

Beloved coach made us all better



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God, how it hurt.

When my left ankle snapped like a twig, I heard it, the pop. All I could do was roll face-down in the grass. I clutched my face mask and screamed.

I was 17, a linebacker who wanted to be Dick Butkus. I was a rake-thin teenager from Charleston, S.C., playing my favorite game for the umpteenth year. Like any teenager in shoulder pads, I wanted to play beyond high school.

I clung to that dream like a sailor clinging to a ship in a roiling sea. That summer during football camp, my coaches told me a few college scouts had asked about me, the bow-legged kid, the sergeant major's son who wore No. 88.

But that Friday night in Beaufort, S.C., a lumbering offensive guard from Battery Creek High turned my left ankle into his target so his running back could score in the waning minutes of a tough game.

Battery Creek won. We — the Razorbacks of Charleston's Middleton High — didn't.

I remember two things from that game: my ankle and my coach.

He helped carry me off the field.

I don't remember what Jim Werden said. But whatever it was, it was encouraging. Plus, I laughed. I leaned into his big shoulder, squeezing back tears, and for a brief instant, I forgot about that sharp pain shooting up my leg.

That was 34 years ago. I had forgotten about it until the other day. Michael Rentz called.

Mike and I are good friends, high school teammates, bonded forever by the red and gold of Razorback football.

But I hate when he calls because it's always something I don't want to hear.

"I've got some bad news," he told me. "Coach Werden died last night of a massive heart attack."

Coach Werden was built like a teddy bear, and he had beefy hands as big as dinner plates.

I see him in his elastic coach shorts, his tube socks up to his knees, his round face slick with sweat and his whistle clenched between his teeth.

And that smile. He was always smiling. He was our surrogate father, our mentor, our friend. A year after I graduated, he earned the nickname “Bubba,” and during the drive when his team won the state football championship in 1982, people as close to me as family hollered a new phrase:

“Roll, Bubba!”

For years, I wanted to call Coach Werden and say thanks. A few years back, I almost did. I looked up his phone number and stared at it because Mike told me Coach Werden’s son, Chris, was playing football for Elon University.

Chris was his only son, his only child, and I figured Coach Werden and his wife, Linda, would make the four-hour trip from Charleston to Elon to see Chris play, and I would love to see them again.

But I never called. Don’t ask me why. I just didn’t. Maybe I was scared of the awkwardness of a potential meeting or the idea of hearing the pregnant pause on the other end of the line. I wondered if he’d even remember who I was.

Werden had coached hundreds of players, and I know many of them felt just like me.

For 28 years, he coached at Middleton High, and he was good. He was named South Carolina’s Coach of the Year eight times, won a state championship and had only seven losing seasons during his tenure at Middleton. His record: 210-133.

In South Carolina’s Lowcountry, where Friday nights felt as significant as Sunday mornings, he was a legend. From 1972 until 1999, he roamed the sidelines

until my alma mater closed, merged with arch-rival St. Andrews High and morphed into a huge high school known as West Ashley.

My alma mater. Gone.

But I had memories I could keep forever.

Like that Friday night in Beaufort.

I didn't play again that season. I hobbled along the sidelines on crutches, wanting to stay close because I couldn't say good-bye. Football was my identity, the letter jacket of my high school psyche, and I didn't want to take it off.

But a funny thing happened after that injury my junior year.

I took a social studies class taught by Linda Werden, Jim's wife, and I got to know her. She always asked how I was doing, how my leg doing, and like her husband, she kept laughing and thinking of everything — except my bum ankle in a cast.

I also took a creative writing class, and I fell in love with turning words into stories.

Of course, I wrote about what I knew, and I told tales of athletes taken down by injury or by a tragic event. My friends always told me, "Aw, you're just writin' about your broken leg."

I was.

My senior season, I played again for Coach Werden, and during those jungle-hot days of August, when we were practicing twice a day, I remember catching passes for my quarterback, who asked me what I wanted to do in college.

"I want to study journalism," I told him.

“Journalism?” he scoffed. “Why do you want to study journalism? You want to write?”

That hurt. So, I kept quiet. I didn’t say anything to anyone else until Coach Werden asked.

I figured I’d better tell him. When I did, he smiled.

“You know, Linda told me you could write,” he said.

I wish I could remember more. But my memory is hazy.

Whatever he said, I laughed. Once again, Coach Werden made me feel all right, and I knew I could share with others what I wanted to do without feeling embarrassed.

And I did.

Two Sundays ago, my buddy Mike and a dozen former Razorback football players put on their funeral suits to pay tribute to our teddy-bear coach. I couldn’t make it. But Mike told me about it. He said it was a tearjerker.

Coach Werden was 64 when he died, and he was laid to rest in a cemetery seven minutes from Middleton High, now West Ashley Middle School. It seems appropriate for a man who helped mold teenagers into men. He lies in a tranquil place, full of thick-bodied oaks bearded with Spanish moss.

My dad is buried there. My older brother is buried there. And now, my coach.

I miss him.

He made many of us better, and the older I get, the more I realize it had nothing to do with football.

So, the next time I go, I'll stand beside yet another grave and utter the one word I've said often beneath those big oaks.

Thanks.