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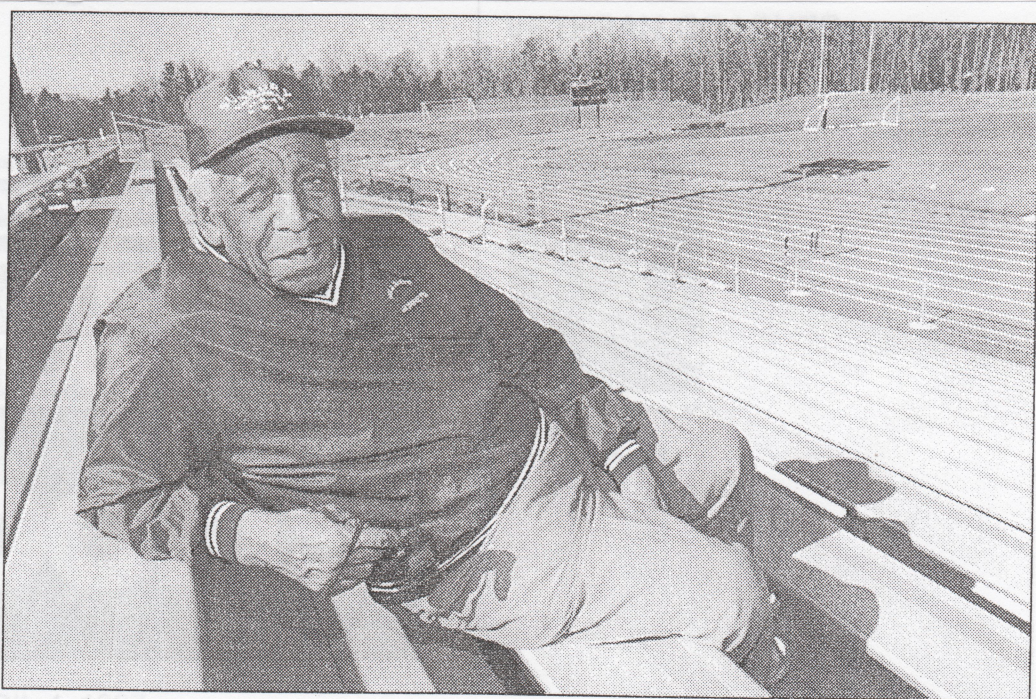
VETERAN COACHES: Russell Blunt, 88, track and field coach at Hillside High in Durham, N.C., is part of an elite group of passionate, die-hard coaches. They believe as long as you can, you should; as long as you breathe, you work. (*High school report, 8C*)



By Peter Schumacher, AP

Blunt: Tireless coach at age 88.

Coaches find quitting hard



Championship caliber: Russell Blunt led his team to a 7th state track title at Hillside High in Durham, N.C., where he's coached since 1955. Blunt, 89 this month, says he'll continue 'as long as he enjoys it.'

By Peter Schumacher, AP

Coaches find quitting hard

By Carolyn White
USA TODAY

Russell Blunt moves a little slower these days, but he's still outrunning his biggest opponent.

That would be Father Time. After recently leading his team to its seventh North Carolina track and field title, the 88-year-old coach at Hillside High in Durham says coaching has kept him healthier than "that boring, sit-at-home thing."

"And just what would I have done if I had retired?" asks Blunt, a widower who turns 89 April 21.

"I promised myself that as long as I could walk, as long as my health holds up and as long as I enjoy it, I'm going to remain a coach."

Blunt, who is coaching the sons of five former athletes, got his third state indoor title by default. East Mecklenburg, which edged Hillside by two points, had to forfeit for using an ineligible athlete.

Blunt — whose teams were outdoor champs in 1984, '87, '93 and '94, and indoor champs in '86 and '87 — symbolizes a small but elite fraternity of passionate, die-hard coaches. They believe as long as you can, you should; as long as you breathe, you work.

John McKissick, 70, who has

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more wins than any other high school football coach in the USA (425-97-13), began at Summerville, S.C., 44 seasons ago.

He sees no end in sight. "As long as I'm healthy, as long as I feel I can do the job, I have no intention of giving it up," says McKissick, who has two grandsons — quarterback Joe Call and linebacker Richard Call — coming back next season.

When Hobbs, N.M., lost 92-90 to Las Cruces in a boys basketball state quarterfinal, Ralph Tasker, 80, missed out on a record: a chance to coach a state champion during each of the last six decades.

"I'm more disappointed for the kids than for myself," says Tasker, in his 48th year as head coach. "Winning state was our goal for this season."

During 49 years at the helm, Edward Burns, 75, ice hockey coach at Arlington (Mass.) High, has five state championships and led his team to the playoffs 44 times. Burns has a 762-110-53 record.

Blunt, McKissick, Burns and Tasker are members of the National High School Sports Hall of Fame.

After 23 years of coaching boys basketball at Del Mar High in San Jose, Calif., Dave

Morgan purchased a small almond farm and tried his hand at retirement.

A year later (1983), he sold his farm and got a job coaching at Denair High, 60 miles south of Sacramento.

"I missed basketball, missed the kids," says Morgan, who turns 77 on May 17. "Coaching is addictive. It gets in your blood. If you've had some success and your ego gets stroked, retiring, losing contact with people, makes you feel as if you're not needed anymore."

Arthur "Reds" Hucht, 80, boys swim coach at Calvert Hall High in Towson, Md., since 1960, recently began to feel ineffective and announced his retirement.

"It's hard today to motivate kids to continue swimming year-round," says Hucht, whose teams have 23 state championships, the last in '93. "I'm 80 years old, but I'm tough. I know if they don't compete year-round, they won't be competitive."

Youngsters are different than they were when Tasker, McKissick and Blunt started coaching, but they say a good coach can adapt. "You've got to care about your players," Tasker says. "I feel if I can keep one of them from going down the wrong path, my years have been successful."