

SPORTS

BILL TUTEN DIES



Bill Tuten in his athletic director's office at St. Johns in 1968.

SJR State archives

Pioneer Passes

Founded Viking athletics, impacted state organization

By **ANDY HALL**
Palatka Daily News

Basketball came to St. Johns River Junior College as a recreation-league team playing the likes of Middleton Shopping Center and the Poage Bill Dingers.

From that acorn sprang an athletic department that included almost everything but football at various times during the 1960s, along with an extensive intramural program. As St. Johns athletics grew (and later endured despite tight budgets), so did the sports structure for two-year schools statewide.

A man largely responsible for both developments, William H. "Bill" Tuten, died Friday at Crestwood Nursing Center after a long illness. He was 87.

Tuten coached Viking basketball and golf teams to national tournaments, but was remembered Monday by current and former SJR State coaches and administrators as a man whose influence stretched well beyond the college and his retirement in 1993.

"He was patient and supportive of me while I had my growing pains and for that I'm very appreciative," said John Tindall, who was 23 when he became head baseball coach and would lead the team to multiple conference championships and state tournament appearances over 30 seasons. "I was fortunate to come in when Bill and Pat Wilson were there. They took their teaching just as seriously as they took their coaching. They were conscientious professionals."

"He was one of a kind – a mystery wrapped in an enigma a lot of times," said Wilson, who coached volleyball and tennis, ran intramural programs and taught physical education during her time at St. Johns from 1963-85. "He was a good boss and I enjoyed working for him. I wanted to coach volleyball and I approached Bill. Title IX was just beginning to take effect." (The volleyball program was later dropped, returning in 1994.)

Tuten's influence on the state and national levels was such that the Florida College System Activities Association scholar-athlete award is presented annually in his name. Viking baseball players Matt Pennington and Johnny Blue-Craig received the honor in 2013 and '15, respectively. Tuten was in on the ground floor with the FCSAA and long served as Region 8 commissioner for the NJCAA.

"He is the John Hancock of the FCSAA handbook," said SJR State baseball coach and athletic director Ross Jones. "Our academic eligibility standards are much higher than the national standard. Our ejection policy is tougher."

"When we get together (with other athletic directors), these guys who have been there 30-35 years always ask about coach Tuten."

"There are two words that come to mind. One is giant and one is icon," SJR State president Joe Pickens. "He has impacted hundreds and hundreds of lives, not just as St. Johns River Junior College and Community College, but around the state."

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Tuten

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In the early years, Tindall said, St. Johns had track, cross country, golf and wrestling teams in addition to baseball, basketball, volleyball, tennis and softball. Tuten, who had two stints as basketball coach, coached the first Vikings baseball team, the golf team throughout its existence and softball in the slowpitch era. The intramural program thrived at a time the college had

only the Palatka campus and included dormitories serving many students from Jacksonville.

The 1968 golf team finished third in the nation. The basketball team made the 1967 NJCAA tournament under Tuten and assistant coach Cliff McGriff with Palatka's Bobby Stevens starring at center. All three have since passed away, Stevens last summer.

"It would be something to see the reunion with (Tuten) and coach McGriff and Bobby Stevens," said Joe Asher, a guard on the '67 team who served as athletic director at St. Johns

after a career in the Air Force. "Bill Tuten was more than just my basketball coach. He was like a second dad to me and when I came back, he was my mentor."

Two of Tuten's basketball players, Stevens and Neal Chancey, are in the FCSAA basketball hall of fame. Chancey coached the Vikings' last state tournament team in 1975.

St. Johns' current athletic program encompasses baseball, softball and volleyball. The baseball team ended a 21-year state tournament drought in 2010 and has won Mid-Florida

Conference championships three of the last four years. The softball and volleyball programs have been on the uptick.

"We went through budget cuts, we went through scholarship cuts, but we kept the programs alive," Tindall said. "Wins were hard to get sometimes, but there are a lot of kids that benefited from keeping (the programs) alive."

A graduate of Stetson University, Tuten also officiated high school football and basketball for many years, working in a football crew that also included Tindall, McGriff and longtime

St. Johns instructor Jerry Rothschild.

One of Tuten's sons, Billy, became an accomplished golfer who played at the University of Houston, won a U.S. Public Links championship and played in The Masters and the U.S. Open. Son Jonathan Tuten long served as administrative assistant to the basketball program. Both survive him, along with a daughter, Sandy Robbins, and wife Joanne Tuten. Son Tommy Tuten died earlier this year.

A June 18 memorial service is planned at Johnson-Overturf Funeral Home.