

