

Character counts

First JMU football head coach Challace McMillin talks to a 1980s-era Dukes team. The revered coach has been honored with two JMU academic centers named for him.

Sport psychology center's holistic approach mirrors coach's philosophy

BY MARTHA BELL GRAHAM

At every Madison Homecoming or athletics event, alumni — especially former football players — seek out a soft-spoken gentleman they once called “coach.”

He is Challace McMillin, JMU's first football coach, mentor to a generation of student-athletes and a perpetual draw for former students, many of whom became coaches themselves. After nearly 40 years at JMU, the impact of the retired coach and professor still reverberates — and will continue to do so for many years to come. Last fall JMU's Center for Sport Psychology was officially named for the former coach.

McMillin's former player, Joe Showker ('79), and his wife, Debbie ('78), pledged \$500,000 to establish the center, earning the right to name it the Challace McMillin Center for Sport Psychology. Another alumnus, sport psychologist Roddy ('76, '77M), and Jeanne Kibler ('75), established the Kibler Professorship for Sport Psychology.

The center supports student-athletes, coaches and parents in achieving success in sports and in life. It is the second honor for JMU's first football coach. The Challace McMillin Academic Performance Center is also named for the former coach and professor emeritus.

The sport psychology center's holistic approach to sport mirrors the philosophy McMillin modeled as a coach, mentor and professor. In a three-pronged approach that distinguishes it from other sport psychology centers, the McMillin center first supports athletes in their quest for personal and performance excellence.

The center also offers students studying in related academic fields such as psychology and kinesiology an opportunity for hands-on, clinical experiences in sport psychology. The center's

Honoring more than a coach

Joe Showker ('79) was a redshirt freshman transfer from Virginia Tech when he first met Challace McMillin in 1975. The kicker, nicknamed “Joe the toe,” felt an instant connection to his new coach. “We clicked,” Showker recalls. “He and I were very much of like mind; I had a great appreciation for what he was doing.”

McMillin was an intelligent coach, Showker says. “He was disciplined and had high expectations. He was the first coach to give me an itinerary.”

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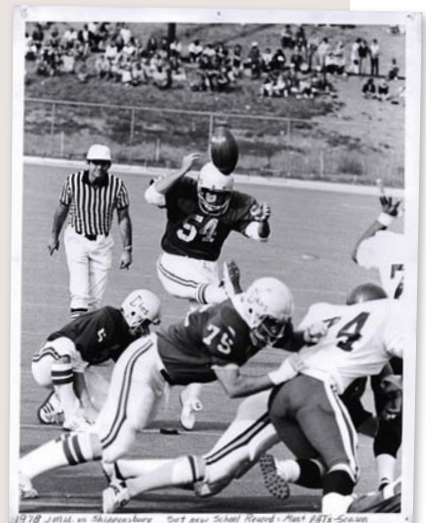
For Showker and many student-athletes influenced by the coach's career, McMillin was far more than a coach. “He was my mentor. Coaches and students intersect at a point in which their lives are changed. You hope it's the right people,” Showker says. For Showker, McMillin was that person.

After Showker graduated as a physical education major and a second-tier Academic All-American, he followed in his coach's footsteps. “When I got out and started coaching, Challace McMillin was one of the people I tried to emulate.”

Showker coached in Rockingham County Public Schools for many years. Currently, he is an instructional technology resource teacher with Rockingham County Public Schools. Though not actively coaching, he stays involved as master official for U.S.A. Track & Field.

Showker's respect for his former coach is obvious. “He was a model coach for my formative coaching years,” he says. “He was even-tempered.” In the shadow of the Lombardi era, when coaches ranted at players, McMillin was calm, Showker says. “As a man he was always in control of his emotions. He never lost control of his character.”

It's that character — humility, discipline, goal seeking, pursuit of excellence on and off the field — and the mentoring that Showker admires and now honors. When it came time to name JMU's new center for sport psychology, Showker had only one name in mind: Challace McMillin. “What he does transcends football.”



Joe “the toe” Showker kicks for an extra point after a touchdown in 1978. Showker has honored his former coach and mentor with a gift to Madison.

director Robert Harmison explains, “With the center’s commitment to identify and implement best practices, students are able to participate in and design research studies related to the effectiveness and ability of the center’s psychoeducational programs to positively impact the athletics community.”

But it is the center’s third prong — reaching beyond campus — that sets it apart. Through clinics for parents, coaches and athletes, and through research and outreach, the center will have a positive impact on hundreds of young lives. “Both undergraduate and graduate students will have the opportunity to gain valuable experience developing and delivering outreach programming that will positively impact the sport experience of athletes of all ages in the region,” Harmison says.

Because not all coaches, and certainly few parents, are trained in coaching, outreach is important and innovative. “Participation in competitive sports builds character, and athletes learn valuable life skills like discipline, teamwork, working toward goals, leadership and social skills,” Harmison adds. “However, without good sports parenting and coaching, participation that overemphasizes winning, perfect performance and playing despite pain can result in unhealthy behaviors.”

The center’s mission will spread McMillin’s passion. “I have always had a strong belief that the mental aspect of sports is extremely important and that it has to be approached the same way you work on the body,” McMillin says.

McMillin came to JMU in 1971 as director of housing and as track and field coach — with the understanding that he would start a football program. “It was very exciting to me. Very few people have an opportunity to start a football program at the collegiate level,” McMillin says.

McMillin’s success is legendary. Starting from scratch, the coach built a

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Robert Harmison

player to set short- and long-term goals, and then to go about accomplishing them methodically. “My players had to develop a master organization calendar — in detail. They had to write it out and turn it in every semester to their position coaches,” he explains. Today’s student-athletes have academic coaches, but back then the coaching staff did it all.



“What coach Mickey Matthews has done to keep coach McMillin involved with the team means the world to us former players,” says former cornerback Chip Parkins (’77). (Center): McMillin with NFL All-Pro Charles Haley (’87) and Gary Clark (’85). (Below): Receiving kudos from Linwood H. Rose.



winning program that produced, among others, the only NFL player to earn five Super Bowl rings, Charles Haley (’87).

“I always believed it was important to have a coaching philosophy,” McMillin says. “I wrote it out; I gave it to the players. We talked about it.”

McMillin’s philosophy is simple. Number one was getting an education and developing relationships. Football came second. “Going to class, being organized, being on time. These were extremely important me,” the coach says.

McMillin required each player to set short- and long-term goals, and then to go about accomplishing them methodically. “My players had to develop a master organization calendar — in detail. They had to write it out and turn it in every semester to their position coaches,” he explains. Today’s student-athletes have academic coaches, but back then the coaching staff did it all.

McMillin taught his players to plan for success. As a result, more than 90 percent of his players graduated. “I’m very proud of that,” he says.

The discipline that McMillin modeled and taught his players is a reflection of his coaching philosophy and his own life — where fundamental personal discipline promotes excellence. Thanks to McMillin’s philosophy and high standards, JMU athletics programs like Day With the Dukes — where student-athletes reach out to the community — flourish.

After McMillin stepped down as head football coach in 1984, he earned his doctorate in sport psychology from the University of Virginia. With his new credentials, he continued to have a significant impact on Madison as a professor of kinesiology.

Though retired, McMillin continues to practice what he believes through his association with the center as a mental training coach for current student-athletes. **M**

Dukes’ scorecard (cont.)

Hitting the big time

We watched the YouTube video about the expansion about 50 times and tried to picture ourselves playing in the new stadium. We talk about it at lunch, in the locker room, whenever we get a chance. Playing in front of a bigger home crowd will be icing on the cake. It will be big time.



— **Vidal Nelson**
sophomore strong safety, Virginia Beach

Green wooden bleachers to Purple Pride

I am very proud to be a part of JMU’s football heritage as both a former player and a coach under Chal-lace McMillin. As a freshman member of the first varsity team in 1974, I was proud that Madison College was the first Virginia college to get an artificial playing surface. We thought that was awesome! However, the plans and pictures of the new stadium with all of its amenities far surpass my utmost hopes and dreams for the JMU program. In less than 40 years we have come a long way from our green wooden bleachers.



— **Joe Carico (’78, ’81M)**
former defensive back; Harrisonburg High School athletics director

Purple prestige

The expansion will make it more available for people to come see the Dukes’ show and add more excitement to the game. From a booster standpoint, they really don’t have a luxury area. I know they put them in nice seats now, but it will add a little more prestige to the whole program. We really have a pro-Dukes crowd here and knowing that your team and your fans are behind you only helps you elevate your play.



— **Corwin Acker**
sophomore tailback/receiver Landover, Md.