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December 24, 2010

Clemson legend Bill Wilhelm dies

Staff reports

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CLEMSON, S.C. -- Bill Wilhelm, Clemson's legendary baseball coach from 1958-93, passed away Friday morning at Oconee Memorial Hospital in Seneca, SC at the age of 81. In his 36 years as Clemson's head coach he posted a record of 1161-536-10, and the 1161 victories are the most in school history in any sport, and still rank in the top 20 in the history of Division I college baseball. In 36 years guiding the Clemson program he never had a losing season.



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Bill Wilhelm is shown here at Doug Kingsmore Stadium in 2005 moments before throwing out the first pitch prior to Clemson hosting Miami.

Wilhelm led the Tigers to the College World Series six times (1958-59-76-77-80-91) and coached Clemson to 11 ACC Championships, 16 top 25 seasons, 17 NCAA Tournament appearances and 19 ACC regular season titles (including ties). Between 1973-82 Clemson won either the ACC regular season title or the ACC tournament every season.

Wilhelm coached 20 All-Americans, 27 players who went on to play Major League Baseball, 88 first-team All-ACC selections and 100 of his former players signed professional baseball contracts. Among his former players is Jimmy Key, a four-time Major League All-Star who played on World Series Championship teams with the Toronto Blue Jays and the New York Yankees.

The native of China Grove, NC led the Tigers to the College Worlds Series in each of his first two years with the program, 1958 and 1959. His 1958 team might have been his favorite as the Tigers won the ACC Championship and made a miracle comeback to win the NCAA District III Playoffs in Gastonia, NC by defeating Florida twice on the same day by scores of 15-14 and 3-1.

When Wilhelm retired he left a strong program. He took the Tigers to the NCAA Tournament each of his last seven years as head coach and the team averaged 51 wins per year over that time. His 1991 team still holds the Clemson record for wins with 60 and the team's 60-10 mark was the best winning percentage (.857) in the nation that year. That team had an average winning margin of 5.5 runs per game, still a school record. His final team, the 1993 squad, won the ACC Championship, beat 13 top 25 teams, and reached the NCAA Tournament.

"When I think of Clemson University I think of him," said Clemson Head Baseball Coach Jack Leggett, who succeeded Wilhelm in 1994 and has taken the program to the College World Series six times. "He was what Clemson is all about. He was tough, he was honest, he was competitive and he took pride in everything he did.

"I will always have great respect for Bill Wilhelm. He set such a strong foundation for this baseball program. He set that foundation certainly in what he accomplished on the field, but he also set that foundation in the way he ran the program. He did things the right way and he was a great example to me when I was his assistant for two years before taking over as head coach.

"Since he retired he was nothing but supportive. We had great meetings about baseball. Those meetings and his wisdom were very valuable. But, at the same time, he never interfered. He let us run the program.

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"My prayers go out to his wife Sarah Jane and his two sons, Randall and Michael. The entire family has meant so much to the Clemson baseball program."

"Coming from another part of the country--I had always heard of Coach Bill Wilhelm," said Clemson Athletic Director Terry Don Phillips. "He will be sorely missed, not only by the Clemson Family, but most assuredly by many people from coast to coast, because his legacy extends far beyond Clemson. He made this a national program. I count it as a tremendous privilege to have known Coach Wilhelm."

"Coach Wilhelm's passing is a tremendous loss for the Clemson Family," said Billy McMillon, current manager of the Greenville Drive, who played on Wilhelm's last three teams at Clemson (1991-93). "Coach had an enormous impact on the lives of countless baseball players and Clemson fans for decades. He taught me more than just the game of baseball. I learned about dealing with people fairly, how to hard work and the importance of discipline. I can honestly say that the lessons I learned from Coach Wilhelm have shaped my life on and off the baseball field. He has meant so much to me and I will miss him greatly."

"The two most important things in my life were my marriage and coming to Clemson," said Rusty Adkins, who was a three-time All-American from 1965-67 and set a national record during the time with a 41-game hitting streak. "He brought me to Clemson and I had not even seen the school before I accepted a scholarship. I was close to him my entire career and it continued for 40 years. I loved the man."

"Bill Wilhelm had a huge impact on my life," said Neil Simons, starting centerfield on two of Wilhelm's College World Series teams who is still the only four time first-team All-ACC player in Clemson history. "I learned so much about baseball, but about life in general. He is an institution who will be missed by his former players."

"He was the most brutally honest person I have known. In 1980 we were playing Virginia at Clemson and I hit a home run off of Ricky Horton, a left handed pitcher who went on to play in the Major Leagues. The ball curled about the foul pole and the ump called it a home run. After I crossed home plate I looked up and saw Coach Wilhelm at the plate arguing with the umpire that it was a foul ball."

"I couldn't believe he was arguing against a home run by one of his own players in his ball park. He told me in the dugout that he didn't want Clemson to get a reputation that we were a bunch of "homers" and that Clemson would be a place where you would get a fair shake." The umpire did not change his call.

Wilhelm is survived by his wife of over 50 years, Sarah and his sons, Michael and Randall.

Funeral arrangements will be announced at a later date.

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