

## Make Your Move

# Firefighters coach high school sports after Hanford workday

Armando Plata and Lester “Shag” Williams have a few things in common: both are firefighters and emergency medical technicians in the Hanford Fire Department, both have high school coaching jobs after their shifts end at HFD and both have a big heart.

As HFD firefighters they have to stay in shape, and federal regulations governing the fitness of firefighters mandate that they are allowed one hour of training time four times during their work week. Both Plata and Williams make use of the training facility at the 200W Fire Station to maintain physical fitness for their work, but it also allows them to keep up with, and provide a good example for, the high school athletes they coach after they finish their day’s work at Hanford.

Plata is varsity wrestling coach at Prosser High School and Williams is head coach of the basketball program at Davis High School in Yakima. From November through March, they finish their Hanford work in mid-afternoon and head for the high school gym to train the young men on their teams. Often they do not come home until late in the evening, when many of us with only one job are already sleeping.

“It makes for a long day,” Plata said, “We often do not have weekends and holidays with our families at home, because of tournaments and games.”

Fortunately for both men, their families share the love of high school sports and are involved in running tournaments and games and come along on trips. Both of Plata’s sons were high school wrestlers and his daughter, now a junior at Prosser High School, helps keep the books for the teams. Plata’s wife supervises matches and tournaments. Williams’ wife and daughter also help support the basketball team and attend games.

“The Hanford Fire Department has been good to us in allowing us to coach after work,” Plata said. “The management believes in what we do as coaches.”

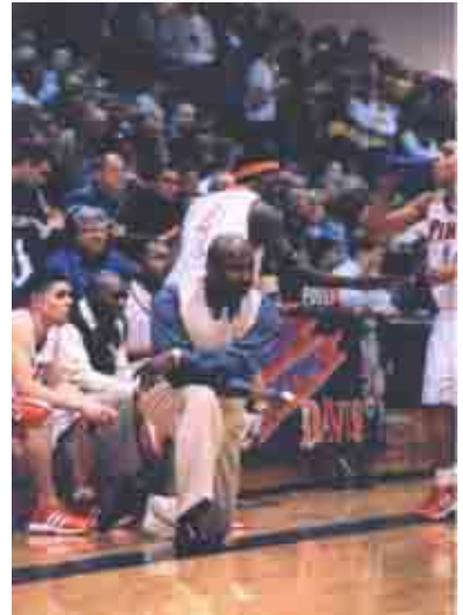
Plata and his brothers wrestled in high school. As with many of the young men he now coaches, agricultural work was not that plentiful in winter — wrestling season — so he was able to participate in the after-school practices and weekend tournaments.

Williams graduated from Davis High School, played basketball for the University of Washington and later for the World Basketball League in Canada.

Williams and Plata share a philosophy about sports — “Sports are great,



**Hanford Fire Department firefighter and Prosser High School wrestling coach Armando Plata confers with members of the team during a tournament.**



**Coach Lester “Shag” Williams watches from the sidelines as the Davis High School varsity basketball team played Richland High School last season. Williams is also a firefighter with the Hanford Fire Department.**

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but they are not everything. You have to keep your grades up so that you have more opportunities in life,” said Williams.

Not all high school basketball players will be as lucky as LeBron James, to whom Nike gave \$90 million to advertise its shoes.

That is hard for kids to understand. To illustrate his point, Williams introduces his National Basketball Association-star wannabes to former high school basketball stars who were injured or just plain didn't realize their dream. Some of those former stars who did not pay enough attention to their studies are now out of school, jobless and just “hanging out.”

“If you pay attention to your studies and you are a talented athlete, sports can be your way to get a higher education through a scholarship,” said Williams.

Plata agrees and cites the example of three Prosser High School wrestlers who were gifted athletes and gifted students, and attended Division I schools on scholarships. One student attends Oregon State University, another is at Duke University and one graduated from Lehigh University.

Plata admits that wrestling does not have the professional career potential of basketball. The talented wrestler competes on the college level and, if he is lucky, makes it to the U.S. Olympic team. This fact and the nature of the sport, with the pressure on individual performance, make it harder to recruit athletes.

Many of their athletes come from single-parent homes, and both men find themselves not only in the role of coach, but also counselor, role model and father. “We are not just teaching them to be better wrestlers or basketball players, we are teaching them how to make it in life,” said Williams.

Williams and Plata also find themselves helping their athletes meet some expenses, driving them home after practice and even offering shelter to their players when no one is at the athlete's home after a game or tournament.

Is it worth the time and trouble? Plata and Williams smile and nod.

“Working with young people keeps me young. The payment comes when a kid succeeds in life,” concludes Williams.

And the proof is in the performance. This year Prosser's wrestling team came in sixth at state, the highest level it has achieved as a team to date. The Davis varsity basketball team shares the Big Nine championship with Pasco. “With a team that was all under 6 feet in height,” adds Williams with pride.

Oh, and both Plata and Williams were named “Coach of the Year” in their respective leagues. ■