

Len Luedtke, Sr.

Nominated By Cory Jennerjohn

Len Luedtke was the first Ted Lasso.

Lasso is a popular fictional TV character that somehow exudes positivity out of every single life situation. Luedtke is a real man that has a firm handshake and a huge smile. He also has a complete set of dimples that make him even more jolly.

Luedtke is a father, grandfather, teacher, administrator, and football coach. But most importantly, he's an incredible listener.

He is the man with a one-of-a-kind chuckle. I have heard it for many years at various family functions. My uncle can make others laugh with a deep-bellied laugh that infects an entire room with happiness.

Luedtke was named the Marshfield High School football coach in 1995. The Tigers weren't exactly an attractive school to coach. Marshfield had never played in a postseason game. In Luedtke's first season, the Tigers went 7-2 after going 1-8 in 1994.

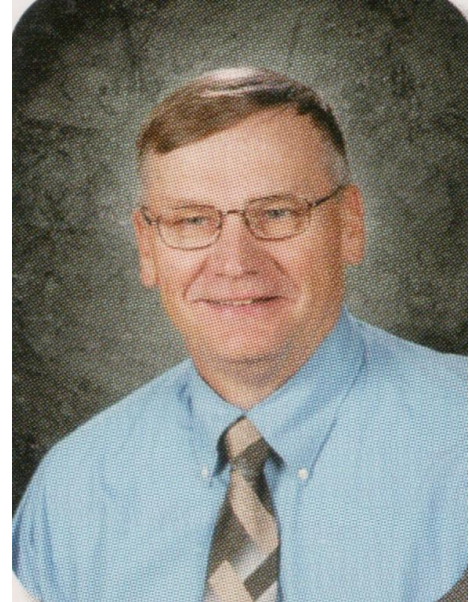
"It was the start of great seasons and awesome games to come," said Luedtke's son, Len Luedtke, Jr., who played for his father in 1995 and is now on staff as an assistant.

Luedtke, Jr. was spot on. That 1995 season was the building block of something special in the Marshfield area. And it was surprising. Remember, this was an area that was known for the Marshfield Clinic, not for football success.

In Luedtke's second season, the Tigers won two playoff games and in 1997, he led Marshfield to its first state title. Think about that for a second. The Tigers had gone from never even playing in a postseason game to winning a state title in just three years.

"I consider myself a lucky man to have played for coach Luedtke and his staff," said Adam Stenavich, who graduated from Marshfield in 2000 before earning a scholarship to play offensive line for the University of Michigan.

Let's face it. Football isn't easy. Especially when Marshfield was competing in arguably one of the toughest conferences in the state with powers like Stevens Point, D.C. Everest, and



Wisconsin Rapids always ready to assume control in the Wisconsin Valley Conference. The Conference was dismantled for football after the 2009-2010 season.

“No doubt that the WVC was an incredibly competitive conference with top notch teams,” said Pete McAdams, who coached the Stevens Point Area Senior High School (SPASH) football team for 20 seasons before resigning in July 2021. “The conference champion was almost always a top four team in Wisconsin.”

From 1996-2009, Marshfield, D.C. Everest, Stevens Point, and Wisconsin Rapids combined to win 83 playoff games, five state titles, and three state runner-ups.

But it’s more than just wins and losses. Remember, there aren’t many coaches that would want to step into a situation bereft of a winning culture. And there aren’t many coaches that would be able to steer the ship through rough waters before ultimately ending up in paradise.

“Len knew how to get the best of his players and coaches,” said McAdams, who is now an assistant football coach at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. “He has always been humble and treated his players and coaches with respect. I believe that was a huge reason they gave everything they had for him.”

Luedtke amassed a 136-44 record at Marshfield and only missed the playoffs once. His teams won three Wisconsin Valley Conference titles (1999, 2001, 2002), three state titles (1997, 2001, 2002), and were state runner-ups twice (1999, 2004). Pretty amazing for a program that hadn’t tasted the playoffs until Luedtke started smiling on the sideline.

“The cliché, ‘Success breeds success,’ is true here,” said Paul Lecker, who was the sports editor of the *Marshfield News-Herald* from 1999-2003. “The expectations of the upcoming players were dictated by the success of the teams from the past. Fifteen seasons with only one losing season, and even that year included a playoff berth, is impressive.”

But Luedtke was also versatile. He wrestled and ran track in addition to playing football at UW-Eau Claire, where he graduated in 1975. Three years later, he earned his first head coaching job at Shawano High School.

The reason Luedtke succeeded is because he proved that he cared. He made each player feel important. While Luedtke is known for his notable athletic milestones, he never centers conversations around himself. And I guarantee you, during his 15 years at Marshfield he probably blushed and went silent whenever someone asked him to talk about himself.

But that’s how he’s always been. He’s great with any age group. I think tots have always been amused with his booming laugh, while the adults could just listen to him weave in and out of epic tales. An avid outdoorsman who has taken fishing trips to Canada, Luedtke has a magnetic personality but never seeks to be the center of attention.

He's one of the most selfless people you will ever meet. Players and coaches see that and instantly want to do the impossible just to make him proud and keep him smiling.

"He has influenced an entire generation of young men in such a positive way," Stenavich said. "All we can say is, 'Thanks Coach,' and do our best to carry on those values for the next generation."

Tigers' players now practice on Len Luedtke Field at Kenneth & Ardyce Community Stadium. He was inducted into the Wisconsin Football Coaches Association Hall of Fame in 2013 and the National High School Athletic Coaches Association Hall of Fame in 2022.

While wins and losses are things that people will hold on to, the most important thing that Luedtke did was shape generations of young men. He made them into the best version of themselves, on and off the field. That contagious smile made a bunch of boys believe in themselves and, in turn, made a community believe in them.

So thank you Len. Thank you for caring. Thank you for listening. Thank you for being you.

The milestones are great, but his greatest accomplishments go far beyond the sidelines. And the funny thing is they always have.