

Prep Zone

Atlanta high school sports news from The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

By Todd Holcomb

Legendary Clarke Central football coach Henderson dead at 89

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Billy Henderson won 285 games, 11 region titles and three state championships in a head-coaching career that spanned 35 seasons.

Billy Henderson, a legendary Georgia high school football coach who led Clarke Central to state championships in 1977, 1979 and 1985, died on Wednesday in hospice care in Athens. He was 89.

Henderson won 285 games in 35 seasons as a head coach at Willingham in Macon, his hometown, and at Clarke Central in Athens, where he took over in 1973 and became a revered local figure. His victory total ranked fifth in state history when he retired after the 1995 season.

Henderson, born June 2, 1928, was an outstanding athlete at Macon's Sidney Lanier High in the 1940s, gaining All-America status in football and baseball before playing those sports at the University of Georgia. He played in a 1945 national baseball all-star game coached by Ty Cobb and Babe Ruth but turned down professional baseball opportunities to play football at Georgia, where he was halfback, initially the backup to star Charley Trippi on the Bulldogs' undefeated 1946 team.

Henderson first coached football as an assistant at Jefferson High, then joined Athens' staff in 1953 under former Georgia teammate Weyman Sellers from 1953 to 1955, when Athens won a state championship with Fran Tarkenton.

Henderson would coach at Furman and South Carolina before becoming newly opened Willingham's head coach in 1958. His Willingham teams were considered overachievers and were known for their three straight wins over Valdosta from 1963 to 1965.

Willingham closed in 1970 when Bibb County schools were consolidated, and Henderson moved to Mount de Sales, a private Catholic school in Macon. He assisted the football team there and also became head baseball coach, leading Mount de Sales to state titles in that sport.

In 1973, Henderson moved to Clarke Central, where he would build a Georgia football powerhouse that would last decades. Clarke had opened in 1970 as merger of Athens and Burney-Harris high schools. Clarke's football program struggled with integration, and the Gladiators finished 1-9 in 1972, just three years after Athens High had won a state title.

Henderson rallied the school and community together, and in just four seasons, the city had a championship again. The 1977 team went 14-0 and defeated Buck Belue-led Valdosta 16-14 for the title. In 1979, Clarke went undefeated again, beating Tift County 20-10 for the championship. Clarke won the title for a third time in 1985, again finishing 15-0.

Henderson's Clarke Central teams would win 11 region titles and play for a state championship seven times. Henderson coached 42 first-team all-state players at Clarke and Willingham. Some of his more notable players included Jim Bob Harris, Karey Johnson, Chris Morocco, Derek Dooley, Robbie Kamerschen, John Kasay, Chuck Smith, Adrian Jarrell and David Perno.

Henderson retired in 1996 because of an illness that left him deaf in one ear and gave him occasional bouts of vertigo. Henderson remained active in the Athens community in retirement. He founded the Athens Athletic Hall of Fame in 2000. In 2005, he was given the Bill Hartman Award, the highest honor accorded to a former University of Georgia student-athlete.

Funeral arrangements have not been announced.

[Read and sign the online guestbook for Coach Billy Henderson](#)

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