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Sports



Late Williamsville Athletic Director Jim Rusin and his lawn chair were fixtures at district sporting events. Harry Scull Jr. / Buffalo News file photo

TRIBUTE: Williamsville schools mourn loss of longtime athletic director

Scholastic Spotlight: The late Jim Rusin leaves lasting legacy

Take-charge attitude highlights years of service

By Mary Jo Monnin

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Jim Rusin received his share of ribbing from coaches about the less-than-expensive lawn chair from which he watched Williamsville athletic events. It was about the only thing he took sitting down.

The take-charge, get-it-done athletic director is being mourned by the school district after his death Jan. 6 from esophageal cancer. Rusin, who was 64, devoted 43 years of service to the education of Williamsville athletes.

Kris LaPaglia, a physical education teacher at Heim Middle School and the Williamsville North field hockey coach for 19 years, was one of the last coaches to talk to Rusin, calling him with a curriculum question the day before he died. Despite having known him since she was in middle school, LaPaglia refused to say she was among the coaches closest to him because "there's been so many."

"He said he needed me to take over the assessment writing because he couldn't make it. He didn't sound real well," LaPaglia said. "As we got further into the conversation, I got a sinking feeling. It's hard because this guy has been the backbone of all of us. That guy has been my hero since I was in Mill Middle School. I am going to miss him so much; he was a huge part of my life."

LaPaglia said her field hockey team enjoyed the unconditional support of Rusin. He would often pull his SUV onto a corner of the field during warmups, open the windows and blast the stereo so the girls would have a sound system.

After LaPaglia mentioned his chintzy, vinyl lawn chair was one of the ugliest she'd ever seen, he responded with, "but it was a great deal."

Rusin was memorialized at a Mass on Monday at the University at Buffalo Newman Center. He was remembered for the opportunities he created for kids as the district's AD for the last 33 years. He didn't

just have visions, he followed through on them.

It was his groundbreaking work that helped launch the Western New York Varsity Hockey Federation's boys and girls leagues. He was there in the 1980s to help with the expansion of boys lacrosse. He wrote books and was a sought-after consultant on issues such as head injuries and the dangers of performance-enhancing drugs.

After previous attempts by other groups in the 1980s had failed to sustain a boys hockey league, Rusin was steadfast. He helped put the pieces in place to get hockey players back on the ice.

Many of his fellow athletic directors doubted he'd ever be able to eliminate the fighting that forced earlier leagues to fold.

But with proctors under contract to help stamp out the violence, the Federation made its debut in 1990. The original field of eight teams has grown to 25.

Rusin was an ideas guy who loved challenges. The establishment of the girls hockey Fed was one of his crowning achievements. A humble man as well, Rusin had to be persuaded to drop the first puck in the first game. Despite tight school district budgets, the Federation is in its third season with seven strong teams playing an 18-game schedule.

Rusin was the Section VI chairman the first two years before turning it over to assistant chairman Rick Hopkins, the coach of Williamsville's combined team. Rusin hired Hopkins in 1990 as a substitute teacher and made him JV lacrosse coach.

Rusin, who battled cancer for six months, remained as active in league affairs as his health would allow. Hopkins didn't need caller ID each morning to know who was calling him at school at 8 a.m.

"That phone would ring and it would be Jim wanting a full update on how things went the night before," Hopkins said. "It was his favorite sport at the end. He loved the finesse aspect of it and he became a huge girls hockey fan. He was very visible. He went to everything. The joke was when was he going to take Mrs. Rusin out to dinner? He was a unique man with a lot of energy. He took chances maybe where others didn't."

There was a moment of silence for Rusin before the start of each game last week.

Rusin received his bachelors, masters and doctorate from UB. He was married for 37 years to Dr. Mary Lou State.

Their only son, Dr. John S. Rusin, 37, lives in San Diego. Rusin was extremely proud of his son, especially after he earned his doctorate.

Few were as close to the Rusin family as Kevin Lester, the athletic director at Williamsville South.

The pair worked together for 42 years as physical education teachers, coaches and ADs. He marveled at Rusin's work knowing he oversaw the athletic, PE, health and intramurals programs for three high schools, four middle schools and six elementary schools.

Lester said Rusin could have retired after his devastating diagnosis, but that wasn't his style.

"The last thing he was talking to me about last Wednesday was the possibility of turf fields," said Lester. "His motor was always going. He didn't have to come back to work, but he loved the action. He said there was unfinished business he wanted to take care of. He knew he was dying.

"One thing I will say, is it was never about winning, it was about participation," Lester added. "He would get excited by the fact kids were played hard and that would make him happy. He made sure everyone had what they needed to run their programs and tried to make it a family atmosphere. It's been a great run."

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