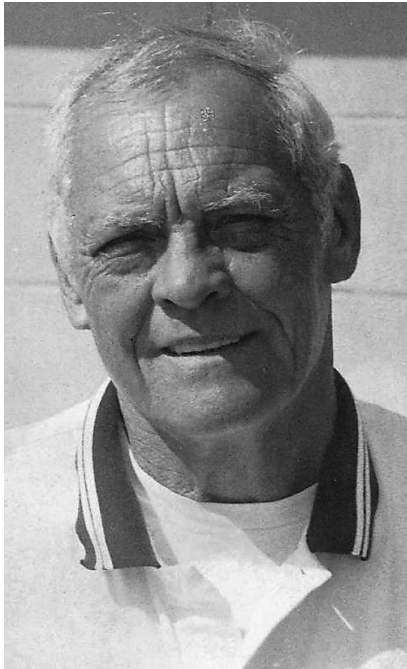


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## Revered coach Bud Willis dies at 85

By Wayne Grandy Feb 29, 2016



BUD WILLIS



**MOULTRIE** — Just hours after one of his former players presented two Packers with awards named in his honor, former longtime Moultrie High football coach Virgil “Bud” Willis died Sunday evening.

A former outstanding athlete at Tifton High School and a captain of the football team at the University of Alabama, Willis took over the Moultrie High football team in the fourth game of the 1965 season and led the Packers to a 93-34-1 record until he stepped down after the 1977 season.

He remained one of Colquitt County’s most revered and loved sports figures.

Since 2006, the Bud Willis Character Award has been presented in his honor at the annual Colquitt County High football banquet.

David “Bull” Durham, who played for Willis on the Moultrie High teams of 1969-1971, praised Willis before presenting the 2015 Character Awards to tight end Shaun Bonner and defensive lineman Ty Phillips.

“I never heard Coach Willis say a cuss word,” Durham said. “He was a good, honest, hard-working south Georgia coach.

“When we lost, we hurt more for Coach Willis because we saw how much he hurt. Nobody left here who didn’t love Coach Willis.”

Brooks Sheldon was a sophomore when Willis first moved up to the varsity staff to coach ends under Knuck McCrary.

“Excellent coach,” Sheldon remembers. “Very detailed on where to put your shoulder, head, drive though, etc.”

Virgil Seay played for Willis’s Packers from 1973-1975 and went on to play at Troy State and four years in the National Football League, earning a Super Bowl Championship ring as a member of the Washington Redskins.

But Seay’s career nearly ended with his final game for Moultrie.

An opportunity to play at Florida State did not pan out. Neither did one at Albany State.

And Seay began to believe his football playing days were over.

Willis then called East Mississippi Junior College.

Seay was on a bus headed west in a matter of days and played two seasons in Scooba. Chan Gailey then recruited him to play at Troy State, where he was an excellent receiver and punt returner.

“Coach Willis made that phone call that got me into junior college,” Seay said. “I thought I was finished playing.

“Two Super Bowls, three Halls of Fame. None of that would have happened for me if he hadn’t made that phone call.”

James Virgil “Bud” Willis was born Jan. 27, 1931, in Tift County and played football and baseball and was captain of the basketball team at Tifton High School.

Willis was a big part of the Tifton High football teams that went 8-2 in 1947, 7-2 in 1948 and 11-1 in 1949 under coach Alvin “Pig” Davis.

Willis was named All-State in 1949 and earned a scholarship to play at Alabama, courtesy of Davis.

“I wasn’t a great high school player,” Willis said in a 1999 interview.

“But he told them I could block and saw to it I got to go to the University of Alabama.”

In Tuscaloosa, he was a member of the 1952 team that went 10-2 and beat Syracuse 61-6 in the Orange Bowl.

Willis was the captain of the 1953 team that went 6-3-3 and won the Southeastern Conference championship and played in the Cotton Bowl.

He was an honorable mention All-American selection as a senior.

One of Willis’s Alabama teammates was Bart Starr, who went on to an outstanding career in the National Football League as the quarterback and later the coach of the Green Bay Packers.

Willis remained at Alabama in 1955 to serve as an assistant coach on the freshman team and then returned to Tifton to begin his teaching and coaching careers and to play minor league baseball for the Tifton Blue Sox and Tifton Phillies.

In 1957, he married Inita Martin of Hartsfield and soon moved to Moultrie where he was named the county recreation director.

A year later, he was named the Moultrie High's eighth-grade football coach and in 1961 joined Knuck McCrary's varsity staff, coaching the ends.

When McCrary suffered a heart attack during the 1965 game against Dougherty and died later that night, Willis was named the head coach.

Willis also taught drafting at the high school and was the athletic director.

Willis built some outstanding teams during his tenure.

Between 1965 and 1972, his teams never lost more than two games in a season and between 1965 and 1975, the Packers won 86 of 108 games. But because only the region champion advanced to the postseason in those years, only the 1972 team, which finished 11-1, played more than 10 games.

Valdosta often was the team that stood in the way of the Packers and the playoffs.

The 1975 Packers also lost just one game and finished in a three-way tie atop the Region AAAA standing with Valdosta and Thomasville with a 9-1 record. No tiebreaker policy was in effect and a vote of the region's principals left the Packers out and sent Valdosta and Thomasville on to meet in a one-game playoff to determine the region champion.

And even though his final two Moultrie teams went 4-6 in 1976 and 3-7 in 1977, he still finished with a 93-34-1 career record and a 73.0 winning percentage that was not broken until Rush Propst's current remarkable seven-year run.

After stepping down following the 1977 season, Willis coached four more seasons at Cook High before retiring as a head coach in 1981.

The Hornets had lost 22 straight games before Willis took over.

In four seasons, he erased \$29,000 worth of debt and his final team went 6-4.

In 1978, he began the first of three terms on the Georgia High School Association executive committee and he continued to serve on the Georgia Athletic Coaches Association board.

For several years he continued to coach seventh-graders in Tift County with Fred Tucker.

In 1999, the Georgia Athletic Coaches Association presented him with the Sam Burke Award for his "continuing interest in the youth of the nation by devotion of his time and talent to preserve, strengthen and promote high school athletics in Georgia."

In 2000, he was elected to the inaugural class of the Colquitt County Sports Hall of Fame.

He said at the time, “It’s a humbling thing. It’s a great honor to be among such great people. I just have to sit back and thank my lucky stars for such great coaches, great administrators and great football players.”

He called his involvement in football “a lifelong love story.”

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