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TRINITY - When it comes to the longevity of a high school coach, family will always play a big part in that decision on whether to remain on the sidelines or finally hang up the whistle.

After 35 years as the Trinity High School varsity boys basketball coach and 42 years coaching overall, Tim Kelly officially announced his retirement last Thursday, ending a run of success at the Randolph County school that will be very difficult to equal.

The reasons for leaving after all these years is very similar to what persuades other coaches to finally end long tenures: Family and health.

"My daughter had a little boy," Kelly said of his daughter Karen. "Last year, we were scheduled to open the season early and we had rented a cottage at the beach for Thanksgiving and I couldn't go. I realized I missed out on a lot of stuff my children were in when they were young and I didn't want to do that with my grandson. They live in Charlotte, so we can go up and stay for two or three days during the week. When you're coaching, you can't do that."



Coach Tim Kelly. Photo provided.

Kelly, who will turn 67 in July, also pointed to Parkinson's, which he was diagnosed with in 2012. Parkinson's disease is a brain disorder that causes unintended or uncontrollable movements, such as shaking, stiffness, and difficulty with balance and coordination. Symptoms usually begin gradually and worsen over time.

"My Parkinson's has gotten a little worse and this is one way to relieve stress," Kelly said. "Stress can be a trigger. I still love coaching. It was really hard and I went back and forth. I prayed on it and one night I was thinking about it and someone was telling me it was time to hang it up. I still have the passion to do all the stuff you have to do. But I don't have the energy.":

What a ride it was. Kelly amassed 673 wins, a state championship, two regional titles, four sectional

championships and more than 35 regular season, conference tournament and holiday invitational championships. He won The Courier-Tribune Christmas Invitational a record 15 times.

And it all almost never even happened. Kelly was turned down for the head basketball position three times at THS before finally landing the job.

After spending three years at Roanoke Rapids High School, he and his wife wanted to be closer to her parents, so they sought work in this area. His wife landed a counselor job in Randolph County, and while here, she told then administrator Jerry Tillman, who would go on to become a state senator, her husband needed a job.

Kelly said he wasn't dressed for an interview, but Tillman introduced himself and immediately offered him a job coaching at Archdale-Trinity Middle School.

"We really wanted to move closer to her parents," said Kelly, whose own parents resided near Atlanta. "In Roanoke Rapids, we were five hours from her parents. I needed a job. I enjoyed middle school and was grateful he gave me that job, but that wasn't the level I wanted to coach at. I wanted to coach at the high school level."

While at the middle school for a four-year period, Kelly applied for the varsity basketball position at THS on three separate occasions. He was turned down each time.

When Tommy Pursley became AD, that all changed.

"Tommy Pursley came in as AD and he knew I had coached football before I moved here and he said how would you like to come over here and be a football assistant and head basketball coach?," Kelly said he was asked prior to the 1989-90 season. "I said that would be great. That's how I got to Trinity High School."



Coach Kelly on the sidelines in 2017.

The Bulldogs had tasted very little success in boys basketball to that point, winning just 34 games in the prior 17 years. But Kelly knew the middle school players who would be at the high school and he loved their work ethic and their wanting to work hard and he set out to turn the program around. Kelly established summer camps and other ways to improve the program. It just didn't come quick enough for some parents.

"You know the movie 'Hoosiers'? That was me," Kelly said of a fictional basketball coach who moved to a new town, only to have the townspeople attempt to get him fired after finding out about the coach's no-nonsense and disciplined approach. "They had a meeting and tried to get rid of me. Luckily, I had a strong principal and a strong athletic director. I remember Coach Pursley making a good point back then. He said what are we going to do? Let parents run him off. What are we going to do when they come after the next one of us? You are not going to please everyone."

Pursley very well may have saved the THS basketball program that day.

What followed was a truly impressive era of basketball under Kelly. First led by Ken Spell and Adam Roberts, Kelly's system began to gel with the players and a once-struggling program flourished.

Championships followed and then in 2004, everything came together. In one of Kelly's fondest memories in all his years at THS, the Bulldogs, who were led by a trio of seniors who had started since their freshmen seasons, rolled to the state 3-A championship. Led by Tim Kelly, Jr., Josh King and John McEachin, the same group that reached the sectional finals in 2001, made their first regional appearance in 2002 and advanced to the sectional finals again in 2003, the Bulldogs defeated Dudley 73-64 at the Dean Smith Center in Chapel Hill for the coveted state crown. Seniors Dustin Everette, David Idol and Jonathan Watts were also key contributors to the season.

"When Tim came through, I got so close with those guys," Kelly said. "Josh King used to go on family vacations with us. You get to where you love those guys. I love Josh King. I love Robert Mitchell. Dom (Dominick Payne). He's a great guy. Those are the guys. I really like this group coming in now, but it's time."

Throughout his time, Kelly has been a big inspiration to a lot of his former players and assistant coaches. A number have gone on to have lucrative coaching careers themselves. The long list includes David Spell, Brian Nance, Mitchell, Norman Weeks, Rick Halo, Tim Setzer, King, who is coaching professionally overseas, and Dennis Hamilton. There are more.

"When you think of Trinity High School or Randolph County basketball, you think Coach Tim Kelly," said Mitchell, the THS Athletic Director and longtime assistant coach who played under Kelly. "I have been blessed to work with Coach Kelly for the last 20 years, two as a player and 18 as a coach. I credit Coach Kelly with all of my success as he pulled me into basketball my junior year, transforming me as an athlete and giving me the inspiration to be a school teacher and coach."

After graduation, Kelly hired Mitchell as an assistant and there he remained until this year, when prior to Kelly retiring, Mitchell announced he would be staying at THS as AD, but leaving the basketball program.

"He has supported me every step of my journey as a coach, mentor, co-worker, and most importantly as a friend," Mitchell said. "It was also great to see over the last couple years Randolph County name the gym after Coach Kelly and to see Trinity High School start a Hall of Fame and honor Coach Kelly in its inaugural class. It is definitely sad to see the retirement of Coach Kelly come today, but I am happy for him to have some more time to spend with his family and his grandchild."

Current Asheboro High School boys coach Brian Nance, who spent many years with the girls programs at Randleman and Trinity high schools, said he owes a lot to Kelly.

"I was the girls coach at Trinity and whether we had the early practice or the late practice, he let me stay and work his practices," Nance said. "It was like a clinic every day for me, learning

how to run practices, maybe being a little more efficient. I had seven years at that point, but those three years at Trinity, I really stayed close to him. I was at all his meetings with the team. I was there for the state championship year and then the rebuilding year and then the next year when they won another conference championship.

"He was the one who told me to apply for the Asheboro (boys) job," Nance continued. "I was not going to do it because it was boys and I had been on the girls thing for so long. He encouraged me to apply and I have been here 18 years. We continue to be close."

This past year, the THS gymnasium was renamed in his honor and he became an inaugural member of the Trinity High School Hall of Fame. In all, Kelly coached 35 years of basketball, 14 years of football - including six as a head coach, one year of baseball and one year of track.

"I still want to be involved at a level they feel comfortable with," Kelly said, adding that former player and Providence Grove High School basketball coach Brett Andrews has moved to Trinity and was named interim head basketball coach for the remainder of the summer. "If it wasn't Brett, if it was someone from outside, I'd be done, out. I will do a lot with Brett, as much as he feels comfortable with. I want to make sure I don't cross that line where I am overstaying my welcome."

So as Kelly's days as a head coach ends, it would be hard to find a coach who meant more to a school or a community.

"A great place with great teachers," Kelly answered when asked to describe Trinity High School. "The teachers are involved with their students and they support athletics. I love Dr. (Brian) Toth and Robert is the best athletic director Trinity has ever had. He goes beyond. I've never had any doubt my kids work hard. For me, it was a great place to be for 35 years."