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Tony Cirelli



Jeff Willis



Rodney Bennett

# Trio of coaches excited to be inducted into JUCO Hall of Fame

By MATT MEYER Special to The Daily Sentinel

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Coaching isn't a solo endeavor. There are assistant coaches, players, alumni, families, faculty, staff and administration who all factor into the success of a coach, especially at the junior college level.

For three of the 2023 inductees into the NJCAA Baseball Coaches Association Hall of Fame, that's a common theme — no one got there alone.

Rodney Bennett, Frederick Community College (Maryland)

In his first 20 seasons with the Cougars, Bennett amassed a record of 719-286, crossing both 700 wins and 1,000 games coached during the 2022 campaign. This year, FCC has posted a 34-12 record and will once again battle for a Region XX title, the 20th trip for the team during the skipper's tenure.

“It’s definitely a surreal feeling just to know how many people actually made this happen,” Bennett said. “Hundreds and hundreds of players, dedicated and loyal assistant coaches, and most of all my family who has allowed me to follow my passion. I might be individually recognized, but this doesn’t happen without a ton of people.”

His squad was No. 1 in the rankings during the 2011 season, the first program in the school’s history to reach that mark. They’ve also sent 227 players to four-year institutions. So far, he’s made five trips to the NJCAA Junior College Division II World Series, including in 2021 and 2022.

“What really stands out collectively are all the postseason memories,” Bennett said. “I’ve been doing this for two decades and to get five trips is so special. It’s the goal every season because the more success you have, the more opportunities your players have to move on.”

Tony Cirelli, Mesa Community College (Arizona)

Cirelli’s history with the Thunderbirds runs deep, all the way back to 1981, when he played for the program. After earning two degrees from Arizona State, he came back to Mesa in 1985 as an assistant coach. With a decade of experience under his belt, he took over the top coaching spot in 1995 and has been successful ever since. The Thunderbirds won the NJCAA Division II World Series in 2014, the pinnacle of a nearly three-decade career where Cirelli has built up a 992-589 record with 22 postseason appearances. He’s coached 23 All-Americans and 60 players who have played professional baseball.

“The first thing I thought was, ‘Golly, accepting this feels almost selfish,’ “ he said. “There are so many other people and coaches over the years who have had a big part in what we’ve built and who I’m representing with this award.

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“This all started out with me not wanting to ruin the tradition of baseball at Mesa. I didn’t want to let the program down and I didn’t want to let the alumni down. We have alumni who are so proud to have played at this program and we want them to keep coming back and supporting this program.”

Jeff Willis, Louisiana State University Eunice

There’s been a whole lot of winning for the Bengals since Willis arrived in 2003. This year, he started his 21st season as head baseball coach and his 19th as athletic director. During that span, he’s stacked up seven Division II national championships, seven NJCAA National Coach of the Year awards and a 942-213 record, not counting the 2023 season.

He’s sent more than 200 athletes to four-year institutions and 57 to the professional ranks.

“It’s a team award, not an individual one,” Willis said. “It took a whole team to accomplish this with tremendous assistant coaches and tremendous players through the years. We’ve also had some fantastic faculty, staff and administrators here who have made this an enjoyable ride.

“We’ve always prided ourselves on caring less about what’s on the scoreboard and more about the young people who are going to be husbands and fathers, and the impact they’ll make in the community. That’s been the biggest success for me.”

