

Waterdown boys' rugby team loses a great mentor | FlamboroughReview.com

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When the Waterdown Boys' Rugby Club players took to the bench between plays, they looked for the insightful and encouraging words of Dave Burnett. But at last week's tournament – the Warriors' first of the season – the team's head coach wasn't there.

The silence was deafening.

Coach Burnett passed away of acute pancreatitis on April 2. He was 70 years old.

As the nation's rugby community mourns the loss of the player and esteemed coach, the grief-stricken Warriors took to the pitch with one goal in mind – to make Burnett proud.

"Dave's always at the back of our minds now," said Grade 12 WDHS student Jake Newman, who has looked up to Burnett as a coach since 2007.

"On my tries, I pointed to the sky," said Warrior Jordan Young after twice securing four points for the Waterdown team at last week's tournament. "I knew he was watching."

Well respected by the 23-player squad of young men, Burnett was also a cherished member of the Rugby Ontario and Rugby Canada associations. A native of Gloucester, England, the 70-year-old rugby enthusiast was heavily involved in the sport, playing an instrumental role in promoting and growing rugby locally and across the province.

A coach, administrator and tireless volunteer, Burnett held the position of past president and was the secretary of the Burlington Rugby Football Club. An avid and talented player, the Warriors' head coach also played with the Brantford Harlequins, Hamilton Hornets and the Burlington Centaurs. He was an active Niagara Old Boys team member until his death earlier this month.

Burnett's sudden passing has left some Waterdown team members reeling.

"His loss will be hard to bare," said Nathan Tidridge, a teacher at the high school and manager of the Waterdown Boys' Rugby Club.

"He had been playing rugby his whole life. He was jacked," said Newman of the coach's physical strength. "That's why we are so rattled because he would go against us and put us on our butts," added Young.

Described as a gentleman, Burnett was a mentor to many young rugby players, including Nick Bridges. "We all sort of looked up to him," said the Grade 12 student, who has played the sport at the Parkside Drive high school for three years. "We are all different in a positive way because of him," noted Young, who personally benefitted from Burnett's guidance since joining the team in 2010.

Burnett's coaching abilities were second to none said members of the Warriors' squad. According to Newman, Burnett was able to identify players' strengths and position them on the pitch accordingly.

The head coach's patience was also valued by the Waterdown team players. "He was really good at hands-on stuff," said Bridges. And Burnett's dedication to the squad was boundless.

“He never turned his back on us,” said Young. “He never gave up on us,” no matter how poorly the team performed, added Newman.

“For the members of our club, Dave personified integrity, honour, respect, and what it meant to be a gentleman,” said Tidridge, adding that in 2010, Burnett was awarded the club’s highest medal – the William Webb Ellis medal – for his leadership.

Following the Warriors’ first tournament last week, the players were hit with the realization that Burnett was not there to offer some constructive criticism or congratulate the boys on their performance. “It was surreal,” said Bridges of the team’s mood. “It didn’t feel right. It was definitely emotional afterwards,” said Newman.

Burnett’s passing has further spurred the Waterdown boys’ desire to succeed this season. “Our whole season is dedicated to him,” said Bridges, adding that the team will soon sport a special emblem on their jerseys in memory of their coach.

A celebration of life ceremony in memory of Burnett was held last weekend at Burlington’s Sherwood Forest Park, hosted by the Centaurs. The Waterdown Warriors team attended, passing a rugby ball in honour of their coach.