

By Randy Whalen

Rollie Bolattino is perhaps best remembered as a basketball coach at Lockport Township.

But Bolattino was more than that. Much more.

He made an undeniable impact on the Lockport community in many ways.

"Rollie was my best friend," Bob Meader said. "He is missed. He was a great mentor for me and my family. The Bolattino family, Patty, Callie, and the grandkids exemplified role models for the Meader family."

With Bolattino's influence, Meader was a teacher, coach, and ultimately principal at Lockport between 1991-2005.

"Rollie loved teaching and coaching at Lockport," Meader said. "He was always there to lend a helping hand to students, those in co-curricular activities, and the staff. Rollie was never outworked by anyone."

"His greatest joy while coaching was assisting our basketball players and coaching staff in winning the (Class AA) 1978 State Basketball Championship!"

Rolin F. "Rollie" Bolattino, age 79, passed away peacefully on Monday, January 9, 2023, surrounded by his loving family. Born in Joliet and a lifelong resident of Lockport. Rollie graduated in 1957 from Fairmont Grade School, and in 1961 from Lockport Township High School.

True to his form later in life, during his time at Lockport, he was his Sophomore Class and Senior Class President. He received the 1961 Lockport Athlete of the year, participating in football, basketball, and baseball. Not only was he involved in athletics, but Rollie was also a member of the Lockport marching band all four years.

Bolattino was a 1965 graduate of Western Illinois University, where he was a three-sport athlete playing football, basketball, and baseball. After graduating college, he taught at Wilmington School District for three years and spent his last 27 years teaching at Lockport. He was a physical education teacher and later the PE department chair. He was a dedicated basketball coach for 24 years, and as mentioned, was immensely honored to be part of the 1977-1978 Lockport's first school State Championship Team.

In 1994, Rollie retired, after many proud years of being a Porter where he accomplished so much throughout his years of teaching and coaching. But he was also a high school and Big 10 Umpire for 17

years. Plus, in his spare time relaced baseball gloves for 62 years for many athletes near and far from tee ball players to major leaguers.

Above and beyond all his achievements, he enjoyed spending time with his family, especially his grandchildren. He will be deeply missed by all who knew and loved him. Preceded in death by his parents, Joseph and Margaret (Nee McCleary) Bolattino; one brother, Roger Bolattino; and numerous aunts and uncles. Survived by his devoted wife, Patricia "Patty" (Nee Brooks) Bolattino; one loving daughter, Callie (late Christopher) Revord; four adored grandchildren, Reilly, McKenna, Colby, and Cooper Revord; three cousins, Dennis (Peggy) Lapikas, Patti (late Bill) Hagerborme, and Donna (Mike) Keenan; his dear unofficial younger brothers, Ross Margentina, Jim Huey, Bob Meader, and Rob Cronholm. Numerous other cherished family members, friends, athletes, and former coworkers also survive.

Per Rollie's wishes cremation rites were respectfully addressed. Inurnment was privately held with only his immediate family in attendance at Lockport City Cemetery, Lockport, IL 60441. Family and friends can sign the online guestbook at O'Neil Funeral Home, Lockport. There are many tributes there.

"Rollie was well dressed in unique sports coats," Meader recalled the 'loud' sports jackets Bolattino wore, including the checkered maroon one. "He was super, he was great for kids. He loved telling stories of his grade school days at Fairmont and his lifelong friends he had as classmates."

Meader, a 1968 Lockport graduate who played basketball for the Porters, worked for Bolattiino in the physical education office. Meader later coached sophomore basketball at the school and recalls a story that exemplifies what type of person Rollie was.

"Sam Thigpen was a custodian at Lockport," Meader recalled. "He was distraught that a member of his family, who lived in the deep south, had passed away. Sam didn't have a reliable vehicle to get to the services. So Rollie gave him the keys to his van and told him to take it there and take his time."

"That was Rollie. If there was a Hall of Fame for Outstanding Human Beings, Rollie would definitely be a unanimous first-round inductee!"

Alvin Green was an outstanding player on the Porter boy's basketball team that placed fourth in the state in Class AA in 1973. He fondly remembers Bolattino from that time.

"I have good memories of Rollie," Green said. "When I got to high school he was the sophomore coach and I started on the sophomore team. So he was my first coach. Then he moved to be a varsity assistant the next year and I was brought up to the varsity as a sophomore. So I had him as a coach all four years."

"My sophomore season we had to play all of our games and practice at Lockport West (now Romeoville). He made sure that we had to and from practice that season. He and his wife also did all our laundry as far as uniforms and practice jerseys. We got to practice and they were all laid out on the bench. He also laced everyone's baseball gloves. He was more than a coach."

Yes, he was and Green remembers the work that Bolattino did behind the scenes that led to Lockport upsetting top-ranked, undefeated Lincoln 62-54 in a 1973 state quarterfinal game.

"The scouting and stuff he did was outstanding," Green said. "In the game against Lincoln, he had scouted them a few times that year. Rollie was telling us stuff to look for and he was spot on. He told us that (future NBA player) Norm Cook would dribble the ball and put it on the floor and we took that away from him."

"It was just the little things like that and they made a big difference. He was dedicated to the program. In later years he would walk his dog by my house near Dellwood Park and if I'd see him he'd always stop to talk."

While Bolattino was part of many great teams, the 1977-78 Lockport boys' basketball season was certainly the pinnacle. The Porters went 33-0 en route to the State Title. It seemed like the whole town, which had a population of about 10,000 then, came out to the celebration parade for what was the first of what is now 23 Illinois High School Association State Championships.

Mike Murray was a senior on the State Championship basketball team. Now living in Shorewood for over three decades, Murray stayed in touch with Rollie up until his passing.

"Rollie was there when you needed him," Murray said. "There are so many stories of what Rollie meant to me, and my kids, Phillip, John, Lauren, and Patrick."

Murray recalls plenty of things during that time.

"Rollie did the interpretation of the rules for the (Illini 8) Conference and also did the conference newsletter with the stats," he said. "Also, we didn't have athletic trainers, as we do now. Rollie was basically it. He played the trumpet and helped influence my kids musically. He was an expert boat driver, and he could fix baseball gloves in the dark. He did everything."

"Plus, as players, we never talked about winning state. It was always one at a time. Let's get this one and worry about the next one."

As most who knew Bolattino have said, he cared for people and it showed.

"When Terry Green, who was a junior then, broke his leg my senior season, he was in the hospital in Chicago," Murray recalled. "Rollie went up to see him as often as possible. He also knew Ken Norton (who went on to be a professional boxer and was the WBC world heavyweight championship in 1978) was in Rollie's fraternity at Western.

"Rollie, to us, was the leader. If you wondered which way to go, Rollie was the one to ask for advice. Not just for us as players, but for the coaches too. He was the go-to guy at the school."

Following the 1981-82 season, Bolattino resigned from his varsity assistant basketball position. But in 1987, the head coaching position became available. Rollie got the job and had the task of replacing Bob Basarich, who was head coach of the Porters for 21 seasons, going 496-99 in that span with 15 regional titles, seven sectional championships, and two state trophies.

Not much was expected of the boys basketball team that season. But the Porters went 22-8 and won a regional championship. Tony Porto was a senior on that team and remembers it well.

"My senior year our first team meeting was about how this can go two ways," Porto recalled. "With no one believing in us, we could fold, or we can defy all the naysayers. We chose to defy those odds and go 22-8."

Current Joliet Central boys basketball coach, Lawrence Thompson, who was the head coach for the Porters for 16 seasons from 1999-2015 and won three straight sectional titles between 2006-08, was the assistant varsity coach under Bolattino in the 1987-88 season.

"We had all kinds of guys that were talented in their own right," Thompson said. "Rollie had been away from the program for five years or so but I saw firsthand how he was able to put the team in his vision but also have it different (than Basarich).

"Anytime the kids became discombobulated, Rollie would be the calming force. He was able to get the kids to step up and do what they were able to do."

The Porters nearly won the SICA West that season but had a pair of narrow losses to conference champion Joliet West, which was coached by Mike O'Connell. A longtime basketball coach in the area, O'Connell was the head coach for the last two seasons of Joliet East (1981-83) before guiding Joliet West (from 1983-93) and two seasons (1993-95) as head coach of the combined Joliet Township team. His squads won seven regionals, and four sectionals made a pair of elite eight appearances, and placed fourth in Class AA in his final season.

"I had the pleasure of seeing the two sides of Rollie," O'Connell recalled. "On the court the serious coach. Off the court, I had the pleasure of boating on the Kankakee River with him. As the driver of the boat, he took great joy in pulling tubers and making them flip off the tube. It was a challenge for him."

O'Connell also had a vantage point for what is remembered as the most controversial call in Lockport basketball history.

Playing Joliet Catholic before a packed house in the sectional title game at Romeoville on Friday, March 11, 1988, the Porters had taken advantage of the first season of the three-pointer to rally from nine points down with two minutes to play in the game and tied the game at 45-45.

Following a Hilltopper turnover, John Humphrey was fouled going to the basket and went to the free-throw line with one second to play. He made his first free throw but missed the second. Joliet Catholic's Mike Kosky got the rebound and heaved a full-court shot. The ball was online but Lockport's Antoine Harris was standing a few feet in front of the far basket and in his exuberance for what he thought was a Porter victory, went up and grabbed the ball.

There were only two officials working games at that time. The referee at midcourt, Don Hakes, who was also an NFL official, ran off the court believing Lockport had won. But Marv Carlson, who was the trail referee that was under the Lockport basket, came over to the scorer's table and signaled that it was goaltending. Thus giving the Hilltoppers a 48-46 victory.

"That was the year Joliet Catholic beat us on a last-second bucket by Brian Michalick, O'Connell said of his Tiger team being upset by the Hilltoppers in the opening game of the regional. "Joliet Catholic beat Lockport on the worse call I've ever seen. I was sitting under the basket. That ball would not hit the net let alone the rim. Rollie and Lockport got screwed."

The crazy loss ended an otherwise successful season for Bolattino and the Porters. It also ended his basketball coaching career as his contract was not renewed for the next school year.

Plus, it ended what had been an incredible run of more than a quarter of a century of success for Lockport boys basketball. Between the 26-year span of the 1962-63 season and the 1987-88 season, the Porters won 20 or more games 24 times and never had a record worse than 18-8. They won 17 regionals, eight sectionals, and qualified for the state quarterfinals four times.

That era ended on a wave of a hand that signaled a goaltending call on a nearly 80-foot heave. In the 35 seasons since, including this one, Lockport has 18 winning campaigns and two .500 ones.

But the loss didn't end Bolattino's influence as a person. He continued to teach at Lockport for another six years and made many more friends and memories along the way.

They are best summed up by Craig Misewicz, who was the Class of 1980 Student Body Co-President at Lockport.

"It took me a long time to put the words together for a man that died this past month, Misewicz said. "When I heard the news from Bob Meader - I couldn't catch my breath."

Misewicz, who currently lives in California, treasured any moment he got to spend with a man who meant so much to him.

"I was lucky enough to visit with Rollie most of the time Maureen (Misewicz's wife) and I returned to Illinois to spend time with our grandson, Colson, our extended families, our former teachers, our old neighbors, and our friends.

"My last visit with Rollie will remain one of my most treasured. Laughing, sharing photos of our grandchildren, talking smack about teams that wished they could have beat that 1978 team, and me trying to hustle just one plaid jacket out of his closet."

Misewicz put his talents to work by writing a poem for Bolattino. With his blessing, that is shared here.

"Rollie's love of life always rubbed off on me," Misewicz said. "His 6 B's will turn into a book later this year. Yes, as a tribute to Rollie, I am finally writing a book. Below, I share my thoughts about an amazing human being and a true Lockport Porter. I hope you can resonate with my words."

THE BALLAD of BOLATTINO

Rollie Bolattino, a man of Lockport born,
Athlete and coach, his legacy adorned.
From Fairmont to LTHS, his journey began,
A leader in his class, a true Lockport man.

He played football, basketball, and baseball.
And marched in the band, a true all-rounder.
He went to Western Illinois University,
Where he shone on the field, a true warrior.

He taught for three years in Wilmington,
But his heart was in Lockport, where he belonged.
For 27 years he taught and coached,
A true Porter, he had found his life's song.

He coached his '78 team to an Illinois State Championship,
A proud moment that will forever last.
He was also a High School and Big 10 Umpire,
A respected figure who always stood tall, even when he missed a call.

In his spare time, he relaced baseball gloves,
For many athletes, near and far, one and all.
But above all, he loved his family at 1068 Grandview,
His beautiful wife, Patty, his adorable daughter, Callie.

And his four amazing grandchildren, Reilly, McKenna, Colby, and Cooper,
Who he adored, with all his heart and with all his being.
He may be gone, but he will never be forgotten,
His spirit will live on, forever in our hearts.

Rest in peace, Rollie Bolattino,
A true legend, who will always be a part of our lives.