

Augie Holmquist: Jefferson's forgotten man

Written by Don Taylor

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The year was 1963 and Jefferson High School boasted a sophomore football team that finished its season undefeated and conference champions.

With the help of the class preceding it and the class following, this team would go on to be undefeated throughout its three seasons at Jefferson. The Des Moines Register would years later name the Jefferson football team of 1965 as the eighth-best team in Iowa sports history.

That 1965 team was made up of many accomplished athletes who were later named to the Jefferson Hall of Fame. In all, 15 members of the 1965 roster went on to participate in college sports. Jefferson historian Bob Ask calls this the “apex of sports in Jefferson history.”

I can't speak for all the team, but when I think back, it seems that it was - and is - more about the relationships than the wins. The chemistry was critical and the sharing of the work that went into the accomplishment formed a bond among us that will last way past the record.

The story of this team is easy to tell. However, I would like to focus on the forgotten man of this successful team. Augie Holmquist was eliminated from the action but will be forever linked to the spirit of the program.

I have been fortunate to be around some special athletes as a player and as a coach over the years. Among the best are Jon Meskimen and Larry Lawrence, who were my teammates at Jefferson. Two others were Marv Cook, who I coached at West Branch, and Scott Schebler who played for me at Prairie.

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What they all had in common was the athleticism to succeed in multiple sports and a tremendous work ethic. It has been a blessing to have known and been a part of the lives of these men.

I want to focus this article on an athlete much like the guys I just cited. A man who may have been taken from the field, the court or the diamond way before his time, but has lived a life even more inspirational than the fleeting fame that sports can provide for us.

I want to tell the story of Augie Holmquist.



In ninth grade at Roosevelt, Holmquist was the quarterback/linebacker on the football team. He was among the city leaders in passing on offense and tackling on defense. He was in the top 10 in scoring and rebounding in basketball, and citing George Thompson, the Roosevelt baseball coach, "threw harder than anyone he had ever coached."

A gifted athlete of the same caliber as those I have previously mentioned, Holmquist was arguably one of the most promising athletes in Cedar Rapids history.

On Tuesday, Nov. 5, 1963, a tragic event took place that is wedged in my memory bank between the March on Washington and the Kennedy assassination. Randy Shultz, a sophomore student at Jefferson, shot classmate Augie Holmquist in the back three times in a shower room with a .22 caliber revolver following a swimming class at Jefferson. Holmquist would remain paralyzed from the waist down from that day forward.

It was my original intent to just relay the story of the event, but it is clear that the result of this horrible event is more newsworthy than is the tragedy that took place that day 50 years ago.

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Coaches say that a truly great athlete not only excels as a player, but inspires his teammates to play at a high level as well. If that is true, Holmquist's entire life is a testament to greatness.

"God, family, friends and the help of many others enabled me to overcome the challenges in my life," said Holmquist, now retired and living in Florida.

"Everyone should have to be in a wheelchair. It's a learning experience. Without this experience, I could have never had the kind of impact on the young people I talk to, or anyone I come in contact with in my daily life."

Despite this tragic roadblock, Holmquist graduated from high school with his class, graduated from broadcast school, electronics school and Kirkwood, where he was president of the student body. He worked as a DJ in Cedar Rapids while coaching the Mount Mercy basketball team for two years.

It was at this point that Holmquist endured a tragic car accident and lost one of his legs, but that did not slow him down. He then began work at a state facility, helping special needs young people cope with a variety of issues including paralysis, a task he has voluntarily continued doing at local hospitals ever since.

Tragically, after three years of marriage, his first wife, Natalie, died of a rare form of cancer. Yet Holmquist endured. He became a popular radio talk show host on KMSD in Milbank, S.D.

He retired in 2002 and moved to Florida, where he became a program director and tour guide for Valiant Air Command War Bird Museum. He and his second wife, JoAnn, have been married for 22 years.

He has coached youth sports programs with his brothers and has given of his time to working with young people at local hospitals and institutions.

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“My life is on a roller-coaster. Every other day I am rocketing up to some new high or I’m on the downhill going like a bat out of hell and lovin’ it,” said Holmquist.

In my recent conversation with Holmquist, I asked what it was that enabled him to press on, not feeling sorry for himself, or just throwing in the towel.

“When we were playing sophomore football so many years ago, we were late in a game where we were ahead 28-0 and the other team ran a pass play and I probably could have caught the guy with the ball, but it was 28-0, it was late, it didn’t matter. Coach Allen (Bob Allen, Jefferson sophomore backs coach) pulled me aside and chewed me out. He instilled an understanding that you never quit, you never give up, and that anybody can quit. That has stuck with me all of these years.

“My family has never stopped supporting me, and that has made all the difference. At times I have felt like I live in this terrible fog and wondered why God has kept me alive this long. I know God was there the day I was shot, because he stopped the bullet before it hit my heart. In down times it has been my parents and brothers who are always there to pick me up.

“I have received help from so many friends and people I didn’t even know that it is clear that God has blessed me. Because God has blessed me, I enjoy helping others serving to encourage them to overcome their particular challenges.”

Holmquist was taken out of sports long before he really got the chance to test his many talents and skills. Due to his understanding of team, and the value of hard work, commitment and endurance he has risen above his disadvantages to make a real difference.

The class of 1966 has a website and I want to quote a statement made on it. Here is how it goes: “This victory was for Augie. We gave him the game ball, he taught us to never give up! We were the sweat and the muscle; he was the spirit that drove us. This ball is for you.”

Holmquist was given the ball when we won the sophomore conference championship and the game ball from the 1965 state championship game. His spirit was truly what inspired us to play

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to a higher level on the field long ago, just as his life should inspire us now.

There are three life lessons that we must pull from this sports story that we can apply to our lives every day: Anybody can give up, we can always accomplish so much more together than we can ever accomplish alone, and as we are blessed, we should be a blessing for others.

Those outside of the program may not recall the name Augie Holmquist, but among his teammates he will not be forgotten.