

Kennedy legend Bill Herkelman dies

Written by Jim Ecker

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Bill "Herk" Herkelman, the beloved Kennedy High School teacher and baseball coach, died Friday morning at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics after suffering a stroke on Thursday.

Herkelman was an iconic figure with the Kennedy baseball program for 36 years as a head coach and assistant coach and is a member of the Iowa High School Baseball Coaches Association Hall of Fame.

The Kennedy High School field was named in his honor last year.

"He is the godfather of Kennedy baseball. That's probably all that needs to be said," Kennedy head coach Bret Hoyer said somberly Friday. "We'll try to carry on his legacy every year."

Herkelman compiled a 318-224 record as Kennedy's head coach from 1977 through 1992 with five Metro titles, two Mississippi Valley Conference titles and two trips to the state tournament.

He served as an assistant baseball coach at Kennedy from 1968 through 1976 before becoming the head coach. He returned to the coaching staff as one of Hoyer's assistants in 2005 and was in the dugout Wednesday night when the Cougars defeated Cedar Falls to make the Class 4A state tournament.

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Herkelman, who was in his late 70's, was a math teacher at Kennedy from 1967 until his retirement as a teacher in 2012. He also taught at Lost Nation High School, Maquoketa High School and Harding Middle School before moving to Kennedy when the school opened in 1967. All told, he spent 52 years in a classroom.

Herkelman is survived by his wife, Kristine; two sons, Dan and Stan; and four grandchildren. He was preceded in death by his first wife.

Herkelman was known as a stickler for the fundamentals of baseball and for his Herk-isms about the game. He was extremely popular with the players, keeping them smiling and on their toes.

Members of the Kennedy baseball family offered tributes to Herkelman on social media outlets Friday.

"Coach Herk was a Kennedy legend and we will never forget what he has done for us as ballplayers," said Austin Isaacs, a member of this year's team. "RIP Herk. You will be missed greatly."

"Kennedy lost another legend today," wrote Derek Jacobus, a former Kennedy player who graduated in 2014. "RIP Coach Herk #29, one of the funniest people I have ever met. Another angel watching over us all."

Members of the Kennedy family began gathering at Herkelman Field Friday morning following news of his passing.

"Heaven just gained the best high school baseball coach that ever did it," said former Cougar Ethan Divis, who is an assistant sophomore coach at Kennedy. "Kennedy is the house that Herk built."

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"Will forever and always be a part of the Cougar family," said former Kennedy football coach Matt Lewis.

Herkelman and his wife attended a post-game gathering at Hoyer's house after the substate finals Wednesday night. Kristine Herkelman called Hoyer on Thursday to tell him that "Herk" had suffered a stroke, but it was believed to be a "mild" stroke at the time.

He was originally treated at St. Luke's Hospital in Cedar Rapids, then transported by helicopter to the UI Hospital in Iowa City Thursday night.

Further tests detected bleeding in Herkelman's brain. He was pronounced dead Friday morning.

Herkelman Field was dedicated on June 2, 2014 in a ceremony that included Herkelman's family members, friends, admirers, former players and former students.

"It's just tremendous," he said that night. "To have all my family here; I didn't even know they were coming."

People at the ceremony wore special Herkelman T-shirts and were given Herkelman baseball cards. Herkelman's name is inscribed on the stone wall behind home plate at the field.

Herkelman grew up in Elwood, Iowa, and wanted to be a Major League baseball player. "I always said I would've given my two little fingers if I could've played in the Major Leagues," he once remarked.

He graduated from the University of Northern Iowa and began his distinguished career as an educator. He never missed a day of school due to illness in all his years in the classroom.

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The Kennedy Cougars are scheduled to play Davenport North in the opening round of the Class 4A baseball tournament on Wednesday at 5 p.m. at Principal Park in Des Moines.