

Link Walker — Player, Coach, Mentor

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EAU CLAIRE, Wis. (UWECBlugolds.com) - An association with the UW-Eau Claire football program that began more than 60 years ago came to an end Friday (May 28) with the death of Link Walker.

Visitation is scheduled from 4 to 7 p.m. Tuesday (June 1) at the Lenmark Gomsrud Linn Funeral Home (www.lenmarkfh.com), 814 1st Ave., Eau Claire and funeral services will take place at 11 a.m. Wednesday at First Lutheran Church, 1005 Oxford Avenue, Eau Claire with visitation an hour before the service.

Memorials in Link's honor may be given to the Blugold Football Program through the UW-EC Foundation or Northwest Wisconsin Home Care and Hospice, PO Box 2060, Eau Claire, WI 54702.

The only child of a carpenter-contractor, the 84-year-old Eau Claire native began that association as a student-athlete following a 2 ½-year stint as a rangefinder on a destroyer in the United States Navy during World War II. When he returned from military service, Walker enrolled at what was then Eau Claire State Teachers College. He played for Blugold Hall of Fame coach Ade Olson and served as a quarterback for the Blugolds' 1948 conference championship team, the school's first outright league title. He earned eight letters in football and baseball.

Following his graduation, he spent 12 years in the Wisconsin prep ranks with one year at Elcho, one year at Abbotsford, four years at Stanley and six years at Antigo. He had an overall high school record of 65-29-2 and his 1959 Antigo team was ranked No. 2 in the state prior to the time of the state championship series.

Walker returned to what was then called Wisconsin State College at Eau Claire in 1962, serving two years as an assistant coach to Jim Rice and helping the Blugolds earn a conference championship in 1963. He entered graduate school in 1964 at what is now the University of Northern Colorado and served as an assistant coach there for two years. Returning to Eau Claire, he again continued as an assistant coach two more years until taking over the head coaching reins in 1968.

For the next 19 years, he guided the Blugold football fortunes with his most successful era coming in the early 1980s. During a three-year stretch, his teams produced a 23-7 overall record, a 21-3 conference record and won two Wisconsin State University Conference championships. At one point, Blugold teams won 20 consecutive home conference games. His 1981 team went undefeated in the league, finished 9-1 overall and was ranked No. 9 in NAIA Division I, missing the national playoffs by one position in the rankings. His 19-year Blugold record was 104-85-3 giving him a 31-year head coaching mark of 169-114-5. His 19 years and 104 wins are still the most of any Blugold football head coach.

During his head coaching tenure, Blugold teams became known for their potent offenses, leaning heavily on a strong running attack, usually with a good option quarterback. However, defense was not overlooked as evidenced by the 1978 team which posted a school record five shutouts and the 1981 team which led the conference in fewest yards and points allowed.

At the time of his retirement, Chancellor Larry Schnack was quoted as saying, "I have appreciated Link's understanding of the university's educational mission and the role that the football program plays in that mission. In conversations with former athletes, they have expressed their appreciation to Link for the qualities of leadership, fair play, and a healthy competitive spirit that he instilled in them."

Director of Athletics Steve Kurth, who also served as Walker's offensive line coach for 16 seasons, had these comments about Walker on his retirement. "He has had the respect of coaches everywhere. He has had some great teams and some great athletes. Link always liked tough football and tough football players. He liked the competition best when we played against the best opponents."

Walker was inducted into the UW-Eau Claire Blugold Hall of Fame in 1987. His induction plaque has the following two statements: "His players respected for their toughness and competitiveness" and "Will be remembered for his humor, honesty and sincere love of the game of football." Walker was twice the WSUC and NAIA District 14 Coach of the Year.

In 1999, Walker was one of two college head coaches (the other was Wisconsin's Barry Alvarez) to be inducted into the Wisconsin Football Coaches Association Hall of Fame. As a testament to the admiration he had from his former players and coaches, more than 40 were on hand for the ceremony in Madison. Walker has also been inducted into the Eau Claire Memorial High School Old Abe Hall of Fame.

Among the things Walker took pride in was the number of his assistant coaches and players who went on to coach in both the high school ranks, the collegiate ranks and even the pro ranks. He was the first Blugold football coach to schedule intersectional games, traveling to Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Nebraska to play games. He produced five first team NAIA All-Americans in defensive back Mike March, running back Roger Vann, offensive tackle Jeff Wilson, running back Lee Weigel and offensive tackle Wil Beech. He also had six Academic All-Americans in Paul Sinclair, John Kuhn, Grant Bashore, John McBride, Mark Anderson and Mike Zeihen.

Since his retirement, Walker has served as a mentor to the subsequent Blugold coaches—Jim Lind, Greg Polnasek, Bob Nielson, Todd Hoffner and Todd Glaser—often being called upon to provide motivational talks to the Blugold teams.

Walker and his wife Jean Ann, a retired Eau Claire elementary school teacher, have two daughters. Susan, who lives in Eau Claire, is married to Dr. Richard Cochrane and the couple has two children: Kelsey and Taylor. Sally, who lives in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, is married to Mark Hinders and the couple has two children: Casey and Gabriel.