

Pine Knot

Carlton County's
only independent,
locally owned newspaper.

News

Vol. 3 No. 5

www.PineKnotNews.com Friday, January 31, 2020

\$1.25

Cloquet's trailblazing, enigmatic hockey coach dies

Bill Kennedy led team to first state tourney

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Word began to filter out early Monday morning that the godfather of Cloquet hockey, former boys hockey coach Bill Kennedy, had passed away Sunday at the age of 85 at his home in Mahtowa. The tough-as-nails Kennedy coached the Lumberjacks from 1967 to 1987 after

taking over for Don Bourdeau. Kennedy was instrumental in putting the program on the map.

He was also a favorite teacher to thousands of students who met up with him in his classroom during his four decades of teaching.

Bruce Plante, who played for Cloquet and then was a longtime Bantam coach there before moving on to become the head coach of the Hermantown program, spent a ton of time learning the coaching game from Kennedy.

"Bill was a disciplinarian to the highest degree," Plante said. "He did some things at times

that weren't right, but they were always with the good intention for the betterment of the team and the individual. He wanted our Cloquet kids to be tough and fearless."

Not only did Kennedy coach a hockey team, he also had foresight. When he arrived, the team played their home games — and practiced — at the hockey rink outside Washington Elementary School. In the late 1960s, voters turned down a referendum to build a new indoor hockey rink next to the high school.

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Bill Kennedy took over the Cloquet varsity coaching job in 1967. He is shown here in the 1968 school yearbook with captains Sep- po "Andy" Sormunen and Bob Ames. Kennedy, who died Sunday, led the Lumberjacks to their first state tournament appearance in 1982. He retired from coaching in 1987.

HARROWING TIMES IN THE BEARGREASE RACE



Sister dogs Goose and Charlie lead six other dogs and Esko musher Alex LaPlante at the start of the Beargrease 120 race Sunday just north of Duluth. She finished early Monday morning north of Finland. Amber Nichols / Pine Knot News

Esko musher has trouble on the trail

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When Alex LaPlante's third leg of the John Beargrease 120 sled dog race started, things went suddenly and dramatically wrong: Her sled tipped over right as the dogs were taking off after the countdown for the

final leg of the race Monday from Finland to the Trestle Inn.

"I got dragged out of view of the checkpoint, hanging on to my snow hook," LaPlante said. "At first I thought I lost the team ... I lost my grip on the handlebars, but suddenly my left arm went taut and I realized I still had the snow hook. I was

just hanging on because they were really strong."

LaPlante, from Esko, was one of two Carlton County residents on the trails this week. Wrenshall's David Little competed for the first time in the Beargrease 40.

The first two legs of this year's mid-distance race went

fairly smoothly for LaPlante.

The veteran LaPlante said she could tell the dogs knew something was wrong because they would slow down and almost pause, then take off again. She finally thought to holler "woah."

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State: Replace county jail soon

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After the yearly review by the state corrections inspector earlier this month, the Carlton County jail is looking at a forced retirement.

The final report following the Jan. 9 inspection of the jail and its daily operations included plans to recommend to the commissioner of corrections that a future "sunset authorization" be made for the facility. Senior detention facility inspector Sarah Johnson noted in her findings that "it is the intent of the Department of Corrections to continue to work with the officials of Carlton County to address the public safety needs of this community."

Without plans to fund and build a new jail and provide required programming for incarcerated at that facility, some time in the near future the Department of Corrections will move to close the Carlton County jail.

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Kennedy ...

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The denial set off a chain reaction from Kennedy that reverberated throughout the hockey community and the town. A group of hockey backers, along with Kennedy, got together to discuss the situation. It was Kennedy who sparked things.

"Bill was the No. 1 driving force behind getting the Pine Valley Ice Arena started," Plante said. "When we lost the referendum, Bill stood up and slammed his fist on the table and said we will build the damn thing ourselves. We all cheered and agreed. Bill followed through the next day and talked to some big hitters in town and they hatched a plan to get it done."

The building opened in 1970 and drastically increased the time players could spend practicing on the ice. The program began to grow in talent under Kennedy's direction with the help of longtime assistant coaches Dick Bartholdi and Dan Stanaway. The trio had myriad talents that complemented each other's and all had a passion for the game and a tireless work ethic.

Cloquet rise

The work paid off in 1982 with the school's first trip to the Minnesota State High School Hockey Tournament. The Lumberjacks won the consolation championship in the one-class tournament despite losing star center Cory Millen to a broken ankle in the sectional semifinal in St. Cloud. Even with the loss of Millen, the Lumberjacks dispatched Coon Rapids in the section championship as they featured a number of prospects who went on



Bill Kennedy in 1990, a year before he retired from teaching at Cloquet High School. Photos from CHS yearbooks.

to represent Cloquet in the college ranks.

"As a kid growing up in Cloquet, Bill was the face of the hockey program," Millen said after hearing of his death this week. "He always demanded discipline and hard work from his teams. That made Cloquet one of the premier programs in northern Minnesota. I personally feel Bill contributed a lot to my career and for that I will always be grateful."

Millen went on to become the third-leading scorer in Minnesota Gophers history and then had a stellar career in the NHL.

Long time WKLK radio announcer Steve Jezierski did play-by-play of the 'Jacks games during the Kennedy tenure and he spent many a night interviewing Bill before games.

"I was always impressed with how much admiration Bill had for the Cloquet athletes," Jezierski said. "He always said that no one worked harder and was more committed than the Cloquet kids. ... The teams resembled his personality as tough, hard-working and committed to his values."

Kennedy was a no-frills guy who challenged his players in sports and in the classroom. He wanted to get the most out of every-



Bill Kennedy, far right, led the 1981-82 team to Cloquet's first state hockey tournament.

one around him.

"I modeled my coaching style and philosophy after his aggressive, hard-working, no excuses, team first and caring attitude," Plante said. "Bill was very demanding of all of us, whether we were working on the Barn, in his class at school, playing on any of his teams, or as a friend. All of us young guys owe him so much for making us all better people. I loved Bill Kennedy."

In 2009 Kennedy was inducted into the Minnesota High School Hockey Coaches Association Hall of Fame.

"Building a respectable program with the help of some rough, tough kids who loved to play, is what I'm most proud of," Kennedy told the Duluth News Tribune at the time.

He was nominated for the hall of fame by another former player, Dave Esse, who went on to become the head coach of the 'Jacks for many years and is now assisting his daughter Courtney Olin coach the Cloquet-Esko-Carlton girls hockey team.

"I nominated Coach for the ... hall of fame because he surpassed all of the criteria to be selected by

his peers," Esse said. "He helped build a rink, develop a high school program, and shape young athletes into young men. Bill taught me and many others life lessons that we carry on to this day. He showed us tough love and was honest about everything he did and said."

A former Marine, Kennedy was a true patriot. He instilled in his players the importance of respecting each other and the importance of honoring the country properly during the national anthem.

"Every time I stand during our national anthem, I don't move," Esse said. "Coach taught us to think of our freedoms because of our past and current soldiers. 'Respect them by not moving,' he would always say. ... People in the hockey world respect and identify with our program because of the Lumberjack logo and our work ethic which he helped start."

His own words

In true Bill Kennedy fashion, his obituary was written in his own words and was short and to the point. Kennedy explained how he served the country as a Marine and how

he attended college at the University of Minnesota, St. Cloud State and the University of Wisconsin-Superior. He mentioned his mother, his wife, his children and his grandchildren. He talked about his sawmill and his meeting a lot of good people in his lifetime.

Kennedy wrote that he had a good life for 64 years with his wife Barb. It reads almost as an aside when he notes: "I was a fan of high school and college football and hockey."

He requested no funeral service. He asked that any memorial contributions be made to the Democratic Party. He ended with the Marine motto: "Semper Fi."

During his tenure, Kennedy's teams finished with a record of 295-172. He taught social studies and economics for 30 years at the high school. He also coached football and track. He retired in 1991 and set up a sawmill in Mahtowa.

Former students had a common set of words when leaving online comments for the Kennedy family this week. "Tough." "Teddy bear." "Greatest teacher." (www.atkinsnorthlandfuneralhome.com/obituaries/William-Kennedy-33/)

Kurt Peterson, a 1985 graduate of CHS, wrote: "I still draw on the lessons I learned from Bill Kennedy. I wasn't an athlete, I had long hair. I was what he would have called a 'tree frog.' But for some reason he took a liking to me and ... he showed me — in that gritty, common-sense and humorous way of his — that I had more going for me than I imagined."

Pine Knot sports writer Dwight Cadwell, who played for Kennedy in the 1970s, wrote a story on the Northland Sports Online blog in 2014 about his "no-nonsense, tough guy" coach. "You either played with fearless toughness and unmatched passion or you found yourself sitting on the bench," Cadwell wrote.

Kennedy was among those coaches who burn an image in fans' minds by the way he dressed. He always wore only a light jacket on the bench and chopper mittens.

Cadwell said Kennedy had an easy-to-follow mantra: "Shoot, score, win — it's a simple game, Kennedy used to say."

Pine Knot News writer Mike Creger contributed to this story.

County board ...

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The Carlton County board of commissioners considered the report at its meeting Monday, Jan. 27.

Commissioners and county staff involved with public safety have worked on a plan for the future of the jail for at least four years, sparked by overcrowding, the age of the facility and a design that doesn't serve today's needs. A jail study was commissioned and completed and several proposals for a new jail complex are under consideration, with the favored plan to build a new facility in the north parking lot of the current courthouse. Purchasing the Carlton High School property would also give the county other options for buildings and/or parking. The price tag is still up in the air — but \$24 to \$30 million is in the ballpark — as is the question of how to pay for such a project.

The board is hoping to fund a new jail complex utilizing a half-cent sales tax. But it needs

approval from the state legislature before it can take a vote to residents. The legislature requires that any sales tax use must be for a project that will have a regional impact.

The county board unanimously approved a major push for state bonding for engineering, planning and designs for a new female offender program in conjunction with the new jail being considered. There is a dearth of programming for women offenders in the region and board members hope the project will help in securing state permission for a sales tax.

It unanimously approved asking the Legislature for permission to ask voters to approve a half-percent sales tax to build a new jail. Sheriff Kelly Lake said she thinks the decision to start the process of sunseting the jail could also help.

The earliest the legislature can give its blessing is during the session that begins Feb. 11. Approval would empower the county board to put the half-percent sales tax funding for the new jail on the November ballot.

At the end of a flurry of board actions, commissioner Dick Brenner said "the jail construction now is set for a 2022 construction season if all these steps and approvals are successful."

Newly revealed during the discussions Monday was the plan to use the old jail for a kitchen and laundry facility.

Commissioner Mark Thell said in addition to the request for bonding money in the proposal for a new jail, that the Carlton waterline along Highway 210 to the Carlton Junction is in the governor's final request for state bonding.

Mike Grebel, who was part of BKV Group's work on the new jail concept and building scheme, was chosen by the county board for consulting services for the proposed Jail.

Other matters

- The renovation of the old Cloquet City Hall, now owned by the county, is on the fast track. County coordinator Dennis Genereau said once the building was turned over to the county, it took several months of meetings to determine which programs

should be housed there. The ACT team (Assertive Community Treatment) was chosen to relocate there to avoid paying expensive rent elsewhere in the Cloquet business district.

To house county programs the old city hall needed updates in technology and work space. County officials had hoped to keep the cost of the upgrades under \$175,000 so that the work could be quoted by three local contractors. The quotes came in above that level and forced more planning and more hoops to jump through.

The committee also proposed that motor vehicle licensing and veterans services move to the new complex. Most of the renovation and relocation of programs should be done by mid-summer.

Commissioner Tom Proulx asked again why the old council chambers could not be used for county meetings. Genereau responded that it had been discussed in committee sessions but it was decided to not use the space in that way.

- Commissioner Brenner said

that the operations of the two county airports in Cloquet and Moose Lake are close to operating financially with little cost to the taxpayers.

- A letter to the county board from the Midwest Regional Office of the Bureau of Indian Affairs notified the board the Fond Du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa wishes to acquire 11 parcels of land totaling 233.12 acres to re-establish the band's 1854 land base and provide housing.

According to the county assessor, this move would result in a net loss of taxable property for county and local municipalities of \$2.4 million from the existing tax base. The band already owns the Northstar Ballroom at the Carlton Junction. As part of the proposed action, the band would acquire the neighboring Don Dens Sales property.

- The public hearing for the Transportation Capital Improvement Plan and the intent to issue bonds for the new Barnum maintenance facility received no comments and the plan was approved by the county board.