

Blind coach inspires WPCC

By LARRY DALE
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"Defense, defense, come on, lets press 'em!"

"Rebound, come on, lets go!"

"Hey, keep in there under that basket and take those percentage shots."

"All right, that's the way to hustle, fellas!"

The chatter of sports is as familiar as the sports themselves to most people.

A good bench is alive with the banter and camaraderie of team members, coaches, and assistants.

But with Jesse Williamson, it's different. Williamson has been totally blind for 10 years. Still, he is an assistant coach with the Western Piedmont Community College basketball team and a large part of the team's harmony.

"I don't do as much on the bench as I should," Williamson modestly says. But some people would disagree with that statement.

"He has really surprised some refs," head coach Dr. Richard Morgan said. "Sometimes they watch him for a whole game before realizing he is blind."

"Jesse's biggest contribution is his pre-game locker room talks. Team members listen to him. They really admire Jesse."

WPCC's assistant coach has drawn the attention of the Carolina Camera crew and C. J. Underwood. The film crew, which has

become famous in the area, will be at the Morganton Recreation Department gym Wednesday for the WPCC game against Broughton at 2:30 p.m.

"We would like to draw some fans for the game," Morgan says. "The team is a part of the Morganton Industrial League, and the rather informal games draw few spectators."

For Williamson, however, the attention should go to the players and not him. "I don't seek the publicity for myself, I like to see my team get things. I'm just sitting on the bench."

Dr. Nancy Moore, dean of student services, says the formation and progress of the WPCC team is an "unbelievable situation."

"Sort of a rags to riches story," agrees Dr. Morgan.

The team has no gym at the college, so practice is at Western Carolina Center. Williamson is an employee of WCC, a rehabilitation counselor in the North Carolina Department of Human Resources, Division of Services for the Blind.

The team members paid for their own uniforms, and they started out without even having a basketball of their own. Morgan got the team going this season, along with Williamson. There was a team last season, but no coach.

Many of the players on the squad played for Freedom last year. Two faculty mem-



Williamson talks strategy for the Pioneers.

★ Please turn to page 12

Blind coach inspires WPCC

★ from page one

bers, Bill Young and Jim Reed, are also team members. There are 12 on the team.

Williamson has a "great" outlook on life, he says, and it shows.

The scorekeeper asks for the roster. "Hey man, everybody's gonna play but me."

"Some of the refined points of the game I can't get, but sometimes I see as good as some of these refs. I offered one my cane the other day, I don't think he appreciated it."

The team is certainly loose as the WPCC squad runs to a 32-18 halftime lead against its opponent.

As a player goes into the game, Al Steiner, one of the players, says, "Keep him under a hundred."

"Hey, hurry up and get two more fouls, I want to play," a benched member yells to a passing teammate.

"I love the sport and I just like being

with these guys," Williamson says.

"Sure, I happen to be blind, but that doesn't stop me. You have to grab what you want and go with it."

Williamson is currently working on his Master's degree in rehabilitative psychology.

"The old jobs relegated to the blind were and are out of date. Some of the blind are in government service, some are lawyers and judges and even work on assembly lines," he says.

Williamson's importance to the team is two-fold: morale and strategy. "I give talks and Dick (Morgan) and I confer a lot on strategy. We work as a team. Sometimes I have time to reflect on something that Dick doesn't, he says.

During the game, Williamson gets help on the game situation from scorekeeper Mary Dale and the players themselves.

Williamson says he has been blind for about 10 years, through glaucoma and "two or three other degenerative things."

He could see "fairly well until my junior or senior year in high school. I used to be an avid reader."

The Whiteville native says he liked to play pickup games when he was sighted, but was never good enough for a team.

Williamson is the first to admit that he has a full schedule and that he could certainly find plenty to do without basketball. His job and speaking engagements keep him on the go. "It's just a fun thing. I just enjoy being a part of it," he says.

"I think we are one of the better teams in the league. "But Broughton is a fine club; I'm looking forward to the game."

Well, through Dick Morgan and Ray Cook of radio station WMNC in Morganton the game will be drawing regional attention and give county residents a possibility of being on television.

"Way to go Bill, way to play!"

"Get on him, Greg!"

"Come on, Keith, put it in there!"