

One man had a profound impact on the lives of so many great men who came after him. His drive inspired players he coached and colleagues he coached with; football greats call him a legend.

Here are words, memories and stories from those who loved...

Coach Buck

by Michael D. Walker

A few weeks ago, someone asked me if I heard about Coach Buck.

When I was told he had passed away, I didn't want to believe it. I wanted to be alone. I went to my bedroom, closed the door, sat on the edge of the bed and cried.

I know there were many people who felt the way I did when they learned that legendary football coach Carl "Buck" Nystrom, 88, had died on September 25 at a hospital in his hometown of Marquette. In fact, I have talked with several people since then who still get emotional and have trouble finishing sentences while talking about Coach Buck.

Upper Peninsula sports legend Steve Mariucci talked with Coach Buck on the phone just hours before he passed. Alabama football coach Nick Saban called Buck a great man and said he loved him. Former Oklahoma coaching great Barry Switzer said Buck was "easy to love" and that he was glad that Nystrom was a part of his life and career. Former Michigan State All-American Tony Mandarich said he was devastated when he heard the news.

How can one man have such an impact on so many? We all have had someone in our lives that have encouraged us, inspired us, demanded from us, but few have done it better than Coach Buck.

If all you knew about Nystrom was that he was part of five national championships—two as a player (MSU, 1952 & 1955) and three as a coach (North Dakota State, 1965; Oklahoma, 1968; NMU, 1975)—you would know that he was a winner.

If you knew that one of his proudest accomplishments was being named both an All-American and an Academic All-American in the same season (1955), you would know that he was driven to do his best in everything he did.

If you knew that he coached in seven different decades, you would know he had an impact on generations of young men. Those accomplishments

alone would be worthy of celebrating when remembering Coach Buck.

But that would only be half of his story. It's not what he accomplished as a football player and coach that made him great, it's what he did through football for others that is his lasting legacy.

Thirty years ago, as a young coach at a rival high school, I asked if he would be willing to meet with me. I never played for Coach Buck. At that time, I hadn't coached with him yet. There was nothing I could offer him in return, and yet he spent hours in a classroom with me, covering everything he could think of regarding offensive line technique, blocking schemes and life.

It was the most fun I ever had regarding football without actually having a football. There are many stories like this that hundreds of coaches could share.

Eventually, I worked several of his high school line camps, and then I finally got to coach with him as an assistant at Ishpeming High School. Working with him was amazing. I never saw such intensity, such attention to detail, such a demanding coach.

But what amazed me the most was the amount of respect he showed every single player and coach on the team. He made everyone work hard, he made everyone better, and he didn't accept anything less than what he thought was your best, and yet he did it in a way that made you want to work hard, do your best and give all you had because you didn't want to let him down. That is a very rare skill in coaching.

Buck had another skill. He stays with you long after you have played for or coached with him. Sometimes in the moment we don't understand—or appreciate—the lessons and gifts we have been given. There were times when players might have thought he was teaching them about football, but in reality, he was teaching them about life, toughness, integrity, hard work, character and about confronting adversity. He was teaching them how to



All-American coach dies at age 88

by Michael D. Walker

Legendary football coach Carl "Buck" Nystrom, 88, passed away unexpectedly on September 25 at the U.P. Health System facility in Marquette.

"He had been there about a week, maybe 10 days, and he was getting ready to be discharged shortly," recalled his son Kyle, Northern Michigan University's head football coach, who was on a bus with his team returning from a game downstate when he learned his father had passed.

"I got a call from the hospital saying they were trying to revive him," he said. "They called me back about 10 minutes later and it was over. I didn't think he would pass away from that. I thought he would be fine. They were shocked too."

In the past 10 years his father had battled cancer, among other health issues, including complications as a result of his cancer treatment. He

then had a case of COVID-19 that sent him to the hospital in the days preceding his death.

"He had so many underlying issues," Nystrom said. "He had been in and out of hospitals the last three years. That's part of the reason that we wanted to come back home to Marquette."



"I was very fortunate because of who Buck was and what he did. I grew up being formed and put together character, ethics and personality wise because I was always around top-notch people like the players at Northern, Colorado, Michigan State and coaches like (Chuck) Fairbanks, (Hank) Bullough, (George) Perles, (Herb) Grenke. That was the biggest benefit of being raised by Buck, being able to experience all that."

Carl "Buck" Nystrom was born in Marquette, Michigan on August 7, 1933. Interestingly he was called

“Bud” when he was growing up, and “Bud” Nystrom was an outstanding athlete at Gravaeret High School, where he played several sports and was an all-state fullback his senior year.

Although he had been lightly recruited by Michigan State University and other colleges, in 1951 he used an academic scholarship to enroll at MSU and walked onto the football team. He hitchhiked the 400 miles to East Lansing in a time before the Mackinac Bridge was built.

At MSU, Nystrom was part of two national championships, first as a redshirt-practice player in 1952, and then as a captain and MVP of the 1955 team that defeated UCLA in the Rose Bowl, 17-14. That year the 5-foot-10, 190-pound, two-way player became the first Spartan ever to be named both All-American

(offensive guard) and Academic All-American in the same season.

He then enjoyed a long career as one of the top offensive line coaches in the country, highlighted by national championships at North Dakota State (1965), Oklahoma (1967) and NMU (1975). Another highlight was when his Oklahoma offensive line led the way for 1969 Heisman Trophy winner Steve Owens. Additional coaching stints included MSU and Colorado.

The one person who shared all the highs and lows of his career was his wife of 59 years Joan. They were married 13 days after Buck played his final game at the 1956 Orange Bowl. Both were active with several charitable organizations including the Special Olympics and the March of Dimes. Joan passed away November 1, 2015.

MM

be husbands, fathers and men.

Coach Buck could be tough on you, but if he was, it was because he needed to be tough on you. He would demand more from you because more needed to be demanded from you. He would confront you because you needed to be confronted. He never did anything with malice. He coached the way he did because he believed it was best for you. Not for him—for you.

Buck was also a very fair man, and he treated everyone with respect. He had a great sense of humor and was fun to be around. But ultimately, he expected you to play hard because he played hard. He expected you to work hard because he worked hard. He expected you to be a good person because he was a good person.

When I began contacting former players and coaches of Nystrom’s career, our conversations would cover a lot of emotions and thoughts. But every conversation had a common

theme: Buck stories. Many had a story about Nystrom’s teeth falling out at some point in practice while he was yelling, and how he would slap them back into his mouth, grass and dirt all over them, and never miss a beat.

I have many of my own Buck stories. About 20 years ago, he had my two-year-old do bear-crawl drills in my kitchen while making him “growl like Coach Buck.” About 10 years ago, he came to my house just to give me a box full of old coaching books and playbooks he collected going back to the 1950s. To this day, those are among my most prized possessions. I had many practice stories and conversations with him over the years that bring back great memories.

However, there are two memories in his later years that I can’t forget. The first was the only time that Coach Buck lied to me. It happened in November of 2015, just a few days after Joan, his loving wife of 59 years,



Coach Buck Nystrom and his son Kyle, coaching together at Northern Michigan University in 1988. (Photo courtesy of Kyle Nystrom)

had passed away. When I asked him how he was doing, he told me he was OK, and that he was used to sleeping alone already because Joan had been staying in a nursing home for a while before she passed.

I could see in his eyes that he wasn’t telling me the truth. But even in that moment, he wasn’t thinking of himself. He was still trying to be that pillar of strength, that rock for those

around him. You never saw Coach Buck down or scared or beaten. And he wasn’t going to let anybody see it, even at the lowest point of his life. He was going to demand toughness from himself and confront life and adversity head-on. Because that’s what a man like him does; he thinks of others, and he leads by example.

The second memory is the last time I worked a line camp with him. There



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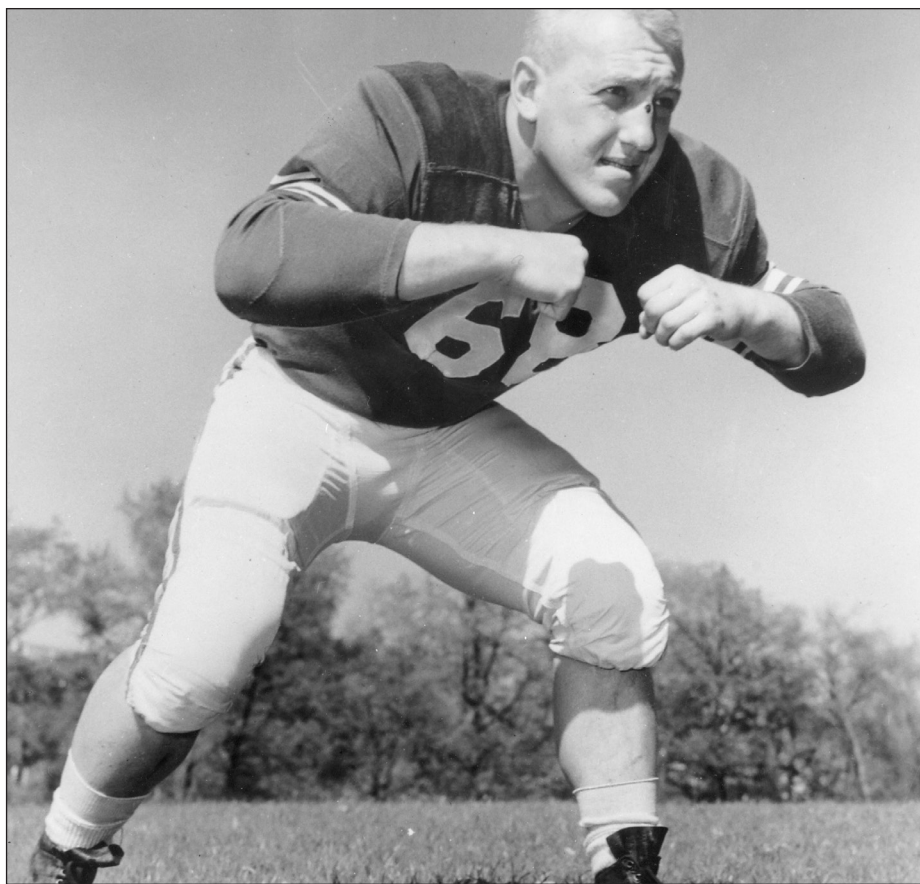
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were a couple hundred high school players sitting on a high school gym floor when Buck walked in front of them. As I watched him talk to these kids, I was saddened by the fact that he looked old and tired, and I began to wonder how much longer he was going to be able to do these camps.

I looked at the faces of the kids in front of him and they all looked younger to me than they had ever before. I wondered if they understood what was happening in this room, what an amazing opportunity they had to learn from this great man—especially because I knew that window was closing.

Then I closed my eyes, and I heard the voice: Coach Buck's voice. It was full of enthusiasm, intensity, strength, compassion and love. Those who spent time with him know what I mean. It was the voice that I heard so many times over the years, and it made me happy. It was the voice of a great coach and a great man. That was the Coach Buck I knew.

I had the opportunity to talk to several players and coaches going back over 50 years of Buck's career, and I heard the same words over and over. Words like discipline, commitment, enthusiasm, effort, pride, hard work, toughness, greatness, demand, con-



Buck Nystrom left Marquette in 1951 for East Lansing, where he became a walk-on football player at Michigan State University, where this picture was taken in 1955. (Photo courtesy of Michigan State University)

front and fun. Almost everyone talked about his legendary fourth quarter off-season conditioning program, which

is so tough that people who did it more than 40 years ago still talk about it being one of the hardest things they

have ever done in their lives.

However, the one word I heard the most was love.

A different kind of love

Steve Mariucci, who was quarterback of the 1975 NMU National Championship team, played for Nystrom from 1975-77. He coached with him in 1978.

"Coach Buck meant a lot to me, as he did to a lot of people," Mariucci said. "Everywhere I coached, I had a picture of Buck. I still have it. He has a chook, yelling out the side of his mouth, his teeth are half out. It looks like he's yelling at me. It's a reminder to get your butt up in the morning and go like hell. When he woke up, he went 100 miles-an-hour every day. It was a reminder for me to work, work, work as hard as I could. His picture is looking at me every day."

Alabama Head Coach Nick Saban coached with Nystrom as MSU assistants from 1983-86.

"I loved Coach Buck," Saban said. "He was a really good friend. We lived together for six months when we went to Michigan State to coach for George Perles. We were like the odd couple. I was like maybe 30, 31 years old, and he had been coaching a long time. We had a lot of discussions about a lot of



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things. Joanie was a good friend to (my wife) Terry. We enjoyed our time working together. It was a lot of fun.”

College Football Hall of Fame Coach Barry Switzer worked with Nystrom as Oklahoma assistants from 1967-69.

“Buck was easy to love,” Switzer said. “I’m glad he was part of my career and life. He was an outstanding coach. Anybody who played for him loved him, and anybody who coached with him believed in him. I enjoyed working with him. Buck always made you smile. I’m glad I knew his family, Joanie and Kyle. It was a good experience and I’m glad we had it, and that and he was part of our lives.”

Mark Marana is the only person who played for (1979-80), coached with (1981-82, 1987-90) and was a head coach with Nystrom (1991-92), all at NMU.

“I can tell you one thing, he was the best there was,” Marana said. “I have so much respect for him. It was an honor to play for him, it was an honor to coach with him. I had a special connection with him, like many people did. I’m getting emotional right now...he just brought the best out of you. I lost a true friend, a loyal friend, a good person. A lot of people did when he passed.”



From 1963-66, Buck Nystrom coached at North Dakota State University. (Photo courtesy of North Dakota State University)

Tony Mandarich, MSU 1988 Consensus All-American who played for Nystrom from 1984 to 1986, said he was shattered when he heard about Coach Buck’s passing.

“I was devastated when I got the news, just like when (MSU coach George) Perles died last year,” Man-

darich said. “They were two of the most influential people in my life, both incredible human beings. Coach Buck went way above and beyond what you ask of a line coach. He was teaching you about life, about discipline in the daily routine, about doing what you signed up for. He taught compassion

and love. What a valuable person to have in your life.”

Herb Grenke coached with Nystrom at NMU over three decades; he was NMU’s head football coach from 1983 through ’90. He said Nystrom was more than just a great coach to the players.

“Buck was a great colleague,” Grenke said. “I learned so much from him, but most of all he was a great friend. We have great memories with the national championship and the playoff games, but the thing I remember the most about Buck is his friendship. He was always there for you when you needed a friend, above and beyond.”

Jim Driscoll was team captain for Nystrom at North Dakota State University in 1965. He also coached with Nystrom at NMU.

“Tears come to my eyes thinking about him and the impact he had on my life,” Driscoll said. “He meant so much to me. It’s indescribable the effect he had on so many people, everyone who played for him. He has to be one of the greatest coaches in the game of football. What else can I say? He was one of the greatest ones around.”

Randy Awrey played for Nystrom, and was MVP of the 1975 National



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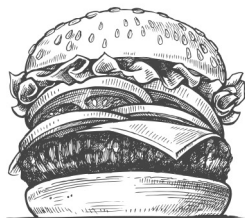
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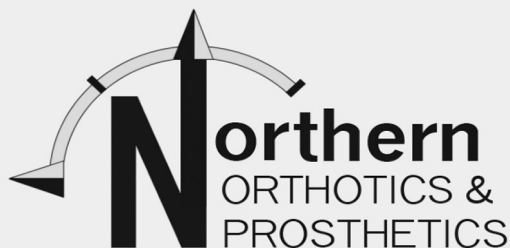
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“He is without a doubt, next to my father, the greatest man I’ve ever known,” Awrey said. “I would say every guy that ever played for him thinks of him as a father figure. He was never afraid to put the hammer down when he needed to, but he would also put his arm around and hug you. He would make you work harder than you thought you could because you never wanted to let him down. There are very few men like him in the world. He was a great leader.”

Rick Popp was an All-American quarterback at NMU in 1987, and played for Nystrom. He said Nystrom was so much more than a good coach.

“He meant to me all that is really good about high school and college football,” Popp said. “He even meant more to me as I got older. I wish every man, every person, could get out of their sport, or whatever their passion is, what he taught; the value of discipline, of building courage, having pride in what you do, enthusiasm for what you do, making every effort to do your best. That’s what he means to me. I love the man. I told him that every time I saw him.”

All-American running back Steve Avery also played for Nystrom at NMU in 1987.

“Buck was such a good coach,” Avery said. “Just think what he’s done

for the game. He was the real deal. I want to honor and represent that man for the rest of my life. I’m trying not to cry. I think heaven gained a great coach.”

The gold standard

In his 38 years of coaching college football, Nystrom influenced both former players and coaches who reached the highest level of high school, college and professional football. His impact is still felt in the game today, including at places he never played or coached.

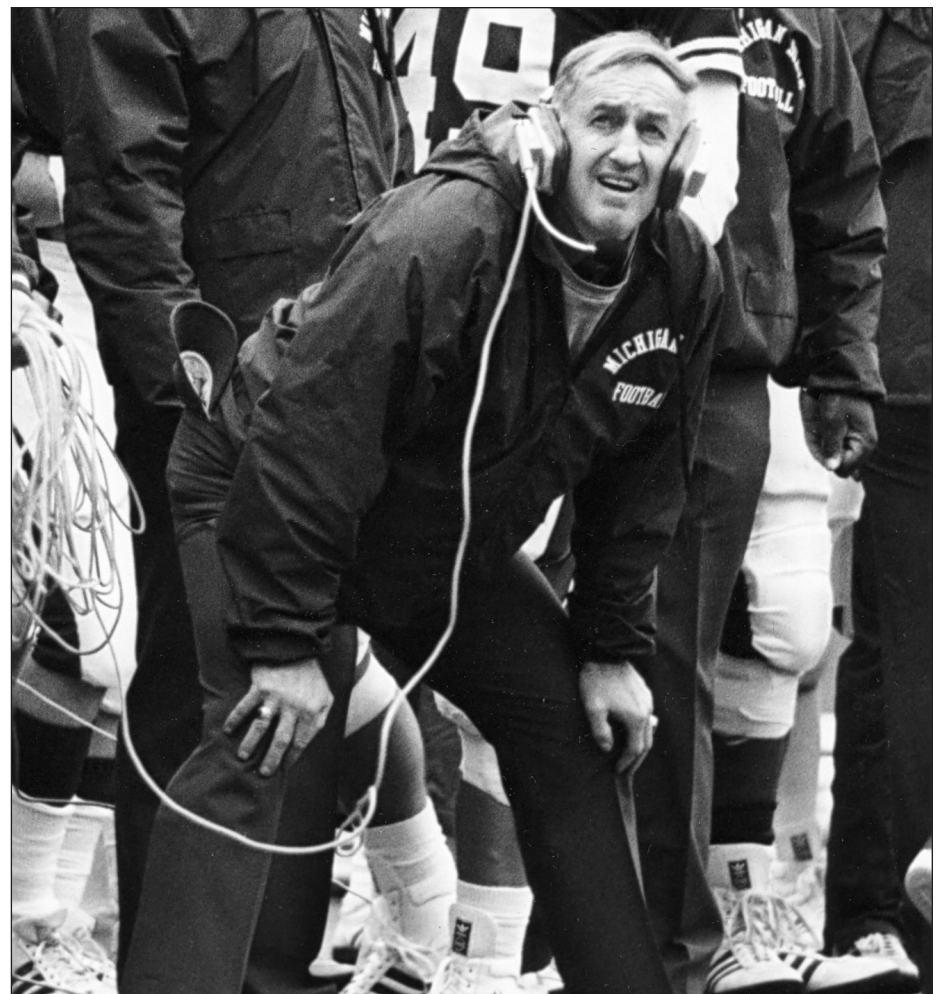
Saban, a seven-time national champion, said he’s been around some great offensive line coaches, but Nystrom was the best.

“He was the ultimate coach,” Saban said. “He coached right up until he couldn’t coach anymore. What a great man and what a great coach, always helping kids.”

Mariucci, who coached in the NFL for nine seasons, agreed.

“I coached on a lot of staffs over the years—college, big college, small college, pro football,” Mariucci said. “I’ve been an assistant, head coach, I’ve done everything that you can do, and I’ve met a lot of great coaches, great, great teachers, excellent minds. Nobody has been more influential to me in my career than Buck Nystrom.”

Nystrom was influential to many



Michigan State University teams got to feel Coach Buck’s intensity for six seasons in the mid-1980s. (Photo courtesy of Michigan State University)

football programs through the lessons he taught his players and fellow coaches—even places he had never coached or played at.

“He was instrumental with our success [at Oklahoma]. After Buck got here (in 1967), players said I was soft compared to Buck,” Switzer said, laughing. “But everyone was compared to him. I can promise you; he was fiery. He worked the o-line hard. Sometimes I felt sorry for them, getting cussed, his front teeth falling out, spitting everywhere. Our backs would already be dressed and he would still be outside working the linemen. He worked them hard, but they loved him. They knew he cared for them. He got the best out of them. He drove them. He got all that was there, I promise you.”

His ability to earn the respect of the players was part of what brought the best out of his teams.

“He built great relationship with all the players,” Marana said. “He was a tremendous teacher, a tremendous disciplinarian and a tremendous motivator. I don’t know if I’ve ever been around anybody who could motivate like he could.”

Grenke said Buck’s ability to motivate and bring the best out of everyone around him was key to turning around an 0-10 team into national champions in 1975.

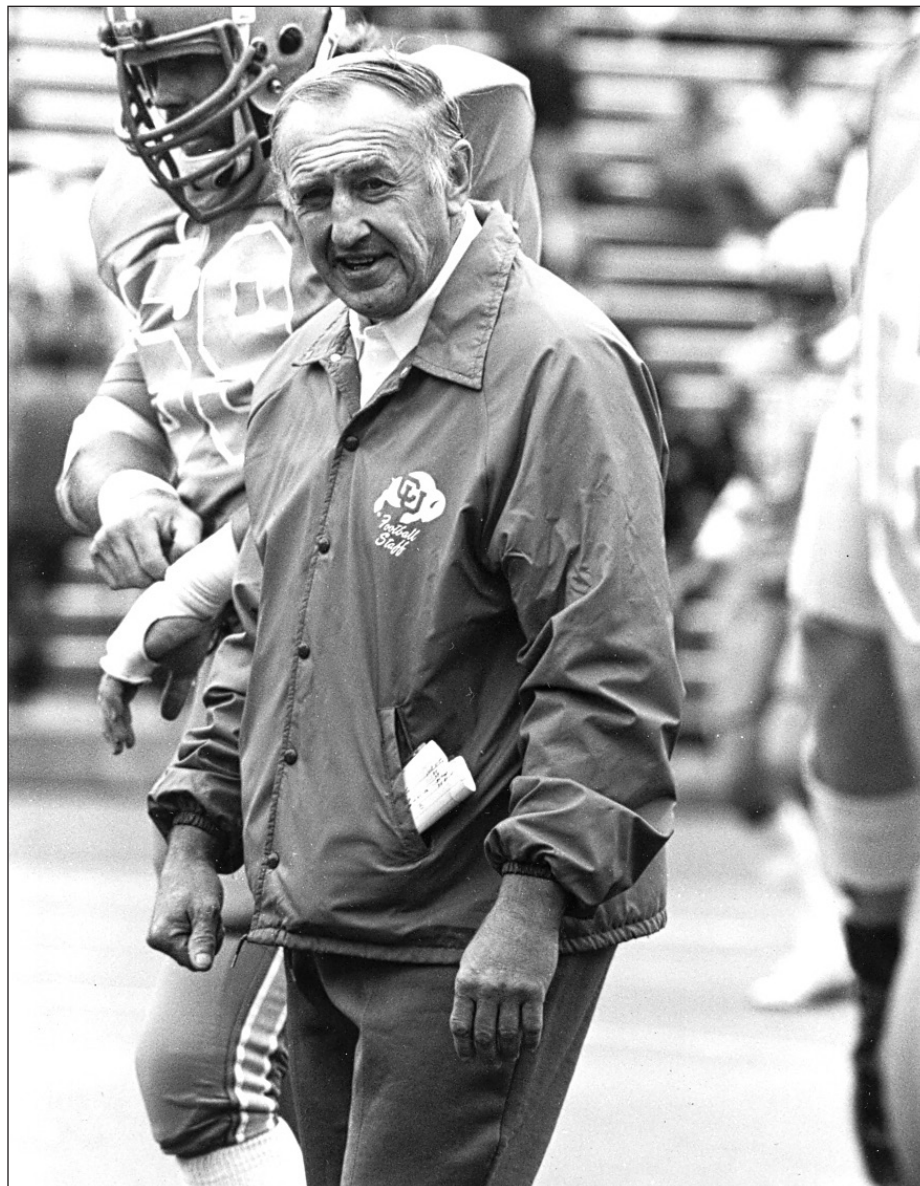
“The major thing was his enthusiasm,” Grenke said. “We had a terrible season the year before, and somehow we had to overcome the feeling of doubts, the inadequacies. How do you overcome that after such a devastating season? He brought that enthusiasm. When Buck came in, he changed the whole attitude. He was exceptional in practice, the enthusiasm and effort he brought.”

Popp said although Coach Buck’s style was sometimes confrontational, his style was effective.

“All he really wanted was for you to be the best version of you. The way he did it, he was himself, one of a kind, and he did things the way he did because it worked,” Popp said. “His personality could come off as gruff, and there were times he irritated me when he coached me, but as I reflected on it, I realized it made me a better man. He taught me to confront when something isn’t right, and to give great effort in everything I do. Many people today are afraid to demand and confront excellence from themselves or others.”

Former Ishpeming High School Head Coach Jeff Olson (1992-2018) said Nystrom lead by example.

“Everyone that has been around him, that coached with him, they talk



Buck Nystrom coached at the University of Colorado in 1981. (Photo courtesy of University of Colorado)

about his work ethic,” said Olson, who coached nine seasons with Nystrom. “I call that passion. He loved football, but he also loved hard work, he loved winning. He wasn’t trying to make you the best football player, but the best person you could be.”

Driscoll said Buck’s knack for teaching more than football made a difference everywhere he went.

“He always had high success,” Driscoll said. “He had something special. It’s hard to describe it. He had a fantastic personality, and you always wanted to do good for the guy. He treated you the right way. He was very tough, very insistent that you do things the proper way. ‘Demand and confront’—he always talked about that. If you are going to demand something, and you don’t get it, you have to confront the player. But he did it the proper way. Somehow, whatever Buck did, it was always taken the right way by players involved.”

Avery said Nystrom’s vision for what could be took his players to the next level.

“Buck was almost prophetic,” Avery said. “He spoke about what he

wanted to see. He didn’t speak about where we were, he spoke about what he wanted to see. Through all the blood, sweat and tears, he would explain it like how it was going to be. He made us do things that maybe upfront we didn’t know if we could do it or not. That instilled even more confidence in us.”

Former Gwinn High School coach Dick Mettlach (1986-2009) established a top local football camp with Nystrom from 1990 through 2019.

“It was fun just being around Buck,” Mettlach said. “He was a charismatic kind of guy. Just talking with him got you fired up. He believed in what he was doing, and he got people around him to believe in what he was coaching. He had one gear when coaching, and it was full speed ahead. The kids loved him, there were no ifs, ands or butts. He was genuine and the kids could sense that. The kids loved being around him.”

Nystrom’s 4th Quarter Program

Nystrom’s 4th Quarter offseason conditioning program was derived from his core philosophy

of demanding that players train and compete at their highest level of performance—and confronting them when they don’t.

This program was specifically designed to instill toughness, discipline and other intangible qualities, and developed endurance, strength and speed, preparing players to be able to maintain their physical strength and mental toughness all the way through the fourth quarter of a game.

Mariucci said his introduction to Coach Buck was in the offseason—and it was memorable.

“The first time we got to know about this new guy (in 1975) was during the offseason program when he implemented 4th Quarter Program,” Mariucci said. “Talk about an eye opener. We would do circuits until we threw up. It was the hardest work that any of us had ever done.”

Mariucci said it changed the team’s whole mindset.

“That’s when we got to know who Buck Nystrom was. We gained respect for him right away—and fear right away,” Mariucci said, laughing.

Saban said he still uses Nystrom’s 4th Quarter Program to this day.

“In fact, when I was at LSU (2000-04) we used it,” Saban said. “He would visit a beach somewhere in Mississippi in the winter, and he would drive over to LSU and watch our 4th Quarter Program. He would take it over like was he coaching it. Players would look around, ‘who is this guy?’, but there was something about him, even though they didn’t know him, he would get after them and they would accept it.”

Marana said the 4th Quarter Program was key to the important relationship building that Nystrom was famous for.

“It built team chemistry, it built relationships, player-to-player and player-to-coach,” Marana said. “It made you tough mentally and physically. It taught you how to battle through adversity. It wasn’t an easy program, I can tell you that. You had to put your hand on the line and bust your tail for about an hour every day of the week for four or five weeks, and you had to lay it on the line. It made you mentally tough, mentally strong and physically strong.”

Awrey said the program makes players learn how to exceed any physical limitations they’ve ever had.

“He designed it for physical and mental toughness, so that when you get in any situation, you can say ‘this is nothing’ because games are not as hard,” Awrey said. “When things hit you in life, you can say ‘I’ve done stuff worse than this, no big deal.’ It



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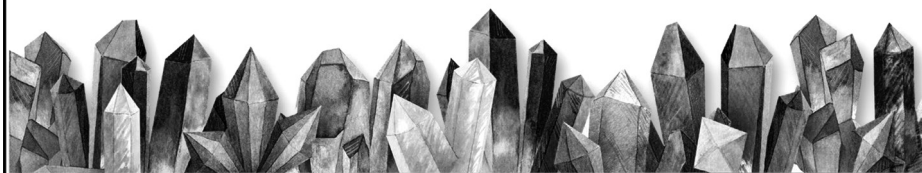
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Avery said Coach Buck came before his junior season in 1987, and he had an impact immediately.

“He started the 4th Quarter Program and I’ll never forget it,” Avery said. “I was wondering, who was this guy, and why was he so intense?”

Grenke said going from 0-10 in 1974 to winning the national championship in 1975 did not happen during the games they won that season.

“It started with the 4th Quarter Program in the off season,” Grenke said. “As coaches, we’ve always done those kinds of things at one time or another. However, the format, effort, enthusiasm of the program was the key. It was in the way in which he presented it, not just to the players but to the coaches.”

Grenke said NMU head coach Gil Krueger did things his own way, but Buck could make anybody respect what he said.

“Gil really bought into it, and the rest is history,” Grenke said.

NMU All-American defensive back Jerry Woods played for Nystrom from 1987 to 88.

“Coach Buck came back the spring of my junior year in ’87,” Woods said. “I didn’t know anything about him, but he was exactly what we needed. He instilled discipline right off the bat. He brought the discipline and hard work we needed throughout the spring. He brought toughness, pride, enthusiasm, all the things he talked about in the 4th Quarter Program. Once you understood the philosophy of it, then you learned how to fight through the pain. That’s when you saw the improvement. The mindset had changed, and it carried over into the fall. You could see the difference in the players and you could see the benefits on game day.”

Favorite Coach Buck stories

Everyone who met him seems to have a favorite story about Nystrom seared into their memory.



Coach Buck Nystrom was intense on the sidelines while coaching at Michigan State in the 1980s. (Photo courtesy of Michigan State University)

Mariucci said in his first year of coaching at NMU, in 1978, his staff went down to visit the University of Wisconsin spring practice at Camp Randall.

“Buck took it over,” Mariucci said laughing. “He took over the line drills and started driving guys. He would grab them by their backs and their pants and drive them into each other, into bags. He would fall on them, spit flying everywhere. He did it the whole practice. I ran into a guy not too long ago, and he tells me, ‘I was one of the linemen.’ This happened just the other day. It was 43 years ago, and he remembered it like it was yesterday. It’s not everybody who can show up at a Big 10 practice and take it over.”

Switzer had an intense memory of a different variety.

“Buck comes into practice one day, and wasn’t feeling good,” Switzer said. “He had an upset stomach and was complaining about it in a staff meeting. We told him to see the trainer, and he gave Buck some sodium bromide—it was like Alka-Seltzer.”

When it was time for practice, Nystrom showed up in a panic.

“It looked like he had rabies,” Switzer said. “He was foaming out of his nose, there was white foam coming out of his mouth. He was trying to say something, but he was just bubbling foam. I thought he was having a heart attack. He had taken the cup of bromide dry and then drank the water.

You are supposed to mix it in the water before you take it.”

The reaction took place in his stomach instead, and it was running out everywhere.

“I wish I had a picture,” Switzer said, laughing. “He looked like a mad man. He never lived that one down.”

Grenke always felt the games were usually pretty easy, but the hard part was at practice.

“It was always competitive, and we would stay out there forever,” Grenke said. “Buck and Gil would have this game plan set, and Buck would come up with something else, and Gil would tell Buck, ‘We’ve got to get the players to dinner’ and Buck would say, ‘Nobody has ever starved to death on this campus.’ That was his sense of humor. Everybody thought that was funny.”

Mandarich’s memory was a common one among players and coaches who knew Nystrom.

“I remember when he would start yelling, and his whole upper dentures would fall to the ground,” Mandarich said. “He wouldn’t miss a beat coaching. He would pick it up off the ground and put it back in his mouth. Grass would be sticking out of his mouth; he didn’t care.”

Popp said Coach Buck came to

NMU from Michigan State the spring before his junior year, in 1987.

“He showed up for his job interview, and we were running the 4th Quarter Program in the old turf room,” Popp said. “Buck came walking by and peeks his head in. He wasn’t happy with the drills and he starts yelling and spitting, and with his sports coat on, he grabs a player who isn’t doing it right and he gets after him. Buck knocks him over and [the player] gets hurt. Everyone is like, ‘Who is this crazy old man?’ (laughing).”

Avery said even when he went to Pittsburgh to play with the Steelers in 1993, Buck’s reach was apparent.

“They all knew Buck Nystrom,” Avery said. “Dick Hoak was my running back coach and he asked me if I played at Northern. When I said yeah, he started talking about Coach Buck—smiling, telling me stories. I didn’t realize the impact Buck had.”

“If they knew you were coached by Coach Buck, they knew what type of a player you were.”

MM

About the Author: Michael D. Walker is a long-time area high school coach, former teacher and sports writer. He enjoys spending time with his family and reading in his spare time.



Coach Nystrom and his son Kyle at Buck’s induction into the Michigan State Sports Hall of Fame in 2014. (Photo courtesy of Kyle Nystrom)



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