

Matthews shows gentler side as guest coach at camp

'It's fun to come back and watch it.
That was my pleasure, to coach the kids'

HERB ZURKOWSKY
THE GAZETTE

WED. 6 JUNE 2012

LENNOXVILLE - The man who for decades struck fear into the hearts of Canadian Football League rookies, and the same one who had a love/hate - mostly the latter - relationship with the media, takes slow, measured steps as he walks across the field, the pain quite evident.

Mentally, Don Matthews is as sharp as ever; his quick wit still readily evident. Physically, unfortunately, his years in football have extracted a toll. He had knee-replacement surgery late in 2009. A joint was replaced in one hand in May 2010. He clears his throat regularly while coughing intermittently.

The second-winningest head coach in Canadian Football League history will be 73 on June 22. When he was on the job, Matthews rarely, if ever, let people into his personal life. But now, in retirement, he has become softer around the edges, readily talking about his wife, Steph-

anie, the son he adopted, Blaze, their life in Beaverton, Ore., and even the recent death of his beloved Rottweiler, BJ, from cancer.

"I can't imagine it being worse for anyone than it was for me. It was a very difficult time," Matthews told The Gazette during an interview this week. "We got another dog. We went to the pound and saved a life. BJ's passing allowed that. We put his ashes down by his favourite run, released a balloon into the sky on a beautiful Oregon sunny day. It was closure for us."

Matthews is at Alouettes' training camp until Thursday, serving as a guest coach for the team he was associated with from 2002 until late in the '06 season, when he resigned, stating anxiety-related issues. He led the Als to a Grey Cup his first year, along with two other appearances.

Matthews received a call from head coach Marc Trestman several weeks ago, asking for assistance with the team's defence and special



PETER McCABE THE GAZETTE

Former Alouettes head coach Don Matthews (centre) says he misses football, but has no plans to return to the game.

teams - two aspects Matthews mastered during nearly 25 seasons as a CFL head coach with six teams.

Under new defensive coordinator Jeff Reinebold, the Als have vowed to be more aggressive defensively. Matthews's teams put relentless pressure on the quarterback.

"I started a lot of that stuff way back in a different era. Jeff references the fact this is the defence Don Matthews invented," he said. "I feel very flattered when I hear that, but I don't believe it's entirely true.

"It feels great to be back," he added. "I was out of football totally, so it's fun to come back and watch it. That was my pleasure, to coach the kids."

Retirement, Matthews said, is treating him well. He moved to Oregon to be near his three grown boys and six grandchildren. From his home, Matthews can see Mount St. Helens to one side, Mount Hood to the other. He has access to one CFL game per week, but doesn't always sit at home to watch them. Matthews didn't watch last

year's Grey Cup.

"I don't miss this to be honest. I gave so much of my life to it," he said. "I missed my children growing up. I'm fortunate to go back and have Blaze do all the childish things and me be a witness. My family gives me a chance to enjoy things I couldn't because of coaching.

"I've put this life in my past. I'm 72."

Most are aware of the accomplishments. Matthews retired with a record of 231-132-1, second behind Wally Buono. He's tied for the league record, with five Cup victories and nine appearances. But Matthews won five additional titles as Edmonton's defensive coordinator. A five-time coach of the year, he was inducted into the Canadian Football Hall of Fame last September. Matthews won championships in four different decades.

"I was able to change with

UPDATES FROM ALS' CAMP

For more news as the Alouettes prepare for the season, go to montrealgazette.com/thesnap

the times and be successful. That's pretty high on my priority list," he said.

He's disappointed he couldn't deliver Als owner Robert Wettenhall another title, although Matthews doesn't dwell on failures. If he's the greatest coach in CFL history, he'll leave that for others to debate. "I'm the greatest coach in the CFL named Matthews," he said.

Matthews emphatically states he'll never return to coaching, physically unable to withstand the daily rigour. "You've got to understand the pain's real," he said. "It has been three days and I'm very tired. My legs hurt."

Matthews admits he misses the daily bantering with the media, and is quite amazed to learn of the fear he inspired in many.

"I don't know if you always knew when I was kidding. But I had a lot of fun," he said. "My wife says I'm such a big teddy bear. I think I am. I really do. I'm not an intimidating guy. I think I look that way, but I'm not that way inside."

hzurkowsky@
montrealgazette.com

Twitter: @HerbZurkowsky1