

Tribute to Charles Atkins for Induction to the Mt. Airy Sports Hall of Fame  
by Steve Atkins

## **Introduction**

Members of the selection committee, friends, guests, family, and new inductees.

On behalf of Mom and the rest of the family, I would like to thank everyone for coming this afternoon. Please know that your support of my fathers induction is a true comfort to our family. I feel that Charlie Atkins is with us all - in the living spirit of all those who have gathered to celebrate this pinnacle of his honors and the honors of this great class of inductees.

First and foremost, I know he would be looking at my mother in appreciation for her loving support, all her good advice and encouragement. Mom, through all the joy, uncertainty, superstitions, raising your four children, you were always his rock and his MVP.

He'd be proud to see all his grandchildren here, and his sons. Dr. Dwight Atkins, the chair or the math department at SCC, Mark, a successful owner of his own consulting firm in Florida, and David high school athletic director who followed our father's footsteps into football. He was equally proud of his grandchildren, nieces and nephews.

## **Achievements**

My father was an athlete. In high school, my dad harnessed this energy into an impressive career in athletics and cemented his legacy on the hearts and souls of so many people. Today his name is etched on the Stadium at North Surry High School, the field house at Mt. Airy High School, and the Sports Hall of Fame room at Elon College. His influence is obviously profound; think about it, these three institutions were the three institutions where he spent most of his life.

Dad coached or played football nearly his entire life...it was, next to his wife and family, his first love. He loved high school football first, college second, and pro-football third. High school football was his preference because it was not perfect. High school athletes weren't particularly good or great athletes (with all due respect to the parents of the kids that dad coached) but it was a great opportunity to encourage and observe and engender accomplishments of young men that often far transcended their abilities, through effort and heart. And it was for dad an opportunity to share - to teach. One of dad's close friends is quoted as saying something like this, "Charlie Atkins can take any subject, and before he gets through with it, he will relate it in some way to football." Whether discussing King David in Sunday School, or world events, football provided the lens and metaphor for communicating the world.

Football was a vehicle that allowed him to become involved in the lives of others. And few people were better cut out for their job. I will always remember my father best with

coaching shorts a white knit shirt, a whistle slung around his neck and a plug of chewing tobacco producing a knot on his cheek and a cigar protruding from his pocket. Actually, I was delighted when my father started chewing cigars rather than Redman. By the way there still exists a genre of Charlie Atkins stories centered around chewing tobacco. I hold the family record for being accidentally spit on by dad who attributed great healing powers to tobacco juice – from relieving the pain of bee stings to killing worms – truly the cure was worse than the malady. Dad at times accidentally swallowed his chew during football games or even when experiencing close calls when teaching drivers training. He even filled his shoes with tobacco spit on long trips with other coaches after realizing he did not have a cup to serve as a spittoon. He had loved his players but was tough but he was loved by them.

Charles Atkins was born and reared in Mt. Airy, to Herbert and Lola Atkins. He graduated from Mt. Airy High School, Lees McRae College (where he met my mother), and Elon College. At Elon and Lees McRae he was selected all-conference. At Mt. Airy he was a member of two state championship football teams - serving as captain his senior year and was selected Most Valuable Player in the state championship game during that year. He was also selected first-team all state, and played in the East-West all-star game. Dad later was drafted into military service and spent his time coaching football throughout Europe.

After leaving the military, because his heart was here, he come back to Mt. Airy to coach football. Dad was asked by Coach Wally Shelton to serve as his assistant coach. Later he took over the head coaching duties from Mr. Shelton. He left Mt. Airy High School in 1963 to coach at neighboring North Surry. It was at North that he made his greatest contributions and developed his reputation in the field of coaching. In short order, he turned North Surry into a perennial powerhouse that at least every other year vied for a conference title. It was at North that he fully matured into the man and coach that was loved by so many people.

At North he won conference championships, was the NC coach of the year, athletic director of the year, selected to coach in the NC East-West and North South all-star games, and was later named Elon College Alumni of the year. At North Surry he also assisted his cousin Bill Atkins, winning two back-to-back state championships in basketball, and also served as athletic director, and, at various times baseball coach and track coach. He also took great pride in his role as guidance counselor at North.

Dad was always an honest football coach exacting from his players their best. And he knew how to take advantage of a situation. Everyone knows the tremendous rivalry between North Surry and Mount Airy High School. Did you ever notice when you went to play out there anything unique? Charlie always had strong big athletes. Mount Airy High School always had fast athletes. Did you ever notice when you went to play at North Surry, when you played one of Charlie's teams, that the grass was always taller?

It wasn't always easy being Coach Charlie. He was a man who held to his convictions refused to play politics, or show favoritism. And, because of that courage, he was

stronger, his teams were stronger, and today we honor his lifetime of achievement. He treated the poor and disenfranchised with respect and made sure that everyone got a fair shot. This was the greatest legacy. If he had sold out early in his career, we would not be here today.

Like so many people of his era, he had to be tough. Life wasn't easy for him. But he loved the town and could entertain his family and friends for hours about growing up in town and his experiences watching major league baseball and his friends who grew up on the square. Despite tough times he never complained and always spoke of his childhood with great fondness.

**In closing I would like to offer a couple of accounts from two of his former players**

### **Dan Grimes and Mark Atkins**

On April 28, 1988, Dan Grymes wrote a letter to Charlie and today is a major in the military He was in the army then, department of the Army headquarters, second infantry division. He wrote a letter to Charlie that I want to read to you because I suppose it symbolizes many a letter that was written from Charlie, including one he wrote to me at a very dark time in my life.

“Dear Coach Charlie,” he begins. “Several years ago I think when I was at West Point you sent me a letter which I still have to this day. You wrote to congratulate me on my accomplishments and offered some words of encouragement for when the going became difficult. Regretfully I never replied but I want to tell you today that I appreciate what you did That was a great letter. That letter helped me realize that everything was a lot better than I would admit. Remarkable you always new when to give a pat on the back or a kick in the tail. For the lessons you taught me then I will be forever grateful. Those lessons still apply with the men I lead now. When I last talked to mom she mentioned that you were under the weather. Coach, get well soon because somebody out there needs you. Somebody needs a couple of words of encouragement and somebody else needs a kick in the rear. And I can't think of a better man to do it than you. take care of yourself and give my regards to the family. I'll see you in June. Sincerely Dan Grymes”

### **Mark Atkins**

He was a football coach and he loved it. But football was not everything. It served as a vehicle for him to nurture, to love, and to teach young people life's lessons. He wanted to win but not at the expense of sacrificing dignity, not at the price of hurting a soul. He was a tough coach but very kind. Nothing pleased him more than the accomplishments of his players after their playing days were over and when the real demands of life arrived. He raised us boys to demand excellence from ourselves. We are who we are because of his legacy of compassion and toughness and hard work. Charlie Atkins touched many lives.

