

W. Gene Davis Merit Award

On Jan. 19, the National Soccer Coaches Association of America posthumously awarded Gene Davis the NSCAA Merit Award, which was accepted by his wife Beth. For 25 years, Davis served as coach of Octorara High School in Parkesburg, Pa., where he guided his teams to outstanding records throughout the years.

Before coaching, Davis played at West Chester University under Coach Mel Lorback. At West Chester, Davis earned All-American honors and became an NCAA Tournament semifinalist with his team in 1959.

"There's no finer performer, both as a man and athlete, who has performed on our field during my 19-year tenure," Lorback said. "He was the kind of man every parent wishes his child would grow up to be. He epitomized a commitment to excellence through his high standards."

Aside from coaching, Davis served as a teacher for eight years at Octorara High School and as assistant principal of Octorara Intermediate for 17 years. He died Nov. 17, 1985 at the age of 47.

Thank you My children, Bill and Abby, Gene's family, my family and I are grateful for this tribute to Gene. I hope you will bear with me while I speak as my heart compels me to.

Not all of you knew Gene, but to us who did, a merit award for service to soccer seems most appropriate. We have seen his excellence as a coach at close range, his diligence to his purpose, his enthusiasm for the sport, his expectations of his players, his rapport, and his total commitment, especially of his time. At this point a little bit of Gene's humor would have been fitting, but the only "time commitment" jokes I could come up with would be much better received at a convention of coaches' spouses!

I do remember Gene's response and the twinkle in his eye when I was listing my responsibilities at home as reason for not being at his summer league games. He said, "We'll probably still play!"

Likewise a few rookies each season with poorly timed work schedules, dentist appointment, or backyard barbecues at Grandma's heard the coach say, "We'll probably still have a team."

Gene's mandate for his team to commit was unshakable. Every year the boundaries were tested. Skilled players with poor attitudes found playing time only if they shaped up and got their acts together. Some hated the coach, but stuck it out anyway, often becoming leaders on the field and better individuals off the field. Some couldn't take the pressure and fell by the wayside. It was an opportunity missed. I hope life grants them others they can better accept.

Gene spoke, wrote, and lived a philosophy - "No pain - no gain". He believed that there were sacrifices to be made to be physically and mentally able to play one's best. He, personally, never smoked in his adult life, though often bragged that he gave it up when he was 11! Neither did he drink. It's true, but maybe hard to believe from his rowdy behavior with his cronies. A diet Coke got him going.

Gene let his players in on his humor, but never at the expense of discipline. Even this last season, he suspended indefinitely his stalling star player, until medical opinions and X-rays were sought to support this player's preseason injury complaint. Gene cared a great deal for that young man. He is one who finally regrouped and will succeed in soccer and most probably, in life.

So, one more season got started where I was embarrassed to sit with the others! I obviously cramped their conversation. But, after 14 years of this I could very confidently know they just needed time to see the whole picture, to understand the value in sacrificing for the betterment of the team. You know, parents of maligned players are often poor models for their children.

But, this season was to be a short one for Coach Davis. The reason, nearly a year-old lung cancer, metastasized to bone. Gene first felt symptoms in his rib and back, severely so, in an "Old Timers" game in the summer of 1984, when he played midfield. He typically rationalized the pain as a muscle pull and an elbow to the ribs, but let John Thompson know that he didn't think he'd play the rest of the season. By October, after visits to a chiropractor, a G.P., and orthopedic man, a lung specialist, an oncologist, we knew what we were dealing with.

I remember Gene saying before he left for school the morning after we found out - "I'm going to put a sign on my office door - Squamous cell cancer is not contagious!" And, it isn't, of course, but how one copes with it can be.

At this point many people questioned - "Why?" - the unanswerable. One of Gene's senior players many months later expressed to his dad, "I know it's rotten for the coach this way - dying - all year long. But, somehow, it's better for me." We were all given a year's grace to evaluate our own purpose to express what had gone unsaid, to see things more from God's perspective, and to love more like He does.

And so, there began a year of three different chemotherapy regimens, and with them a variety of ghoulish symptoms - intense vomiting, a fiery esophagus, diarrhea, constipation, back pain, leg cramps, nausea, insomnia, nightmares, raw fear and depression. But, that same year played host to many of the most meaningful times in Gene's life, as well.

He became a realist, but with hope. He had to reckon with his Creator, reevaluate his own faith, and came to acknowledge his full belief in a loving god. By and large he continued to choose life brilliantly, despite the pain and the odds. He continued working as an administrator, counselling teachers and disciplining students.

Home became his haven - a place to collapse in and to regroup. Yet, he coached with new intensity. I remember my own over protectiveness and, really, withdrawal symptoms when Gene left with Mike Moyer for last year's soccer coaches' convention in Washington, D.C. He took a personal day and pulled out confidently - in a snowstorm! It was a great weekend for him.

He later even signed up for coaching school, but at the last moment opted to coach at F & M's EPYSA camp, as he felt physically able to manage and since he learned he had another year to

renew his license. He came home rejuvenated only to find out that his lymph nodes were now probably involved in the spreading of the cancer.

Octorara's own soccer camp again was held as scheduled with 100 campers. Gene continued to play golf, go to games, and start his high school's early practice with the support of Ken Wilson, his former player and good friend.

On Sept. 4, 1985, Gene suffered a stroke to the right side of his brain, leaving him with some dysfunction in his left side. He minimally regained strength, even in the ambulance, en route to Paoli memorial, and we both felt he would survive and heal. Gene came home in less than a week, unable to withstand the duress of hospital confinement and its phobic memories of chemotherapy. I can recall his zombie-like expression in physical therapy as a bored therapist "baby talked" him through the exercises. She looked the other way and he smirked and gave me a wink. He was strong and clung to normal life.

I can also recall a very attractive nurse, Leslie, who made things much more bearable, and a favorite Davis comment of mine was, "Just because you're on a diet, doesn't mean you can't look at the menu!" But home even looked better.

One short week after his homecoming we sped back to the emergency room, this time in the back of Ken Wilson's van. We borrowed a wheelchair from a neighbor and gathered Gene very painfully from the floor where he found himself unable to move when trying to get out of bed. The cause turned out to be a further recurrence of cancer in his hip. Gene came back home on pain medication, but unable to walk. New equipment now labeled his life at home - a hospital bed, a commode, a tray for meals in bed. But he conquered these also, for a time.

Amid all this strife was an outpouring of caring that has indelible marked the year with the glow of human goodness. Our living room often became an alternate Octorara faculty lounge, our dining room became a local "hot spot" for lunch, players came to visit and for the teacher and coaches there, provided a new audience for the old stories. My, how time and retelling improves the stories!

Townpeople brought a new wheelchair from the VFW, a friend built us a ramp with wood donated quietly by a former player. West Chester State Coach Mel Lorback pulled Gene out of a slump with a visit and three hours of soccer talk.

The community held a prayer vigil for Gene. Services were offered and churches were open in four towns of the Octorara area. Coaches called him after games to "Monday morning quarterback."

The Octorara soccer booster honored Gene at October's homecoming by inviting his captains of the last 25 years' soccer teams to assemble centerfield at halftime. Nearly 50 young men formed a line to shake Gene's hand and talk the rest of the afternoon as he sat in the stands that day.

Friends and neighbors came steadily, bringing meals, school news and their intent to comfort. In his usual style, Gene ran the show, doing most of the entertaining and the comforting.

He verbalized three goals:

- to stay out of the hospital;
- to have as much time with Bill, Abby and me as possible;
- to control the pain.

For a month he realized all three fairly well. We didn't miss a game in a 50 mile radius! We even traveled to Lafayette to see them play Penn State and enjoy the camaraderie of old friends. Gene ventured back to his high school team's practice to watch, to comment, and one great afternoon - to run practice with assurance and direction and hope. He came home pumped!

The next morning Gene had his second stroke, the beginning of a three-week hospital stay that climaxed with his death on this past Nov. 7. The strokes became multiple and were diagnosed as cancer-caused, rare - a condition known as "Marantic endocarditis."

Many individuals experienced Gene's last days and night with me, reaching out in love and coming to terms with the finite nature of life. I hoped to bring Gene home to die. Home didn't happen, but I was fortunate to be alone with him when the athlete's body finally gave up. Like Gene, I felt the spiritual pull, the wonder, the clarity and the peace of a loving God.

As death is inevitable for each of us, so, therefore, is living.

I look back at last year as the worst year I've ever experience, at one with the best. Our moments were among the most painful, at one with the most precious. It can be likened to a game, - lost, but extremely well played. As a coach, you all can live with that. Gene had little regret. Neither do I.

What have I learned?

That being a spouse, a parent, a teacher and a coach all provide us with opportunities for achieving excellence. They are worthy ventures. Less than our best efforts in any one of them is cheating ourselves and our Maker. Rewards are intrinsic.

Also - that love and influence continue. It conquers death. I have received several hundred additional letters of condolence from Gene's nurses, players, parents, teachers, teammates and his soccer camp kids, all recalling significant memories. They are a treasury for me and my children. An Octorara High School service club planted a tree outside his office as a living memorial to Gene. The high school track and soccer field is to be officially named the "W. Gene Davis Memorial Field" and will be dedicated at next year's homecoming. The Gene Davis Scholarship Fund climbs to \$4,000, to be awarded to deserving Octorara players perpetually.

Simply, soccer was Gene's lifeblood. It was his best medium for expressing his life's philosophy. And, it served him well.

The relationship he had with many of us, and with his players, continues to be felt. We are all left to carry on.

Again, thank you.
Beth T. Davis