

Duke Nelson, a legend in Middlebury

A builder of Middlebury athletics, coach and community hero Duke Nelson passes away

On Sunday, October 22, Walter "Duke" Nelson died at the age of 82 after suffering a stroke. Duke was a long-standing member of the Middlebury community, playing the roles of student, athlete, coach, and athletic director at different points in his life. Nevertheless, it is clear that Duke was much more at Middlebury College than just a coach; in short, he was a friend to many, one who will be missed by all who knew him.

Speaking for the college community and especially the athletic department, which was so much a part of Duke's life, Athletic Director G. Thomas Lawson said, "Gone is a man who gave so much to so many. His contributions to Middlebury College, the influence he had on students and the lasting friendships he cultivated will live on as a testimonial to this unique individual."

"Although Duke will no longer sit in the eold of the ice rink or walk across the athletic fields, his memory will always be a vital part of the Middlebury tradition," Lawson added. "Duke Nelson was truly a legend in his own time."

The following is a personal account by Dean of Admissions Fred Neuberger celebrating the life of one of Middlebury's greatest alumni.

By Fred Neuberger

Duke is gone! No, he is not—he will be here as long as Middlebury is here, and he is everywhere Middlebury people gather anywhere in the world.

Still, I went to his funeral on Wednesday, October 24th right here in town in St. Stephen's Church. It was a simple religious service, possibly elegant in its simplicity. His wife, Marge, was there, as were his children John, Janet and Harry. Every seat was filled. Martin Heinecken, the Preacher, called him, "a

mountain of a man" and that, for certain, was a true statement; this was evident when his testimonial dinner was called to a halt after three hours of speeches had flown by. Duke's legacy was evident at the ceremonies when they put his name on the hockey rink, and again when they put his name on the lounge at the golf course. Stories will go on forever, and newcomers will wonder how anyone could be so important to so many people.

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During his life, he probably played every sport that existed wherever he was, but he is best remembered for his exploits in football, hockey, baseball and golf. He came to Middlebury in 1928 and was a powerful academic student and a star athlete. Having graduated in 1932, he began his coaching career right here at Middlebury. In subsequent years he coached at Union College and at R.P.I., where he is still remembered with great fondness and

respect. During World War II, he enlisted in the United States Navy and was assigned to the pre-flight program as an athletic instructor, where he met many amateur and professional stars such as Paul Runyon, Frankie Albert, Pee Wee Reese, and many others from whom he learned so very much.

He returned to Middlebury College in 1946 as head coach of football, hockey and golf. In later years, he was instrumental in helping our now mature lacrosse program get started. The final chapter came as he coached our first women's ice hockey team, providing them with a magnificent start.

In his collegiate coaching career, he won over 500 contests and he coached in nearly 1000. His Middlebury football teams were frequently over-matched physically, but he found endless ways to beat our arch rival, the University of Vermont. His hockey teams were almost always short on numbers, but he possessed a way of attracting some outstanding talent, and he used that talent to do battle with Clarkson, St. Lawrence, R.P.I., Dartmouth, Yale, B.U. and others who now make up the elite of Division One hockey. He found time to win the Vermont State Amateur Golf Championship and he was a regular finalist in some of New England's best tournaments.

I suppose much of the foregoing is common among great athletes and successful coaches, and it does not account for his immense reputation that goes so far beyond Middlebury.

He was religious, drank very little, never cursed, and he never listened to, or repeated off-color stories. He had a way with words—tons of words—by the minute—tons of words! He was kind and he was genuinely funny. He made Casey Stengel sound like an English professor. When you stumbled, he told you that

you had cucumbers for feet and you laughed and he laughed and somehow or other, those comments never hurt. He had a slight stammer and he forgot names, but you knew when he was talking to you; you knew he loved you for trying, and you returned his love.

On occasion he could be loud and overbearing, and he frequently monopolized conversations. Still, it never seemed to matter to anyone, because he could say he was sorry

"I think the bottom line to all of this is that, more than any coach that I have ever known, it was fun to play for him. Some sports are fun to practice and some are not. They tell me that football is not! However, I have had dozens of parents tell me that it was 'fun' to play for Duke."

and there was never any doubt that he was sincere. He was a genius at placing talent where it would support those who lacked talent. He could watch a game for five minutes and tell you what everyone was doing and what their strengths and weaknesses were. He was available day and night and he always seemed to have a solution that would fit your problem.

Duke loved rockem-sockem football, but he wanted it clean and