

Nifty 50

Prince celebrates a half-century of coaching

By Michael Pearson
Multimedia Editor

The pep rally is about to begin, but the featured speaker is still pondering what to say. He brainstorms with an assistant coach on the message to deliver in the big speech. He's perplexed – and then it hits him like a linebacker in the open field.

He rehearses a speech he'd heard only a couple of times before, a poem that the Rev. Jesse Jackson turned into words of inspiration thanks to its simple, powerful message: "I am somebody."

That shot-in-the-dark speech has transformed into a legacy for football head coach Jim Prince, who is celebrating his 50th season of coaching the sport.

Prince began his coaching career in 1972 at Shepherd College, the school in West Virginia where he also played football and earned his degree. Then it was on to the more prominent James Madison University program for the next 17 years.

Prince later found himself at Cox High School in Virginia Beach, where he did his first "I Am Somebody" speech after hearing JMU coach Joe Purzycki adapt it. Prince said he did the speech at Cox "out of mere chance," having no idea how the tradition would grow.

*I am ... somebody...
I will strive ...
I will persevere ...
I will win ...
Because I am ...
Somebody ...*



Photo by Taylor Newton/Nighthawk News
Jim Prince warms up the crowd at the Homecoming pep rally before launching into his full-volume 'I Am Somebody' speech.

"I think it's a part of my legacy," Prince said. "I believe that not only as a coach, but as a person, I can reach out and motivate a lot of other people besides football players."

The latest display of that motivation came during the First Flight Homecoming pep rally. Thanks to COVID-19, it had been two years since students had heard Prince's famous speech. The seniors and juniors were hungry for it,

Prince said, while the freshmen and sophomores were exposed to the message for the first time.

It's hard to know if Prince is more famous for 50 years of coaching or the 32 years of firing up countless crowds with his speech. At his Virginia Beach schools, Prince did the "I am Somebody" speech seven times a year, for pep rallies, Homecoming and even graduation. After Prince departed

for FFHS in 2008, Ocean Lakes High School continued to give the speech, and still does today.

Over his 14 years of coaching at First Flight – the only head coach the Nighthawks have ever known – Prince has had the opportunity to impact the lives of hundreds of students. Senior Gage Tomlin has played for Prince since his freshman year.

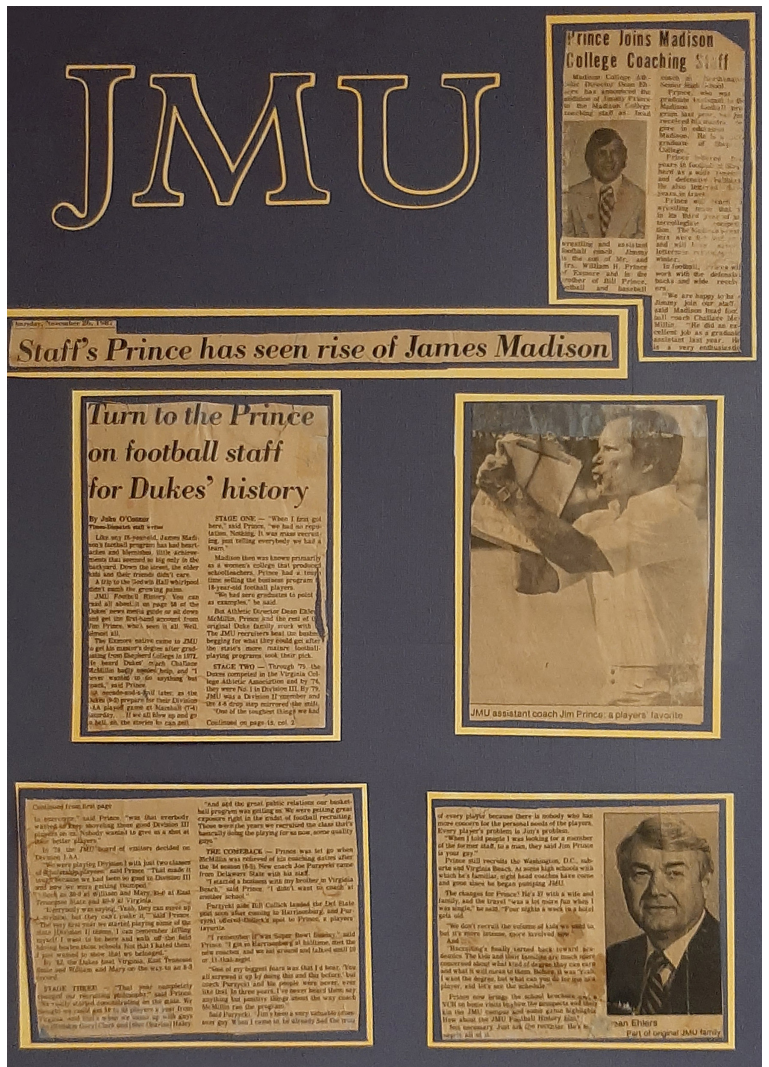
"He's so dedicated and car-



Photos by Olivia Sugg (left) Taylor Newton/Nighthawk News
Students celebrated Jim Prince's 50 years of coaching at the Homecoming pep rally, including a poster designed by sophomore N'Nia Brickhouse (far right). Above, Prince offers advice to current senior Kendrick Pierce during his freshman season. Below are newspaper clippings of Prince's time at Shepherd College and James Madison University that are among many highlights of his career in football found in his office.



NO CHANCE — Jim Prince (11) of Shepherd leaps for a pass but he has no chance to catch it as Salem's 20 Francis Smith is guilty of pass interference as he hits Prince before the ball get to the receiver. Shepherd picked up 15 yards on the penalty and the Rams went on to rally for 14-13 upset victory. Salem's Jo Olivito (14) is also shown. (Journal photo by Scrivener).



ing," Tomlin said. "He wants kids to get better not only in football but in life."

The memories made by Prince's players go beyond winning the Marlin Bowl or going for a joy ride in his Corvette during the Homecoming parade. It's those seemingly small moments during school or practice that impact them the most.

"Freshman year when I was lined up against Parker Sylvia in practice, Coach told me to tell Parker that he 'wasn't gonna do nothin,'" Tomlin said. "I didn't hear Coach and I said, 'I'm not gonna do nothin' and everyone laughed and Coach just looked at me and smiled."

Thanks to the "I Am Somebody" speech, Prince's

outreach extends far beyond his players. All those who enter the halls of First Flight, students and staff alike, are bound to witness it in one way or another.

"Coach Prince is genuine," Principal Chuck Lansing said. "He cares tremendously about the game of football, but he cares even more about having an impact on young men and

even the students who get the chance to work in the weight room from other sports."

No matter if you're a freshman who moved to the Outer Banks during the pandemic or a senior who has known Prince since middle school, or a football player or someone who's never gone to a game, he has the same message for all who take the time to listen.

"There are actually two meanings to 'somebody,'" he explains. "You can be just somebody that's part of a crowd, you're just there, somebody in the masses. Or you can be somebody special. You can make yourself somebody special."

Senior Michael Pearson can be reached at 22pearsonmi74@daretolearn.org.