

Bill Collar: Coach and maker of men

By Tim Harty

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Now that he's the grand old man in the Bay Conference—the dean of Bay football coaches, so to speak—Bill Collar laughs off the fact. “That just means that I have been around a while,” he said in that low, gravelly voice that defines him as much as his trademark crew cut. “The major thing it says is I just enjoy being here.”

Enjoy it. He certainly does. The 52-year-old Collar enters his 24th season at the helm of the Seymour football program, and a storied tenure it's been. He's coached a few Bay Conference championship teams in his time, even had a state title team in 1985, and he gives all the credit for the program's success to everyone else involved in it but himself. It's the kids, the parents, the assistant coaches, his wife Holly, he'll tell you.

But it's also been Bill Collar. Seymour football was firmly cemented in the basement of the Bay Conference when Collar arrived in 1972. And this man who firmly believes in setting goals made his first goal to win the Bay Conference. “People looked at me, ‘Are you crazy?’ ” Collar recalls.

His first team went 0-9, but Collar considers that record anything but a failure, because things started to change for the better. He had to suspend 16 kids for training violations at one point that year, and it led to his house being spray painted and a brief walkout at the high school. But Collar made clear to everyone what he stood for and what was important in his football program.

“He won't compromise his principles,” said Jeff Braun, a former Seymour football player and track athlete. “I was suspended in track one time for a training code violation. I served my suspension and was probably a better person because of it.”

“He's very demanding,” said LaMont Kraft, who's been an assistant football coach at Seymour for the entire Collar era. “He has very high standards and he expects kids to meet them. With that, though, he also has a great deal of compassion.”

And a great deal of resolve. There was no reason to get discouraged after that first year. There was just a lot of work to do. “You can't fire a cannon out of a canoe,” Collar said. “You have to have a foundation.” Collar built it one brick at a time. He emphasized the importance of weight training, not just for football, but all sports, and many Seymour athletes have benefited from Collar's diligence in running the weight room over the years.

“My first year in Seymour we had just one kid on the team who could bench press over 200 pounds,” Collar said. “This year, 28 of the 36 players on varsity benched over 200 pounds. Fifteen were over 250 and four were over 300.” One of the first to really benefit was Braun, who said he weighed about 190 pounds as a freshman in high school, but couldn't bench 100 pounds. By the time Braun was a senior, he was benching 300 pounds, and with Collar as his coach for the weight events in track, Braun won the state championship in the shot put. He then went on to a stellar career at the University of Wisconsin, where he was an eight-time Big Ten champion in track and at one time held the Big Ten record in the shot put.

“He came here my sophomore year and he's the one that got me into strength training,” Braun said. “He was there to open the weight room every morning at 7 a.m. And he worked with us, showing us how to do things. All of the equipment isn't of any use if you don't have any guidance, anyone to teach you how to do things right and get the maximum results.”

It didn't take the football team long to see results. The team went 2-7 in Collar's second year. The year after that, Seymour had a winning record. From there, things took off. If Seymour didn't have a winning record in a season from that point on, it at least played competitive football. And the wins did start piling up. That meant a lot to us to be a part of his first winning team,” said Braun, who was a senior on that 1974 team. “Some of us guys still get together from time to time and talk about it.”

A lot of people talk about Collar, because he's had an affect on their lives. Always for the good, he hopes, because that's what he's trying to do with his life. It's why he's a teacher and a coach. A teacher first, he says, then a coach. But the two are so intertwined. “I want to make a difference in people's lives,” said Collar, who was once named the Teacher of the Year in Wisconsin. “I want to help them be better people.” Or, in the case of football, he wants to help boys become young men. That, he says, is ultimately what football is about.

“He tries to make you a better athlete, and hopefully through that you also become a better citizen,” said Braun. That's what Collar likes to hear. “I always hope I don't do anything in coaching that harms a kid,” he said. “I try to get kids to play at that higher level, try to get them to focus on being and doing their best for their benefit and for the benefit of the team.”

“It's difficult. It's challenging. A lot of kids don't have any idea what they can do. You've got to teach them, challenge them, show them what they can accomplish if they really focus on something and give it their best effort. When you see those kinds of kids come around, that's what keeps you going.”

Through 24 years, Kraft has seen a lot of kids come around with Collar's help. "One of the things that first impressed me about Bill was how he changed people's lives," said Kraft. "He's always so positive. Always doing things to build people up — in the classroom, on the football field. He builds self-esteem. When you're around Bill, you see how football can change a person's life around."

Bill Collar's been making a difference as a football coach for a long time, longer than anyone in the Bay Conference now that Clintonville's Chet Jurkovic has retired. And nowhere in the foreseeable future is that going to change. "I plan on being around a while yet," Collar said. "The major thing is I just enjoy being here. Seymour's a great community. There's a lot of good people and good kids and I enjoy teaching and coaching here."

More thoughts from Collar...

On ego: "As a younger coach, your ego comes into play a little. My ego's gotten smaller over the years."

On winning and losing: "Your goal is to win every game or at least, have a winning season. Sometimes you can win two games all year and the life-long value of the lessons learned is just as great. Sometimes you learn more from learning to handle a loss ... of course, winning is more fun."

On his wife Holly and assistant coach LaMont Kraft: "My wife's been with me 29 years and LaMont's been with me 24 years. I say my wife is a saint, and he's right up there."

More on Holly: "Any time you coach this long, you've got to have a wife who's interested football, too, and enjoys it. Holly's only missed two games over all these years. The first one was during our first year here, and she was pregnant and the weather was really inclement. The other one was with my daughter's wedding rehearsal. I think that was 1991. I think that was my best pre-game speech ever."

On his philosophy in life: "You get from people what you give people. If you want people, to respect you, you have to show them respect."

One of his most memorable moments as Seymour football coach: "Being on the sideline over at Clintonville a number of years ago and we got beat 60-6. When everything falls apart, that's a killer. When the team goes belly up, the responsibility still lies with the coach. You never want to see a team just give up — no matter how bad things get — and we did that night."

What's really memorable: "I think of all the fine young people who've come through the program. Those personal relationships that develop because of athletics are special. I'd have to say that's what I remember most."

What others have said...

LaMont Kraft, Seymour assistant football coach: "Bill is definitely high energy. It's hard to keep up with him. You can't keep up with him. He's a tireless worker, to work with Bill over the years, you can't help but admire him, his energy and his dedication."

Jeff Braun, former Seymour football player and track athlete: "Athletics and young men are his life. He's dedicated to high school kids."

Roger Haring, football coach at the University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse (Collar's alma mater): "He's very creative, very enthusiastic, very well-prepared. I cannot think of another coach I've known who's better prepared. He's also a great motivational speaker, very dynamic. There's only one Bill Collar as we like to say."

Ken Golomski, Ashwaubenon High School football coach: "I think he's one of the best coaches in the state of Wisconsin. His teams are so fundamentally sound and have such great execution. They run a Wing-T as well as anybody in the state. They may be out personelled some years, but they don't get out coached."

Bill Turnquist, West De Pere High School football coach: "He's always been a gentleman, win or lose. He definitely isn't out there because he's on an ego trip or anything."