

Ernest Warriner Williamson '51

Back nearly thirty years ago, one of the University's great friends, Cary Boshamer, was sitting in the small section of seats on the grassy bank that overlooked the baseball field. He said Carolina ought to have something better for baseball than a set of bleachers, the same ones that had been hauled to the stadium for overflow football crowds and to the gym for basketball.

His words found a keenly interested audience — he was sitting beside Ernie Williamson that evening. Donors such as Mr. Boshamer have been the cornerstones of many of the first-class athletic facilities on the Carolina campus. For twenty-nine years, Ernie Williamson was the person who helped them shape their dreams into Boshamer Stadium, an expanded and renovated Kenan Stadium, the Smith Center and Carmichael Auditorium before it, the track and soccer stadium, the natatorium, the tennis center and more.

In the words of Ernie's successor as president of the Educational Foundation, Moyer Smith '61, "He started it when there were no models and established a good one. Ernie is the University's goodwill ambassador."

He came to Chapel Hill in 1946, a 6-foot-4, 220-pound tackle on the legendary football team that went to Carolina's first bowl game. As a freshman he got noticed by pro scouts, and that's what made his first year his last. The Washington Redskins led Ernie to believe he was signing an agreement of intent to play for them once he had graduated — when in fact the paper he signed canceled his college eligibility. Coach Carl Snavely would miss him, but he snagged Ernie as a coach for spring practices.

Ernie never could say no. His time in pro football led him into coaching and his first assignment at The University of the South. There he coached football linemen and was head coach of wrestling and track and field. Rather than say no, he ran to Bob Fetzer at Chapel Hill for advice on how to coach track, and for wrestling he would have the team captain over to his house to teach him the holds, then impart that to the rest of the team the next day.

By 1957 Ernie was back in Chapel Hill. Jim Tatum had two jobs available — recruiting football players and running the 19-year-old Educational Foundation. Of course, Ernie took them both.

He once encountered a football prospect who wanted to go to an agricultural school. Ernie wooed him anyway, to the point that the young man finally asked him if he could study at N.C. State and play ball for Carolina.

"He has that wonderful gift of getting along with all types of people," said his friend Walter Rabb, the long-time Carolina baseball coach. As an athletics fund-raiser, Ernie works on the premise that no one has to give the University a nickel, but a lot of them want to. He's always available to the alumni — the serious donor, the after-midnight recruiting tipster, the one who's upset after a difficult loss.

He tells anyone who wants to see him, "I'll be here when you get here."

The University's oldest foundation evolved under Ernie Williamson into an organization with a sharp eye on the relationship between donors and a very high-profile athletics department. That department has a terrific reputation in the won-loss column and with the folks who govern intercollegiate sports.

Ernie Williamson would be the first to tell you that in selling Carolina athletics, he is selling a respected and beloved product. And those who have responded the most generously to Ernie's requests would eagerly tell you that his enthusiasm is so infectious that they want to give because Ernie wants them to give.

The foundation now awards some 400 scholarships per year, at a cost of more than \$4 million. Its mark, and Ernie's, are on some of the finest athletic facilities in the country. When Carolina set out to build the basketball arena that is the envy of the nation, it turned not to the taxpayers but to Ernie's foundation.

In 1979 he was elected president of the National Association for Athletic Fund Raising; in 1982 he won a national fund-raiser-of-the-year award; he is a recipient of the William Richardson Davie Award, and has his name on a scholarship endowed by the Educational Foundation.

Retired as president since 1986, Ernie still is available to alumni who want to talk sports, still goes on the road to foundation meetings. He's remembered just as well for his fanatic gardening, and for spreading silver queen corn and baby lima beans all over Chapel Hill in the summertime.

As he celebrates 50 years of marriage to Elva this June, Ernie Williamson stands very tall in an athletic program known as much for its clean reputation as for winning.