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Cottingham was constant source of inspiration

John Block
Furman University

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Cottingham was constant source of inspiration

Walter Lee Cottingham was one of the best people ever to grace the Furman campus, and during his tenure from 1959 to 1984, good people were legion. When he died July 2 at the age of 88, Furman lost one of its legendary personalities.

Like so many of his generation, “Coach” Cottingham served his country in World War II. He saw action in North Africa, Italy, the Normandy invasion and the Battle of the Bulge and was a decorated soldier, earning the Bronze Star and other awards. Two children of a Greenville merchant for whom he had worked before the war remember vividly to this day the tall, handsome veteran rushing up their front yard to tell his former employer and friend how happy he was to be home.

Coach Cottingham went on to put his war experiences behind him and embraced the rest of his life with perspective, vigor and an eagerness to serve others.

He graduated from Emory University where he was a student leader and an accomplished athlete. (In 1991 he was elected to Emory’s Athletic Hall of Fame.) At Emory he was also influenced by the “grand system of intramurals” he discovered there.

Following his military service he earned a master’s degree in physical education and recreation from the University of North Carolina. He began his teaching career in 1947 and joined the Department of Physical Education at Furman in 1959.

With Ruth Reid and W.L. “Ikey” Carr, Coach helped establish the idea and practice that health, fitness and physical activity were not only compatible with intellectual pursuits, but that they were primary components of a liberal arts education. That this truth is now widely embraced at Furman is a testament to him and his colleagues.

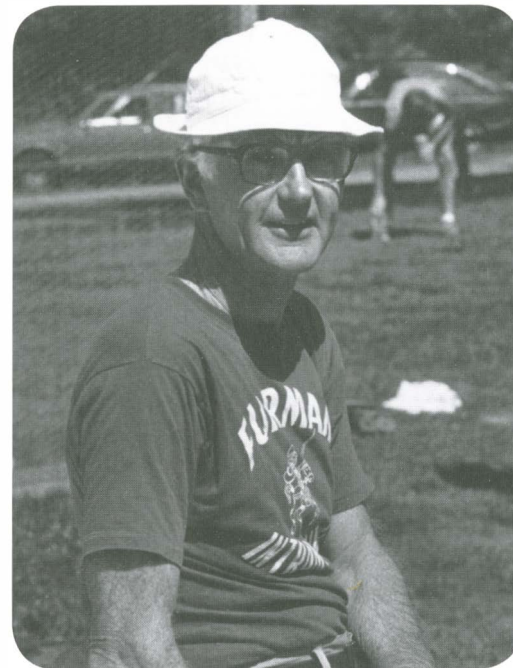
Walter Cottingham was also a constant source of inspiration to Furman students. In his classes, less active students learned the pleasures of physical accomplishment, and muscular football players discovered the grace and skill necessary to play tennis. Men and women of various interests, experiences and abilities mingled under the leadership of this happy, encouraging man with the unusually full eyebrows. Many would work with him during the summers at Camp Pinnacle in North Carolina, where he served as director for years.

Equally important, Coach did yeoman service in overseeing an ever growing system of intramurals, and in 1974 he became full-time director of intramurals. No program could have been more successful. By the late 1970s the vast majority of Furman students took part in some intramural sport, and nothing was more creative or exciting than his establishment of the popular co-recreational teams that reflected and even foreshadowed broader societal changes.

He had the quiet strength of a man of faith — and never had trouble restoring order when tempers flared. Of course, such incidents were rare, since sportsmanship was a key aspect of any activity that Coach Cottingham supervised.

Students showered him with affection and respect, as was evident when the graduating Class of 1984 raised funds to name the fitness center in the Lay Physical Activities Center for him. The same year he received the signal honor of being inducted into Quaternion, Furman’s prestigious men’s leadership society.

While gracing Furman with his talents, he also involved his attractive family in the community. His artistic wife, Dale, earned an M.A. from Furman in 1975, and their children — Mike Grier ’63, Mary Lynne Grier Powers ’67, Walt, Jr. ’74, John ’77 and Nancy ’79 — were all excellent



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students who contributed to campus life in a variety of ways, from student body president (Mike) to varsity basketball (John).

In retirement, Coach Cottingham, who lived near the campus, was a continuing presence at Furman. His tuneful whistling — his trademark — heralded his approach on his bicycle, and he always had a cheerful greeting for friends and strangers alike. Even the casual observer could see that this was a man who was at peace with the world and was continuing to live his life well.

He never stopped dispensing encouragement to others, including former students now themselves approaching retirement — and still not immune to his inspirational charms.

To borrow a description from a popular film, Walter Cottingham was truly “a righteous dude.”

— JOHN BLOCK

The author is a 1963 Furman graduate and a professor emeritus of history at the university.

After the content of this issue of Furman was finalized, we learned of the deaths of Rex Kerstetter, professor emeritus of biology, and Glen Howerton, associate professor emeritus of art. The winter issue will include tributes to both.