

41st Annual HAECO Invitational Honorary Chairman: Tommy Watkins

HAECO Invitational honorary chairman Tommy Watkins is a sports fan – an active one. He definitely finds sports most enjoyable when one of the teams is wearing the familiar light blue of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. But if Tar Heel talent is nowhere to be found, Watkins will find another arena and get involved.

“Sports are fun for everybody involved, and they can impact people and the community in positive ways,” Watkins said. “Sports build character like the HAECO does. At the high level, I think sports engage people in something that’s exciting, but below that are ripple effects into the community that cause good things to happen. And it’s really fun to be a part of that process.”

Watkins serves on the board of the Piedmont Triad Charitable Foundation, the body that oversees tournament operations for the PGA TOUR’s Wyndham Championship. He recently completed his term on the board of directors at The First Tee of the Triad – a local chapter of the international organization founded by the World Golf Foundation to teach kids life skills through golf.

A native of Wilmington, N.C., the 2011 Greensboro Sports Council president has been somewhat of a fixture at the HAECO Invitational over the years. Despite all he has done on behalf of the Greensboro Sports Council and the HAECO Invitational, he was blown away when told he’d been selected as this year’s honorary chairman.

“I was surprised, but I was thrilled,” Watkins said. “I truly felt honored. I never chaired the tournament, but I’ve always been a ‘worker bee.’ I’ve worked as a volunteer for a long time with the halftime shootouts and really whatever I was asked to do. During the years I was most active in the Sports Council when I was on the board and later president and chairman, I was involved in everything it takes to put on the tournament – everything from planning and fundraising to awarding the Bill Lee Scholarships.”

The Bill Lee Scholarship is awarded to four HAECO Invitational participants each year in memory of Bill Lee, a Greensboro sports enthusiast and Sports Council member who died in 2001. All eight participating schools are invited to nominate student athletes each year; winners are the most qualified applicants regardless of which participating school they represent.

“Presenting those Bill Lee Scholarships to the winning students and their families might be the most rewarding thing I’ve done at the HAECO Invitational,” Watkins added. “It was great to see those kids receive the scholarships with their families watching and to see how happy and proud everyone was after receiving them.”

The HAECO Invitational has grown quite a bit since Watkins joined the Sports Council back in 2007, but count Watkins as one insider that’s not the least bit surprised the Greensboro holiday high school basketball tradition continues to thrive more than four decades after it was founded.

“Maybe some of the people working so closely on it each year didn’t see it coming because they were so closely involved,” Watkins said. “But when you pause, take a breath and look at the cumulative dollars that have been given back to the schools, it’s super impressive. I think you have to look at the big picture to get a feel for that. When you do, you say, ‘Wow; what a real contribution to the community.’”

And now the future is secure for the tournament founded in 1976 as the Little 4. Title sponsor HAECO Americas, an international aircraft maintenance, repair and overhaul company

located at Piedmont Triad International airport recently announced a five-year extension of its title sponsorship further cementing the HAECO Invitational into the Piedmont Triad sports landscape.

“It’s a fabulous link between athletics and the business community; it’s tremendous,” Watkins said. “That’s what you want; it’s the kind of synergy that you hope develops and turns into a win-win for all involved. It’s great for HAECO; it’s great for all the kids and their families, and that’s just fantastic.”

Watkins, who earned his undergraduate and law degrees at the University of North Carolina, is a partner with Schell Bray PLLC and currently serves as the firm’s chairman. He serves on the Boards of Visitors at UNC Children’s Hospital and its Lineberger Cancer Center and is a past member of the UNC Board of Visitors, the Board of Governors of the North Carolina Bar Association and the Greensboro Rotary Club Board of Directors.

He and his wife have three adult daughters and four grandchildren. In addition to college sports, he enjoys salt water activities and golf.