



LEN WAITKUS

On Harvey Run Road, a thoroughfare connecting Freedom to New Sewickley Township, there sits a modest clapboard house on a rise above the road. Behind this house is a path that leads up a hill to Robinson Street and connects with a parking lot overlooking the Freedom Area Middle School/High School complex. For thirty-four years, season after season, a familiar figure could be seen taking this path at all hours of day and night. Sometimes with a companion, often alone, he'd make the trek that ended at the wide glass doors of the high school lobby.

Leonard Waitkus' beginnings, of course, came far before his constant walks across this landscape. The only child of Joseph A. and Frances Waitkus, he was born and raised in the mining community of Plum Borough. His life in Plum, set against the blue collar shadows of the coal mines where his father labored, was typical of a child of the fifties and sixties. He attended public school, lettered in football and basketball in high school, graduated, and attended Indiana State College. There he earned a bachelor of science degree in mathematics education. He married his high school sweetheart, bid farewell to the Allegheny Valley, and secured a position as a math teacher in Freedom Area High School, a small school in a district that rose high above the railroad tracks and rivers that bisected Beaver County. He would not leave that position until his retirement some thirty-four years later.

It is a cliché to claim that some professionals are institutions, but Leonard Waitkus was exactly that. His career encompassed far more than teaching algebra and geometry. He was perhaps best remembered by his earlier generations of students as an outstanding coach. As head football coach in 1973, he led the Bulldogs to the only section title they ever would claim. For his performance, he was named the MAC Coach of the Year. That team produced many stellar athletes who would go on to achieve collegiate and professional distinction. To this day, some forty years later, they still meet for reunions where they once again embrace their coach and relive their glory days on the gridiron.

Although Waitkus' career as football coach was brief, his subsequent work as golf coach lasted twelve years and produced three golf pros. He inspired countless athletes by guiding them through the fine points of the gentleman's game.

Waitkus' contribution to Freedom athletics went far beyond coaching. From 1989 to 1999 he served as the district's athletic director, all the while maintaining a full classroom load. He was the chief administrator of the summer recreational swimming program for more than sixteen years. He sponsored the wrestling cheerleaders, supervised track and field meets, and, perhaps most memorably, was the voice of the Bulldogs, announcing football games in that booming voice that launched from the stadium press box and reverberated for miles around.

In his professional career, Waitkus also mentored scores of student teachers and fledgling members of the math department. He acted as master of ceremonies for all sports banquets,

senior banquets, prom grand marches. In a rare dramatic venture, he even took the stage as Ebenezer Scrooge in a Christmas play to raise money for the Freedom Area Education Association student scholarships.

Even in retirement, Waitkus continued to make contributions to the teaching profession generally and to Freedom specifically. From 2006 to 2008 and then again from 2010 to 2012, he served as region director for the PASR. From 2008 to 2014, he was a trustee on the Board of Directors for the Freedom Area Education Foundation. And he maintained membership in the PSEA, NEA, and MAC Coaches Association.

If Leonard Waitkus earned distinction as teacher, coach, mentor, sponsor, and supervisor, he was equally committed to his church and the Roman Catholic community at large. An active member of St. Felix Parish from 1971 until the present, he served as lector for twenty-three years and as baptism coordinator for eight years. He was honored as the Holy Name Beaver County Deanery Man of the year and served as toastmaster for the Deanery banquets from 1989 through 2010.

But it was his service to the Knights of Columbus that is most noteworthy. Waitkus achieved the distinction of 4th Degree Grand Knight. An active chairman who spearheaded the Bishop's Project, he received the John Paul II Award for Contributions to that project in 1998. He attained numerous offices: State Membership Chairman West; First Chairman of the Bishop's Project Golf Tournament; State Scholarship Chairman; President of the Beaver Valley Chapter; Secretary of the State of Pennsylvania. Presently, he is the Supreme Liaison for Lithuania, Eastern Europe, a title that is close to his heart as his ethnic heritage is Lithuanian.

Ever the model of service to the community, Waitkus also takes pride in his work for McGuire Memorial Home. He serves as a member of the board of directors for McGuire and has worked tirelessly to promote the institution's programs.

Waitkus is the proud father of two children, Kelly Waitkus Wetzel (husband Michael) of Sewickley, and James Waitkus (wife Karen) of Newtown, Pennsylvania, and the equally proud grandfather of four: Austin and Kate Wetzel, and Ian and Luke Waitkus. They are his true legacy.

Leonard Waitkus no longer walks that familiar path from Harvey Run to the high school grounds. In the years since his retirement, he lost his first wife, Geraldine, in a valiant battle with cancer. He married again, to a retired teacher, the former Janis Furgiuele, who was declining Spanish verbs at the same time he was teaching proofs and theorems just one district down the river, Rochester High School. Now, in retirement, he walks from his patio home on Pioneer Lane to the clubhouse at Liberty Hills atop Conway Walrose Road. But the hills are the same, overlooking the Ohio River, the Conway railroad yards, and the valley that Waitkus, from his earliest years as teacher/coach/husband/father came to claim as home.