

Former coach and athlete still going strong at age 100

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Fred Dickerson participated in the N.C. Senior Olympics last month, and his best softball toss measured 44 feet.

Not impressed by a throw of less than 15 yards from a former quarterback? Consider that the legendary former coach competed in the event just a few weeks shy of his 100th birthday. Dickerson, who lives with his daughter Patsy in Mars Hill near the college campus, celebrated a century of life on May 6.

A 1931 graduate of Lees McRae, the first class to graduate as a junior college in Banner Elk, Dickerson was the quarterback on the school's inaugural football team and scored the program's first touchdown on an 83-yard kickoff return.

"It was a pretty primitive game back then," he said with a quick grin. "No comparison at all with what you see now."

Dickerson, a native of Reidsville, also attended and competed in sports at Elon College and Davidson, where he played football, basketball and ran track.

He went on to a successful career as a coach and administrator at LMC and at Mars Hill.

Dickerson also was director of athletics at Davis and Elkins College in the early 1940s and served five years in the Navy during World War II in Cadet Aviation Program.

He wrapped up a 43-year professional career as principal at Mars Hill High from 1962-76.

At LMC, the athletic complex and hall of fame are named after Dickerson.

"Sports was my life and my career for so long," he said. "There are a lot of life lessons to be learned from athletics."

And at age 92, Dickerson began competing in the Senior Olympics and set state and national records while participating in tennis and track and field events.

As a coach and physical education director at LMC (1933-36, '46-52) and MHC ('36-41) before World War II, he won a total of 20 conference championships in football, basketball, track and tennis.

With a sly smile and a mischievous glint in his eyes, Dickerson said he doesn't recall how or why he made the transition from the LMC campus across the mountain to Mars Hill, but he hints at the controversy that caused 75 years ago.

"There was quite a rivalry between the schools back then," he said. "I don't remember why I switched schools, but it must have been a big deal at the time."

Don Baker was the longtime sports information director at LMC who several years ago unsuccessfully tried to have Dickerson placed in the N.C. Sports Hall of Fame.

Baker believes junior college coaches of Dickerson's era - who blazed trails in athletics, often serving as a one-man staff who put in dozens of hours every week for all sports - have gone underappreciated.

"He represents a great N.C. tradition in junior college ranks, a segment under-represented by the N.C. Hall. In Banner Elk and Avery County however - and for hundreds of LMC athletes - he is a hall of famer," Baker said.

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