

James 'retiring' at Washington, but wants to coach

Written by Jim Ecker

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Paul James announced Wednesday that he plans to retire as the activities director and football coach at Cedar Rapids Washington after the 2015-16 school year, but he plans to re-apply for the football job.

Due to state rules, James has to completely retire from Washington before he can re-apply for the football job in order to keep all of his retirement benefits.

"I'll have to sit out a period of time and re-apply," he said. "I don't know exactly how it will go, but there's a possibility.

"I'd like to continue, but IPERS rules force you to resign everything and then there's a rule you have to follow as far as coming back.

"You have to be real careful. Nothing can be pre-arranged. I would stand to lose my entire retirement benefits. I'll have to wait until it's posted and re-apply and see what happens."

James thinks there will be enough time to "retire" and then be re-hired as the football coach for the 2016 campaign. "Yeah, that possibility exists," he remarked.

It's probably safe to say he'll be the football coach for the Warriors next season, given his track record and close ties to the Washington community after serving at the school for 40 years.

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Mike Johnson, who has been an associate principal at Washington for the last 21 years, will succeed James as the activities director.

James, 61, coached two state championship teams in girls basketball, two state runner-up teams in football and has served as the school's athletic director the last 10 years.

He's enjoyed a long and distinguished career as a coach and administrator. Now he'd like to have more time for himself and his family.

His wife, Karen, plans to retire in two months as the secretary of food and nutrition for the Cedar Rapids school district. They have three grown children and three grand-children.

"It's been 40 years that I've been at the school," said James. "I'll be 62 this spring. It's just time.

"I'll be able to do some of the little things in life that I think my wife and I will enjoy doing. She's going to retire March 31.

"It's just a little thing like physical exercise and working out. You don't have much time for your family and yourself in this job. I think we'll enjoy having some time to ourselves."

James returned for a second tour of duty as the football coach three years ago, serving as both the football coach and athletic director at one of the biggest high schools in Iowa.

The Warriors reached the championship game of the Class 4A playoffs in 2014 and made the quarterfinals in 2015, compiling a 23-3 record during that two-year span. He's also served as an assistant track coach during his career.

"No one has had a bigger positive impact on the Washington High School community during the

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past 40 years than Paul James," said Dr. Ralph Plagman, the principal at Washington. "His contributions have been enormous."

James twice was named the Iowa Girls Basketball Coach of the Year and the Iowa Football Coaches Association 4A Football Coach of the Year. He also has been inducted into the Iowa Girls Basketball Coaches Association Hall of Fame.

Johnson has been a faculty member at Washington for the last 26 years. He was the head girls swimming coach and assistant boys swimming coach at Washington for five years and is active in the Iowa High School Swim Coaches Association and the National Interscholastic Swim Coaches Association.

"Mike was a Division I athlete at the University of Northern Iowa and has never lost his passion for athletics and other co-curricular activities," Plagman said. "Paul James leaves big shoes to fill, but Mike Johnson is the perfect fit to replace him."

James said he felt "rejuvenated" when he returned as the football coach three years ago when he succeeded Tony Lombardi. He loves coaching the game, but has not set an exact time frame for how long he'd continue as head coach, assuming he is re-hired for the job.

"We'll cross that bridge when we get there," he said. "We'll see how long the kids respond and coaches respond and stuff like. It's still fun, but we'll see what's around the corner. There are no guarantees."

James is a member of the executive board of the Iowa High School Athletic Directors Association and would like to continue serving on the board after he retires as Washington's activities director.