

Georgia TFXC Coaching Collective Interview with Tom Williams (Lassiter, Walton, North Georgia, North Oconee)

Tom Williams is a Member of the Georgia Track and Field/Cross Country Hall of Fame. He was a head coach at Lassiter and Walton High Schools, and then moved on to the University of North Georgia. This fall he was a volunteer coach at North Oconee High School. He coached the Walton girls to State titles in 1999 and 2002, and has coached numerous other teams and individuals to the podium, including 2 individual State XC Champs, 15 top 5 finishes for the boys at State and 10 top 5 finishes for the girls at State. At North Georgia his 2014 XC team qualified for Nationals and in 2017 they were the Peach Belt Conference XC Champions.

What made you want to get into coaching?

Growing up I watched my dad coach my older brothers. As the youngest, I watched a lot of games with my dad on the sideline. Eventually, I too started playing sports. My high school football assistant coach, Jerry Whims, was an excellent mentor for me. Between my dad and Coach Whims, the value and life lessons learned through their coaching was something I thought I too could pass on someday. Ultimately, it was the desire to help young people to be their best.

What were some of the lessons you learned early on in your coaching career?

- 1.) There is no secret, only smart work and discipline.
- 2.) Be careful how you state something to your team or an individual athlete.
- 3.) Your words can inspire or destroy an individual or team.
- 4.) Everyone is important on a team from the slowest to the fastest. Everyone can bring something to the table to be a valuable member of the team.
- 5.) Ask questions, and more importantly, listen to the answers.
- 6.) Be true to yourself as a coach and do not try to be the coach an athlete wants.
- 7.) Get your athletes to buy in to your philosophy, be consistent with each athlete.

Who are some of the coaches you coached against that you always respected and admired?

I am sure that I will leave someone out, but these are some of the coaches early in my career that stood out; Jerry Arnold, Roy Benson, Karl Bostic, Ron Clayton, Andrew Hudson, Luke Prescott, Murray Sanford, Bill Sheskey, Tomy Sitton, Bill Thorn, and Richard Westbrook.

What were some of your favorite things about coaching?

Working with the athletes and helping them achieve their goals. Watching them grow and mature into young adults. Having former runners comeback and state you had an impact on their lives. Basically, the process of coaching each day.

What were some of the areas that you think you improved later in your career?

I have always been a lifelong learner, whether it is attending clinics, running camp, reading books, learning the mental aspects, nutrition, and leadership. You can never know everything; I am still learning today about my sport.

I was able in college to be more specific with my training plans for each individual athlete. In high school, I was more general during cross, because of the high numbers we had at Walton High School. Certainly, with some athletes we developed an individual plan to get them where they wanted to go. I was always more specific in track with my plans for my athletes. I got more specific in both during my time in college, because the numbers were so small and I could get to know the athletes better, plus I had more information about them, mileage, times, etc.

What do you think about the state of Track and Field/Cross Country.

I believe more coaches have knowledge of the sport that they are coaching today. Less coaches are just taking a supplement from another sport. Coaches still need to educate their runners about the sport. I know athletes at times just want to know the workout, but we should explain the process better to them. I see younger and younger athletes getting involved in the sport of cross country, which is not a bad thing, but it comes with a lot of complications. Bill Hackney did a wonderful job of educating and making running fun for a lot of Walton Youth runners in the day. Many who are still runners learned to enjoy the process of being a lifelong runner.

During my coaching time at high school we had Foot Locker and Golden South as a post season event that came at the end of the cross country and track season. I do not know how I would handle all of the cross country post season events, indoor, and outdoor post season events that are present today. Running is a balancing act, how many times can you get an athlete to peak? You have four years in high school with an individual athlete and the goal is to get the most out of the runner during your time with the athlete or are you preparing the quality athlete for a college career as well.

Now with the youth programs and championships taking off, what is the goal of these programs? The challenge I believe is a balance of educating and teaching and preparing for the next level of competition, I still believe the goal should want the runner to continue with the sport after their competitive days are over.

Now that you are retired what comes to mind when you look back on your career?

The friendships that I have made with my fellow coaches, parents, and athletes over my coaching career. The strong desire to still be part of the process of coaching. Wanting to give back to the sport that has given so much to me. I have had a lot of great memories over my coaching career, because I had the opportunity to work with some strong student athletes that made a commitment to the sport.

Any advice for track and field/cross country coaches who are early in their careers?

One of my Walton athletes stated at his Senior banquet, "That you cannot flirt with track or cross you have to marry it". I would say being committed to the sport, and learning as much that you can about the sport that you are coaching. It is very hard to balance everything when you are in season. Be the best that you can be when you are at practice with your athletes, plan for your practices, so that you keep the athletes focused on the task. Plan your work, work your plan.