

J-Hawks dedicate Niemeyer Field

Written by Tom Fruehling

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Even after suffering two embarrassing defeats Wednesday night, Waterloo West softball players one-by-one stopped to pay their respect to Larry Niemeyer, the coach they barely got to know.

“Keep your chin up,” he told the girls. “You’re better than you think you are.”

Niemeyer was seated at a picnic table behind the backstop of the newly named Larry Niemeyer Field at the Jefferson High School softball complex.

Dedicated in his honor between games, the field was built from scratch soon after he started his legendary 33-year career as J-Hawk coach in the spring of 1979.

He wanted a place where the players would be proud to play.

Instead of a dirt outfield, it had manicured grass. The diamond was the first at any area high school to have lights. And a lighted sign in right field that Niemeyer designed himself.

It was, and still is, a showpiece.

“This diamond has probably had more high school softball games played on it than any other diamond in Iowa,” Niemeyer said.

And more home team victories, as well.

In 52 years as a high school coach, first at tiny Adel in central Iowa and up through his last at Jefferson in 2012, his teams won 2,089 games and lost just 429. That’s the most ever for any

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coach in the country.

Along the way, his J-Hawk teams went to the state tournament 19 times and won three titles.

Niemeyer was named national coach of the year three times and was inducted into the national high school coaches association Hall of Fame.

Forty-six of his players were named to the all-state team and four are in the Iowa Girls Softball Hall of Fame.

One of them, Liz Erbe, was among several hundred who came to honor the veteran coach Wednesday night.

"Mr. Niemeyer was very easy to play for," said the Cedar Rapids mother of two who was a star pitcher in the mid '90s. "All you had to do was follow the rules and work very, very hard. He wanted every girl to be the very best they could be."

And not just on the field, either.

"As an adult now looking back, Dad wanted everyone to give 110 percent to whatever they did," said daughter Nancee Waterbury, 38, of North Liberty, now a pharmacist with the VA Hospital in Iowa City. "He was so dedicated, so passionate about what he did. He always expected his players to give the same amount of effort that he gave them to them as a coach."

"Dad felt you were short-changing yourself if you didn't do your best."

Nancee, along with sisters Noreen Thurston, 35, and Natalie, 25, played for their father and later helped him coach. Son Nick, 32, was his assistant for 10 years at Jefferson.

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“I don’t know how many hours we spent at this diamond growing up,” said Noreen, who works in marketing at Go Daddy in Hiawatha. “This is where we spent our summers. We’d come here on Memorial Day to plant flowers. We’d come down to rotate the sprinklers.

“And before there were sprinklers, I remember holding a fire hose and watering the field.”

For the girls, a trip to the ball field meant a stop at McDonald’s first.

For Nick, he and his Dad would bring blueberry donuts from Donutland for their chores.

“It’s been my life, too,” said Gwen Niemeyer of their 43-year marriage. “And I’ve enjoyed every day of it.”

She said she knew what she was getting into it when they got married while he was teaching and coaching in Adel.

“Our wedding was on Saturday,” she recalled, “But we had to have the rehearsal and rehearsal dinner on Thursday because he had a basketball game on Friday.”

She can’t count how many games she’s been to over the years, both as a coach’s wife and a player’s mother. Or the times she’s taken tickets at the gate. Or helped with the grounds keeping.

But she said it’s been well worth it.

“I’m very proud of Larry. Not just about what he’s accomplished, but for the impact he’s had on

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so many young women over all these years.

“There’s no one who has higher morals or higher standards. He’s taught girls how to be good adults.”

Niemeyer was supposed to be coaching the Waterloo West girls this season. He’d signed on for the job last fall and had a few weeks of practice in this spring before recurring kidney problems forced him to step down the week before the opening game.

His health is much improved, he said Wednesday night as he watched the young Wahawks drop a pair of 12-0, three-inning routs to his former J-Hawks.

“I miss coaching,” he said wistfully.