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Top award winners

Sanford Mayor Rex McLeod (left) poses with top award winners Bobby Hales (center) and Doug Johnson at the Lee County Parks and Recreation Commission Volunteer Appreciation banquet. Johnson won a Distinguished Coaching Service Award, given by his fellow

coaches. He is retiring after 25 years as a volunteer coach. Hales, for the second year in a row, was named Coach of the Year. The dinner was held Wednesday evening at the Moose Club.

Staff photo by Kenneth Garrity

Sanford's Bob Hales: He Can Do Everything

By EARL VAUGHAN
Sports Writer

It's not unusual to see a baseball coach pay a visit to his pitcher on the field during a game. But when Sanford Little Tar Heel League coach Bob Hales heads for the mound, fans can't avoid sitting up and taking notice. Hales doesn't walk out of the dugout. He rolls in his wheelchair.

He's been without the use of his legs since an automobile accident in 1966. Prior to that time he had been very active in baseball.

"I played semipro and service ball and helped coach the Sanford semipro team," he said. "I had two young boys, and I sort of followed them into Little Tar Heel League and took up coaching.

"I've been coaching six or seven years in the Little Tar Heel League program. Prior to that I coached in the Teener and Babe Ruth programs."

But he admitted the accident put his coaching future in limbo, at least temporarily. "I had some reservations early after the accident about what I could do and how my boys would react to it," he said. "I just feel the good Lord left me here for a reason. I don't know what it is. Maybe it's to help these kids.

"You can do most anything if you put your mind to it. I just go at it as hard as I can and I don't ask for any pity or sympathy from anyone.

"These boys treat me like I was standing up. They throw to me as hard sitting in the chair as they would if I was standing up."

Doug Johnson, a veteran of Little Tar Heel League coaching in Sanford since 1955, is sharing the duties of coaching this year's Sanford All-Star team with Hales. He agrees the youngsters on the team have no problem overlooking Hales' handicap.

"They don't even consider it," Johnson said. "We were playing in Siler City in the area tournament this year and a thunderstorm hit. I went to the bus with the team and Bob was in the dugout.

"One of the players kept saying, 'Where's Bob?' Finally another player who was on Bob's team during the year said, 'Don't worry about Bob. He's been in that chair ever since I was born and he can take care of himself.'

"He really felt Bob could do anything, and Bob does do anything. I have seen him pitch batting practice and hit infield. He can do all of it. He coaches football and he's involved with basketball to some extent.

"I don't think you could find a handicapped person who can do any more than he can. I'm amazed at it. I don't feel he's handicapped when I'm coaching against him. I feel maybe I'm handicapped."

Johnson said there's even a good bit of gentle ribbing back and forth between Hales and the players. "We've gotten to calling each other names and we call him Ironsides," Johnson said.

"He gets on the bus and goes everywhere we go. He went through a whole lot to be rehabilitated. His story would be an inspiration to anybody who's handicapped.

"But he's not handicapped in our estimation."



Sports photo — STEVE ALDRIDGE

Bob Hales . . . An inspiration