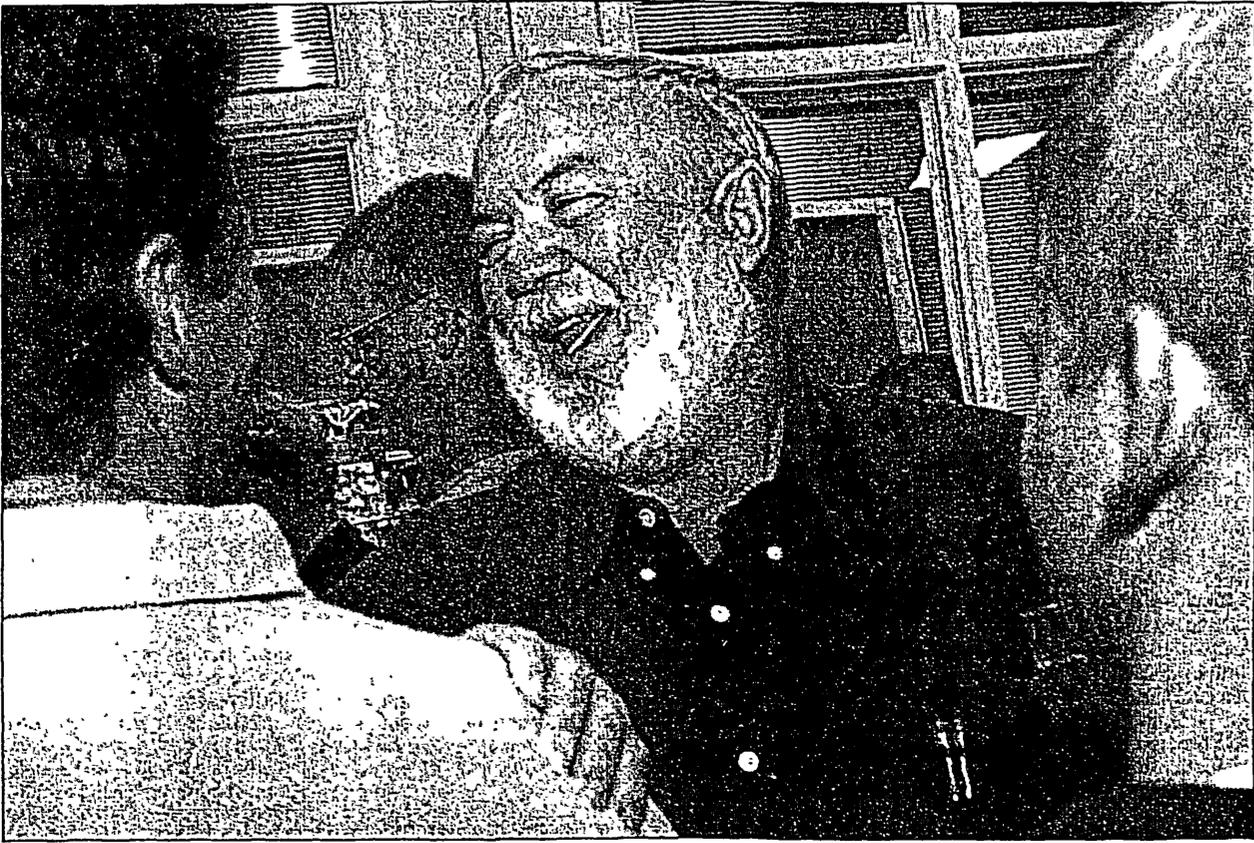


MIDLANDS PROFILE



RENEE ITTNER-McMANUS/THE STATE

Brookland-Cayce High School wrestling coach John Checkovich is greeted by well-wishers during a surprise retirement ceremony. Checkovich began the Bearcats' wrestling program. Below, Checkovich watches a wrestling match during the 1970s in a photo from Brookland-Cayce High School's archives.

'Coach Check' calls it a career

Bearcats wrestling coach retires after 32 years

By RON AIKEN
Staff Writer

ONE BY ONE they shuffled in, renewing acquaintances with smiles and handshakes. Mostly they hovered by the two large bulletin boards filled with pictures, pointing their families to images of themselves in their prime, the bloom of youth on their ruddy faces when decades ago they wrestled for Brookland-Cayce and the man affectionately known as "Coach Check."

They're here, some 200 of them, on a Friday night at Brookland-Cayce's small cafeteria, to recognize, and mostly thank, the man who for 32 years steered the lives of countless Cayce/West Columbia youth.

In 1969, John Checkovich, the man many consider the father of South Carolina high school wrestling, began the wrestling program at Brookland-Cayce and a coaching career second-to-none.

Randy Coker wrestled on Checkovich's 1971, '72 and '73 teams before graduating and joining the Marine Corps.

"Coach Check was more than a coach to those of us who wrestled for him," Coker said. "He was a role model.

"When I was a sergeant, I had this younger Marine I got to know pretty well who later got commissioned and rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel. One day he called me up out of the blue to tell me thanks.

"I asked him what for, and he said because in his career, whenever he would be in a tough spot, he would ask himself, 'What would Sgt. Coker do.' You sometimes don't realize the people you impact, but whatever positive influence I've had is because of the values coach Check taught me."

Coker's son, Adam, graduated in 1993 and also wrestled for

Checkovich.

"My dad always talked about coach Check and what a good man he was," Coker said. "When I got into the program, I realized how right he was.

"Practices were grueling and tough, but I learned how to deal with life, and I wouldn't have missed this night for anything."

Perhaps the most surprising thing about the affair was that it remained a surprise at all.

"If you know coach Check, he likes to know everything that's going on whether it involves him or not," Brookland-Cayce athletics director Brad Coleman joked. "But everyone did a good job keeping quiet and we somehow pulled it off."

Checkovich never saw it coming.

"I thought we were going to have dinner and go to the USC game, then after we ate, my wife tells me she left something at the school," Checkovich said. "They all got me pretty good. I had no

idea.

"But the fact that so many people took time to come from as far away as Georgia and North Carolina to wish me well was very, very touching. It was an emotional night for me and my family."

Capping the many individual testimonials and presentation was an unexpected honor. School officials had been told that, upon their earlier nomination, Checkovich would be awarded the Silver Crescent by the state of South Carolina for his years of service.

When the award was unveiled and the words upon it read aloud, many in the crowd were moved to tears by the surprise.

"By order of the governor," State Rep. and emcee Nikki Setzler said, "I'm pleased to announce that Jim Checkovich has been awarded the Order of the Palmetto, the state's highest honor."

It was a fitting end to a career

of long service and one that left Checkovich — almost — at a loss for words.

"I didn't know what to say, but I never could have believed I would receive that," Checkovich said. "Not an old wrestling coach like me."

Typical Checkovich humility, said the elder Coker.

"That's coach Check to a tee," Coker said. "That's just the kind of man he is.

"He never takes any credit and opens his heart to anyone. Some coaches only want the biggest, strongest and the fastest on their teams, but coach Check would take anybody willing to work.

"That's a real coach. And by the time you left he had made you a better wrestler, to be sure, but more importantly he had made you a better man."

