



Russell Blunt of Hillside in Durham is a member of the National High School Sports Hall of Fame.

Photo courtesy of the Raleigh News & Observer

“A national treasure” —Russell Blunt

Russell Blunt coached high school athletics, primarily at Hillside High in Durham, for more than 60 years. He was 88 years old when he won his last track state championship at Hillside.

When Blunt died in 2004, Dr. Leroy T. Walker, the former president of the U.S. Olympic Committee spoke for many when he said, “We have lost a giant.”

“Things change in sports, but living life doesn’t and that’s what Russ did,” said Walker, a 50-year friend of Blunt. “Young people saw him as one of them, not some 90-year-old, and they believed in him.”

Blunt’s Hornets won 17 state titles, including the 1997 North Carolina High School Athletic Association indoor track championship, his last before retiring in 1998. He was the oldest coach in the nation to win a state championship.

“Russ Blunt epitomizes what Albert Schweitzer said—that the only person on the face of the Earth that can obtain true happiness is the one who is willing to use his abilities to help others,” Robert F. Kanaby, former executive director of the National Federation of State High School Associations, said after Blunt’s induction into the Federation’s Hall of Fame.

Blunt and Greensboro’s Bob Jamieson were the first North Carolina coaches to be inducted into the national hall of fame.

“He was a ‘10’ as a coach, but coaching isn’t

all about Xs and Os and winning, it’s about saving kids, and he saved kids through track and field,” said George Williams, the athletic director and track coach at St. Augustine’s College and the U.S. men’s track and field coach for the Athens Olympic Games.

“He could take a kid from the worst neighborhood and by talking to them make them think they were the greatest in the world.

“He was what every man and woman who knew him wanted to be like.”

Charlie Adams, the former executive director of the NCHSAA, said Blunt was one of the greatest coaches ever in the state, and one of the greatest men he ever met.

“The thing about Russ is that he made all of the people around him better people,” Adams said. “Those of us who had the opportunity to know him were very fortunate.”

Blunt was a member of the North Carolina Sports Hall of Fame, the North Carolina High School Athletic Association Hall of Fame and three other halls of fame, including one in his native Andover, Massachusetts. He was a 1936 graduate of St. Augustine’s College, where he began his coaching career.

He coached every year until his retirement, except in 1944 when he earned his master’s degree at Boston University.

Blunt had two daughters, three grandchildren

and three great grandchildren, but a lot of athletes considered him a second father.

His teams won 10 state outdoor track championships and seven indoor track championships.

"There is no secret formula," he said in 1994. "You just have to work very, very hard—usually harder than you want to."

Once a sprinter complained about having to run too much in practice and threatened to tell his father.

"You do that," Blunt said. "He didn't like running laps either. But he did, just like you're fixing to."

Blunt was asked when he was inducted into the national hall how he had handled criticism through the years. He acknowledged that a group of Hillside parents once wanted him removed as the football coach.

"But I didn't give a kitty what they said," Blunt said, using about as strong an expression as he ever did. "Besides, I've outlived them all anyway."

Blunt was best known for his track coaching prowess, but he was a star athlete in baseball, football and basketball in Andover, Massachusetts. He was working as a bell hop in Massachusetts when he met the president of St. Paul's College in Virginia and told him that he wanted to go to school.

Blunt rode in the Jim Crow car directly behind the steam engine to reach the campus in Lawrenceville, Virginia, completing a cultural

journey that was even farther than the 475-mile trip from Boston.

At Andover, he had been the only black in his graduating class.

"When I got to St. Paul's I had never seen so many beautiful black women. I was 19 at the time," Blunt recalled.

Brenda Armstrong, Blunt's god-daughter and a cardiologist in Durham, said Blunt maintained his sense of humor and bluntness until his final days.

"I told him that he couldn't die yet because we didn't have any place big enough to hold the funeral," she said.

"He said, 'Well, you better start thinking of one.'"

Armstrong said Blunt was happy to have been recognized by his peers with the various awards and inductions.

"But he was most proud of the young people that he helped along the way," she said.

Blunt once explained why he had received so many of these honors.

"Somebody sits around and mentions my name and somebody else says, 'That old bird is still alive? Let's give him something,'" Blunt said.

Kanaby said he counts himself lucky to have known Blunt.

"Russell Blunt was a national treasure," Kanaby said.



Russell Blunt was still pointing the way long after most high school coaches have retired. He coached a team to a state track and field championship when he was 88 years old.

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