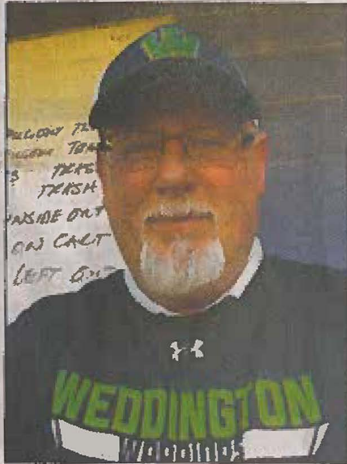


SPORTS: INSIDE



**'POP' RIVERS HONORED**

Eddie 'Pop' Rivers is the coach that keeps on giving to his community. Rivers was a Hall of Fame coach at Forest Hills High for 29 years and now is a volunteer assistant coach at Weddington High.

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WEEKEND EDITION

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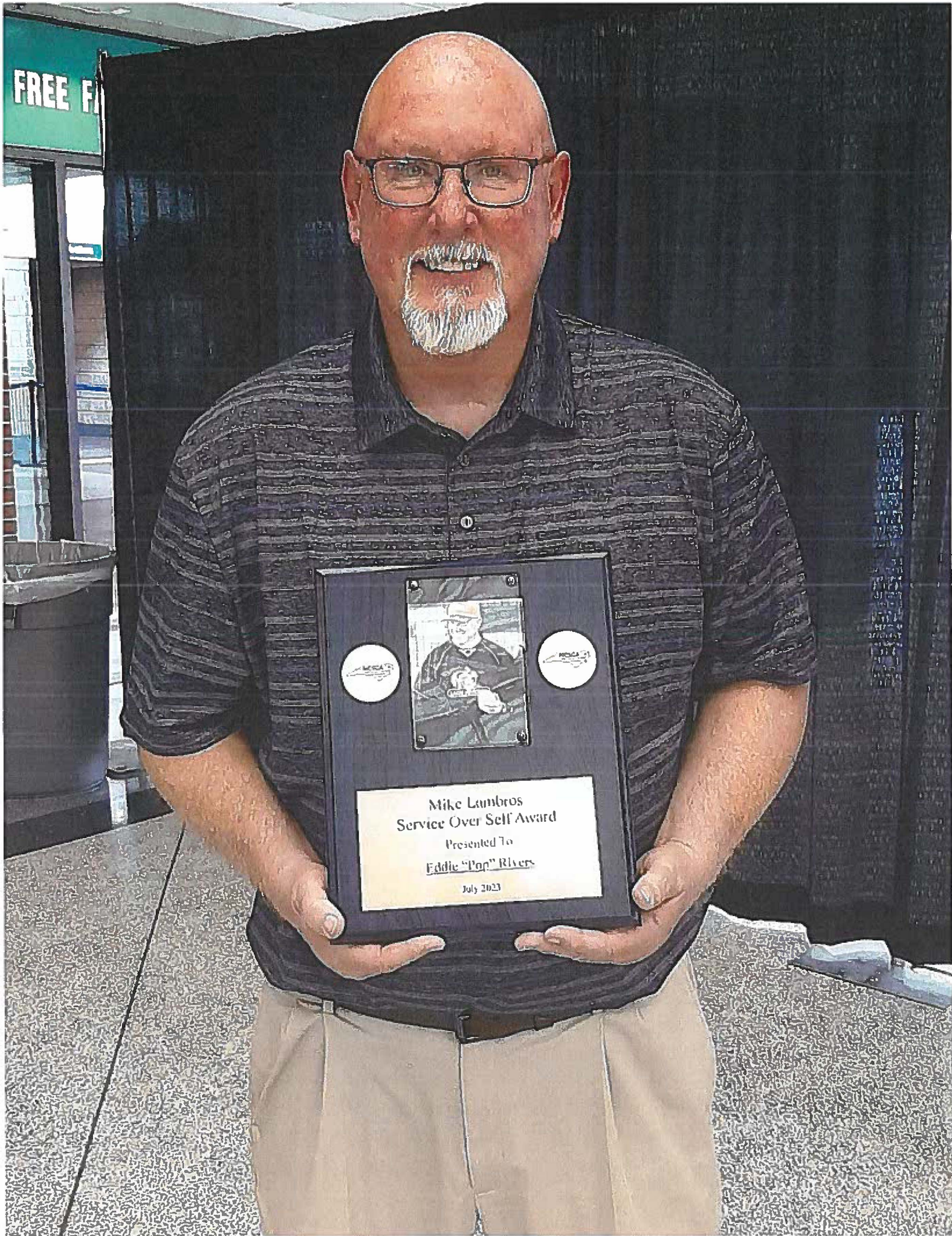
## Pop Rivers Receives Lambros Award

Eddie “Pop” Rivers has been awarded the first annual Mike Lambros Service Over Self award by the North Carolina Softball Coaches Association. Association members were asked to nominate deserving individuals who best represented the unselfish work that goes on in front of and behind the scenes to enhance all aspects of high school softball in the State of North Carolina. Pop was selected by committee from a large number of nominations.

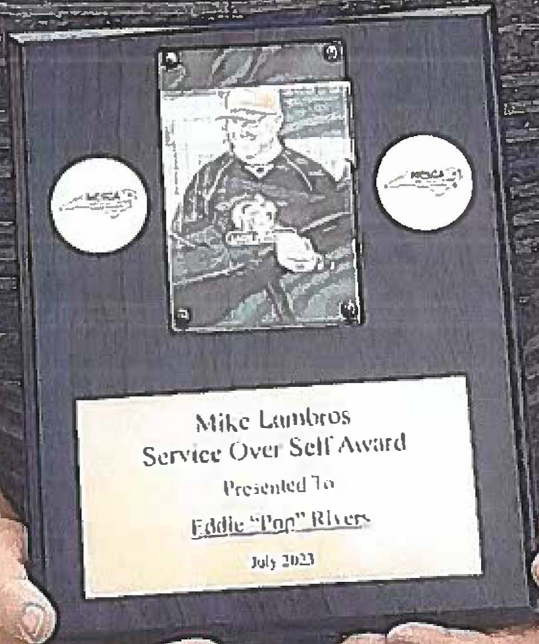
This award was created to honor the memory of Coach Mike Lambros, the well-known, long-time softball coach at North Davidson High School. Coach Lambros was instrumental in promoting high school fastpitch softball in North Carolina. In addition to maintaining a very successful softball program at North Davidson, he constantly worked beyond his own school’s boundaries to elevate our sport. He had a big impact on high school softball as we now see it in our state.







FREE F...





## SPORTS

Got a tip about Union County sports you want to share?

Contact Jeremy Vernon at jvernon@theej.com.

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# Softball coach building on his legacy

BY MICHAEL WAYNE O'NEILL  
E-J CORRESPONDENT

MARSHVILLE — There's no slowing down Eddie Rivers. He likes to keep busy. After spending seven seasons coaching multiple sports at Central High in Pageland, S.C., the



Eddie "Pop" Rivers

North Carolina softball Hall of Fame coach delivered on a promise he made to Weddington High softball coach Claire Lyerly to assist her before the 2022 season.

Rivers said the first practice he coached at Weddington was about learning names. "The only one I knew was Claire," he said. "I didn't know any of (the players). I just showed up, and she said, 'This is Coach Rivers.' ... It was between a J.V. and Varsity team, and you're looking at 25 to 26 girls, and I was like 'Oh my goodness. How am I going to learn these names?'"

Over time, Rivers adjusted to his role.

Hence, the two coached against each other multiple times when Rivers led the Yellow Jackets. "They were always great games," Lyerly said. "I remember he always had a couple of special players ... great groups of girls, and I always liked his staff as a whole."

Rivers has learned to embrace the style of all the players in Weddington's program, just like he did during his 29-year coaching career at Forest Hills. Graduating senior Morgan Nayle said: "... He quickly noticed every capability each player had."



N.C. Hall of Fame coach Eddie Rivers is known as "Pop" around Forest Hills High, where he coached in multiple sports. Jennifer Smith, left, a 1989 graduate, coached alongside Rivers from 1998 until 2000.

## Legendary softball coach says nickname's 'respect I've gained throughout the years'

BY MICHAEL WAYNE O'NEILL  
E-J CORRESPONDENT

MARSHVILLE — Thousands of Forest Hills High School alumni call Eddie Rivers, "Pop", because of the memories they hold to their hearts. Before coming to Forest Hills, Rivers worked in construction and volunteered at his alma mater, Central High School in Pageland, S.C., as a volunteer football coach.

The nickname originated in 1984 when Rivers was hired as the

in-school-suspension coordinator in the second week of the football season at Forest Hills. The ISS room back then was a storage closet that could only fit 10 student desks and a teacher desk.

Rivers recalls an incident when 10 students were assigned ISS for getting in trouble on the career center bus. While at the school, he and the students brought lunch back to the storage closet. The students asked Rivers for money for a whole week and he gave them money to eat.

"About Wednesday of the next week I said 'Look! This has got to stop. It's got to the point where I couldn't eat lunch because I'm paying for all of y'all,'" Rivers said. "I told them 'I'm not your daddy and I'm not your papa.' I go out to football practice with (head) coach (Johnny) Lowery and the rest of the guys that afternoon and I walk in and coach Lowery says 'Hey, Pop! How's it going?'"

SEE RESPECT/PAGE A7

## RESPECT

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"I said, 'Woah!, where did that come from?' (Lowery) said 'That's what the kids call you.' I tried to fight it but it's been Pop ever since that second week at Forest Hills."

From there, Rivers used the nickname to teach thousands of alumni life lessons on the football field, on the courts, and on the softball field. He spent 29 years coaching softball, 18 years as an assistant football coach, five years as the girls basketball coach and four seasons with volleyball.

Current Forest Hills head softball coach Crystall Trull (1998 graduate) can attest to Rivers' laid-back reputation; she said he made practices, games, and bus rides fun. Trull said she never forgets the respect he showed to every player, regardless of their ability.

"His commitment to FHHS athletics and academics was incredible," Trull said. "He was like our parent 'Dad' when we were at school. He treated his players how he would want his daughters to be treated. He always gave you everything he had when he was coaching which made you want to do the same

for him." Forest Hills 1989 graduate Jennifer Smith coached alongside Rivers from 1998 until 2000. She also coached junior varsity girls' basketball at Forest Hills and Parkwood, including varsity cheer at Union Academy.

"Not only is he a fantastic coach, he's one of the best men I've ever known," Smith said. "I learned so much from him about softball and how to be a coach. Many of the strategies I used in my coaching career were modeled after watching him with his teams. He's fiercely competitive but always with good sportsmanship."

Not only Rivers kept a family-oriented culture, he also brought his musical talents to busrides, which made his players want to sing. Shelley Holmes, a 1992 graduate, recalls singing together as a team after wins and losses. "... The music helped with the camaraderie."

Today, Rivers calls his nickname "a sign of respect." He is currently a volunteer softball coach at Weddington High and a substitute teacher at Central Academy in Monroe.

"I'm proud when someone calls me 'Pop,'" Rivers said. "It's not some quirky nickname... That's respect I've gained throughout the years."

## LEGACY

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"He took that in a positive direction as he would use it for his own knowledge towards the games ... He helped me learn the game of softball by always working hard. He kept my motivation high as I went through a pitching slump at the beginning of the season."

Rivers is also a substitute teacher at Central Academy of Technology and Arts.

"Every time I go up there, it's kind of a family reunion," Rivers

said. "There's five or six of the people who are teaching there now that I taught (at Forest Hills). ... We have a big time over there, and it's a great place to sub. I enjoy it."

Rivers helped Lyerly guide Weddington to a 13-13 overall record in 2023.

"Who he is in the softball community is who he is outside of the softball community," Lyerly said. "He is a God-fearing man. He loves his wife, Pam, and loves their daughters, and really is that kind of person who would do anything for anyone."