

High school coaching legend Jerry Potter dies at 89

Potter, the father of the Putnam City football dynasty of the 1970s, died Friday night, five weeks and one day shy of his 90th birthday. A memorial service will be held at 2 p.m. Wednesday at Church of the Servant at 14343 North MacArthur Boulevard in Oklahoma City.

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Dennis Adams doesn't have any stories to share about Jerry Potter.

But he can talk for hours about Coach Potter.

"Here I am, 70 years old, and I still call him Coach," Adams said. "That's the type of relationship he built with everyone who played for him."



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"He was such a great role model," said Adams, who played for Potter at Harding High School prior to the coach's glory days at Putnam City. "He instilled self-confidence and self-pride in you."

Potter coached a Pro Football Hall of Famer, a guy whose son won the Heisman Trophy, and dozens of men who followed his path into coaching.

Yet when they talk about what Potter meant to them, football is only a side note in the story.

"He's a guy who I could truly call a friend," said Jack Pebworth, who was Potter's assistant coach at Putnam City for 13 years. "If I had a problem, I could talk to him and he'd always listen."

“He was just a good man, and that’s all there was to it.”

A hard-nosed coach, Potter earned his players’ respect by treating them consistently with the same intense, passionate attitude.

“There were a lot of times while I was in high school that he probably wasn’t my favorite guy,” joked Putnam City grad Kent Bradford, the father of Heisman winner Sam Bradford. “We were a bunch of young guys who thought we knew it all, and he was there to constantly remind us that we truly didn’t know it all.

“Practices were not easy. He would holler at you. He made us run and do up-downs and all that stuff. But on Friday nights, you were ready to play. And as you got to know him, you realized what a great guy he was.”

For everything he gave to high school football players during his career, the players and the game gave back in excess.

"That was the greatest time of my life when I was coaching, seeing kids excel," Potter said in 2004, after being elected to the National High School Hall of Fame.

Potter started the football program at Harding in the 1955 season with no juniors or seniors on the team. In 1957, the team played for the Class A state championship, losing to Ada.

Harding played for the title again in 1961 and lost to Cushing. A few years later, Potter left Harding, which converted to a junior-high in the mid-1960s.

Potter took over at Putnam City for the 1965 football season, eventually winning state championships in 1974-75 and 1977.

The 1977 title game between Putnam City and Putnam City West, coached by Mike Little, could be considered one of the greatest games in Oklahoma high school football history. Two legendary coaches, with offenses quarterbacked by the two best players in the state — Kelly Phelps for Putnam City and Scott Tinsley for Putnam City West.

It was played before a standing-room-only crowd at Taft Stadium, with fans overflowing onto the racetrack that then circled the football field. Potter’s Pirates won 21-14 in overtime.

Potter’s teams had incredible rivalries with Little’s squads from Putnam City West throughout the 1970s, as well as Jim Darnell’s Midwest City teams of that era.

Though his tough coaching exterior didn’t always show it, Potter cared deeply for the players he coached.

“He was a tough coach. I remember when we started getting water breaks during practice. That was a big deal,” said Phelps, who went on to play quarterback at Oklahoma.

“He emphasized discipline. He was a good man, kind-hearted, took care of his players. He’s one of those coaches you didn’t always like, because he was hard on you, but he obviously pushed you to success.”

Potter was once asked by a young coach why he never criticized his players’ performance, even when they didn’t meet his expectations.

“Well, I put them on the field, didn’t I?” Potter responded. “How can I bad-mouth them when I’m the one who put them out there?”

Potter’s passion to make his players into better men went much farther than that.

“When I was a sophomore and junior, my mom was working, so Coach Potter would come by every morning and pick me up and take me to school,” said Adams, who went on to a successful high school coaching career around the state. “Now, I didn’t always stay at school, but I think he took me to school to make sure I got there.”

Ironically, Potter didn’t complete high school the first time around.

He quit Classen High during his junior year of 1943 and joined the Marines. He served as an air gunner during World War II before being discharged in December 1945.

He returned to finish high school, then played college football at Cameron University and Oklahoma City University.

Potter made coaching stops at Chickasha and Central as an assistant before taking over at Harding and kicking off a 23-year head coaching career that ended with a 171-67-8 record.

The height of his coaching career was at Putnam City in the mid-1970s. Pebworth served as Potter’s assistant all 13 seasons with the Pirates, then took over as head coach when Potter retired after the 1977 season.

“He was my mentor,” Pebworth said. “He was a down-to-detail coach, focused on the basic things you needed to do. A hard worker and very organized. He taught me how to be a good coach.”

Pebworth says one of Potter’s best qualities was identifying talent in his players to get them in the right positions.

“One year, I had this offensive tackle that I really thought was good, but we needed a tight end, so Jerry came over and took my tackle and moved him to tight end,” Pebworth said. “I thought, ‘Hey, you’re stealing my players!’”

“But Jerry was right. That player was Kent Bradford. He went on to OU and played offensive line, but he made us better as our tight end that year.”

That was the 1974 season, when the Pirates won the first of three state championships under Potter.

Then there’s the story of a skinny little running back named Steve Largent, whom Potter determined would be better suited as a wide receiver. Twenty years later,

Largent was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame, at the time holding every major NFL career receiving record.

“That move altered the landscape of my life,” Largent once said.

Largent, though, credited Potter for something much more significant. Largent essentially grew up without a father, and Potter became the male influence in his life.

"I really believe Jerry's accomplishments in the win-loss column pale in comparison to the lives of the young men he shaped and influenced in a positive way," Largent said in 2004, after Potter was elected to the National High School Hall of Fame.

It wasn't only players who were impacted that way by Potter's guidance.

“My first job was as a graduate assistant for him,” said Lloyd Wertman, who recently retired after a successful 40-year coaching career at various stops around Oklahoma. “He gave me a great foundation for what a coach is supposed to be, and the type of work you're supposed to do. He coached me on how to be a coach. And that's what's so unique about Coach Potter.

“I can't tell you how many coaches he's influenced.”

Potter was a coach in its purest sense. He taught his players how to play, his coaches how to coach, and anyone he worked with how to be a better person.

“It's hard to put in words the impact that man had,” Wertman said. “Not just at Putnam City and the places he was at before that, but the impact he had on the kids and on the coaches and on the state of Oklahoma.”