

# A Football Field with a Name

By Rodney Mattrisch



On March 29th, 1948, a son was born to Esther and Conrad Gavinski in the town of Portage, Wisconsin. Portage is located about a half hour north of Madison in the south central part of the state. During his childhood days, he would call Portage his home where he shared the house with his two sisters, Joann and Debbie, and his older brother Marty. As he progressed through his childhood, he soon found himself attending St Mary's Elementary School. After graduating 8th grade, he then attended Portage High School, home of the Warriors.

Most kids who enjoy sports have a tendency to focus on just one sport to excel, not Steve. He liked them all. He excelled in them all. His passion was baseball, basketball, and football. He was so passionate, that while he attended Portage High, he earned nine letters: three in baseball, three in basketball, and three in football. In fact, amazing as this sounds, he was a three-year starter in ALL three of these sports. In his sophomore and junior year in football, he started at quarterback, and in his senior year he started at tight end and defensive end. He was so good that he earned all-conference honors at both positions his final year. In baseball, he worked behind the plate as the Warrior's catcher and was good enough to be offered a contract by the Chicago White Sox farm system. As tempting as it was at the time, he turned it down in favor of going to college. At 6 foot even and a stout 220 pounds, he was the starting center for the basketball team. He played for Coach Tom Davis who would later become the head basketball coach at Boston College, Stanford, Iowa and most recently Drake University. In Steve's senior year the team went 16-3 and scored over 100 points in 8 of those wins, which was a state record at the time. The amazing thing about that scoring binge was back then; there was no 3-point line so this was a major accomplishment. Steve left Portage basketball as the 2nd all time leading scorer in school history.

In the spring of 1966, Steve graduated from Portage and was bound for college. During the summer months, he worked as a cook at hamburger stands in the Wisconsin Dells area. That fall it was time to report to the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater where he would continue to further his education. While attending Whitewater, he played football for two years as a punter and a defensive end. In 1970, he graduated from Whitewater with a BSE in Education. He had your typical college experience, which meant meeting and making many new friends. One of those new friends would eventually end up being his wife. In 1968 his older brother Marty was dating this girl who happened to have this sorority sister whose name was Sue Riedel. One thing lead to another and soon Steve asked Sue to marry him. The month was June, and the year was 1971 when Steve and Sue got married!

One thing I noticed about Steve when I was putting this together was that he never wasted any time in making decisions. Right out of college he started teaching at College Park Elementary School in Greendale. A year later he got married. A year later he earned his Master's Degree in Education from Whitewater, and the year after that his first child was born. Wheew! Let me catch my breath for a moment!!

On June 18th, 1973, Steve and Sue had their first child. His name was Timothy. Two years later on the 16th day of December in 1975, they had their next child. It was a girl who



they named Sarah. No more kids came along so it was to be a family of four in the Gavinski household, which was first located in Milwaukee and then later in New Berlin, Wisconsin. This would ultimately be their last home as a family. Steve would teach in Greendale; Sue would teach at Whitnall, and the kids would go to high school at New Berlin Eisenhower.

Even though Steve was now teaching, he never lost the love for sports. He started coaching football at GHS right away. At that time he was an assistant under Wayne Koska. He also started coaching wrestling with Bob (Rocky) Carlson who not only was his neighbor, but would eventually end up being



one of his best friends. Wayne eventually retired from football and a new head coach was hired. His name was Terry Schaetzke. It was now Terry Schaetzke, Steve Gavinski and Bob Churchill coaching the varsity. I know this because I was playing for them then! All I'm going to say is that was an experience I'll never forget.

In 1982, Terry moved on and the head job was now offered to Steve. With the addition of John Loeding, the new staff would now run the show. They managed to put together 3 Conference Championships in 1984, 1986, and 1987.

The holiday months soon arrived. It was around Christmas when Steve started complaining that he was having a hard time swallowing. After listening to the advice of his family and friends, he finally went to see a doctor. It was at this doctor's visit, when it was determined that Steve had cancer of the esophagus. Arrangements were made right away to have the tumor surgically removed. He then would follow that up with chemotherapy and radiation treatments.

Steve was a strong man and regained all of his strength even after those rigorous treatments. I will always remember how confident Steve was even with everything going on in his life. Later that summer, Steve was hoping that he would be strong enough to coach in the 1988 State Shrine Bowl game. For a high school coach, this was considered an honor. Unfortunately, he was forced to back out at the last minute. He was, however, strong enough to take the helm for the Panthers once again in the fall of 1988.



That season soon came to pass, and all of the signs were looking good for Steve. That summer he went about life as always. He always enjoyed golfing, spending time with his friends, and of course, with his family. By this time I was coaching the JV team so in late summer, he would always invite all of the coaches and their families over to his house for a pre-season picnic. It was here where I was introduced to the game of bocce ball. Steve and Rocky were pros at this game. Many of us coaches tried to beat them, but we just couldn't do it. To this day, I still think it had to

do with his lawn, for I think that Rocky and Steve knew where all of the hidden bumps were. The reason Rocky knew this was because he only lived about five houses away from Steve, and they played all the time!!

At the start of the next season, Steve's cancer returned. A small tumor was detected in his aorta. It wasn't that big so the doctors felt that they could attack this with another round of chemo and radiation. Steve came through with flying colors again. He was tough and still had too many things that he needed to do in his life. One of them was to coach the Panthers in the fall of '89.

That season came and went along with the 1990 season. The varsity team just didn't have what it takes to win a championship in either of those years, but the up and coming class was looking real strong. After this particular season was over, Steve just kept wearing his whistle because he was going to coach his daughter's church basketball team from Holy Apostles Church. One of the biggest sporting moments in his life would happen that year when he took Sarah's team and won the **Padre Serra Championship**, which is equivalent to the NCAA Tournament only for Catholic grade schools. This was a first for Holy Apostles Catholic Church. In springtime, Steve would also coach both of his kid's AAU basketball teams of which he enjoyed immensely. On occasion, he would hold both practices at the same time, in the same gym and would just walk back and forth between courts.



Prior to the start of the '91 season, there were some coaching changes. After working with the freshmen and JV teams for 5 years, I was asked to move up to the varsity along with Joe Schell, a student of the game and a football fanatic to say the least. We both thought... Wow! Coaching on the varsity with Steve Gavinski... Are you kidding me? In my case, I just played for him twelve years earlier.



It's funny because when I played for these coaches, I saw them in a certain light. When you work with these coaches, you see them in a different light. Outside of the football experiences, one of the funniest things I'll always remember was bowling. Steve and Rocky were in a bowling league and they really loved it. If they weren't talking about football, they were more than likely talking about bowling. Most people look forward to the weekends, but Steve and Rocky always looked forward to Wednesday nights. It was so funny because after practice, these two guys would shower up, put on their bowling shirts and left right from the school for the bowling alley. After a few weeks I was even asked if I wanted to be a sub on their team. At the time I thought it would be a good idea because I could start to learn what made these guys tick.

Boy, did I get schooled! They had all of these side games going with all of these strange rules so by the end of the night, I think I lost everyone of them. You would think that these guys would have felt sorry for me, and maybe would have cut me some slack, but instead they just laughed and laughed and held out their hands. I guess that comes with being a rookie.

Things were still OK with Steve over the winter months. The closer we got to the '91 season, the more excited we all got because we truly felt that we may have one of the best teams that GHS has ever had. The only obstacle standing in our way was going to be that summer.

That summer, things went south for Steve. The cancer came back with a vengeance. It had now traveled to his bone marrow. There really wasn't a surgery for this situation so the only option was extensive chemo and radiation. Steve spent the whole summer trying to fight off the effects of these treatments, but you could tell that it was starting to take its toll on him. The most amazing thing I remember was he still wanted to keep moving forward as planned because there was a potential championship season waiting, and he wasn't going to let anything get in his way. Just before the season, he was fitted with a special pump that he would wear on his belt that would administer small doses of the chemo. By this time he lost a lot of weight, and, for the first time, this powerful husky man was starting to look frail. Still... he didn't stop! He may have slowed down a bit, but he wasn't stopping. When it came to yelling, he had me do it because I had a big mouth. All the while during two-a-days, Steve would watch with a careful eye just like he had done for twenty years. Someone donated a golf cart for him to use so he was able to get around to all of the stations a lot easier. By this time the local media started showing up and did really nice stories about him and what he was going through.

Finally, the dreaded two-a-days were over. We were set to open at home against Kettle Moraine who was heavily favored to win the conference that year. Early that week on Tuesday morning, something happened and Steve was admitted to the hospital because of apparent complications. Steve never came back to the field again. He passed away shortly after midnight on August 28th, 1991, just 2 days before the season opener. It was one of the saddest days of all of our lives. God took our head coach and my friend. Why? He was only 43 years old.

The funeral service was scheduled for Friday afternoon, the same day as our first game. Because the services were in the afternoon, Greendale's School Superintendent, Dr. William Knapp closed down the entire school district that day, which had never been done before in history. The service was held at Steve's church, which was Holy Apostles Catholic Church located just a 5-iron away from his house. The place was packed. There were news camera crews everywhere. It was now easy to see, just how many lives Steve had touched during his life here on earth. In attendance that day were current students, past students, entire families, colleagues, friends, and of course, his family. The most sobering sight of all however, was seeing the entire Greendale Panther football team all wearing their brand new Kelly green jerseys with shiny white numbers sitting towards the front with tears running down their faces. I'll never forget that as long as I live.

The service was beautiful. A lot of people spoke of him as a one of a kind gem. I recall one person in particular that stood out the most. That would be Steve's best friend, Rocky, who did the eulogy. Afterwards, we all went to a reception, and all I remember there was watching this video of him and sobbing. The one thought I remember the most back then was how unfair life can be, but, then, on the other hand, life can be a joy too because I had the joy of knowing Steve Gavinski.

Just like after any funeral, life goes on. Plans were made that Jim Arens would now step in as Greendale's Head Varsity Coach. Rocky was also moved up to the varsity so now the staff would include Jim Arens, Rocky, Joe Schell and I. Somehow we had to pick up the pieces and do what Steve would have wanted us to do. I say wanted because we could never do what Steve could do. We all made a vow in the coach's locker room that somehow, we were going to win the Suburban Park Crown, and we were going to do it for Steve. Because of the schedule of the day's events, we didn't have the luxury to think about everything too long. We somehow had to wipe away the tears and put on our game faces because the opening kickoff was less than an hour away.

That night, we found ourselves in one of the most heated battles against a very good Kettle Moraine team. While we did our best as coaches, it was our players that showed up and won the game. In fact, the player who caught the winning touchdown pass is now our current head coach, Rob Stoltz. How ironic this all now seems to me. It was bittersweet, and even today; I can't help to wonder what it must have been like for those players that one hot Friday night, under the lights, at Greendale High. The emotional swings that week were very dramatic to say the least. Yet, the players somehow pulled it together and won the game. Those guys were special.

That season, the Greendale Panthers went undefeated and won the Suburban Park Conference Crown. The one thing I recall that year was just how tough the whole conference was. Every team was loaded with talent, but so was ours. Some say that this was the toughest conference in the state that year. The fact that we won it made us all realize that we were the toughest of the tough just like former coach. We managed to make the playoffs that year, but we ended up losing in the first round to a tough Whitefish Bay team on our field, in the mud. Our quick, shifty, and lightweight team was no match for the much heavier Whitefish Bay team. It sure would have been nice to play them on a dry field, because I truly believe that things would have turned out different. Nevertheless, the 1991 storybook season would end there. That year, we as a staff, were given the CNI "Coach Of The Year Award". While it was an honor for us, it would have been more of an honor if Steve were standing next to us. Instead, he was probably looking down on us, and I'm sure he had that infamous grin on his face.

Steve Gavinski taught in Greendale for twenty years. Between the students he taught and the sports he coached, he touched hundreds of young lives. He was an honorable man and was well respected amongst his peers. He was voted to head up the Greendale Teacher's Union. He was the perfect teacher, the perfect friend, the perfect mentor, the perfect coach, the perfect neighbor, the perfect father, and the perfect husband. He was one that would never give up and always fought to the bitter end. He was one that would always put others before him. I don't know about you, but, to me, that is pretty impressive for only spending 43 years on this earth. Anyone with a resume like that... deserves to have a football field named after him.



In the fall of 1992, the Greendale School Board along with Greendale High School proclaimed that the once unnamed football field, where the Panthers play football would be now called,

## **“Stephen J. Gavinski Memorial Stadium”**

I want to thank Tim Gavinski (*Steve's son*), and Bob Carlson (*Rocky*) for helping me put this all together. It is something that I felt was long overdue. Hopefully now, when you walk by the sign at the entrance to Greendale's football stadium, you'll know who Steve Gavinski truly is.... *ram*