

'Governor of the mountains': Coaching legend Jim Matney remembered for impact on Eastern Kentucky

By [Cameron Drummond](#)

Updated October 02, 2021 4:26 PM

Paintsville

In the company of family and friends, and with a scented candle offering a dim glow against the creeping Friday afternoon darkness, Debby Matney can't help herself.

She launches into stories about her late husband, Jim Matney, reciting memories of the mountain man from Appalachia that border on being mythical.

She recalls the way Jim opened their home to children in need, some coming from as far as the other side of Kentucky to stay with the Matney family.

She remembers tiptoeing around her home on Saturday mornings after wrestling tournaments, navigating past the sleeping bodies of teenagers to reach the kitchen and prepare stacks of French toast for them.

She reminisces on the way Jim was just as happy winning a youth baseball championship as he was after each of his [state titles](#) in football

as the head coach at Johnson Central in 2016 and 2019.

But above all else, the stories being shared of Jim are of humanity.

The Eastern Kentucky high school coaching legend — who is one of only 12 football coaches in state history to record 300 or more wins — was described as a God-fearing man, a born-again Christian who served as a staunch advocate for the people of Appalachia and their way of living.

[Jim died Tuesday](#) from complications of COVID-19.

He contracted COVID-19 sometime after Johnson Central's season-opening game at Lexington's Henry Clay High School on Aug. 20, and he was later transferred to a West Virginia hospital and suffered a stroke.

Debby said Jim was not vaccinated against COVID-19.

Jim graduated from Belfry High School in Pike County before going to Liberty University and wrestling for the Flames.

He began as a football and wrestling coach in 1984 at Sheldon Clark High School in Martin County. He became head coach at Johnson Central in 2004, and he won two Class 4A state titles with the Golden Eagles while making five straight state championship game appearances from 2015 to 2019.

"Coach Matney was the governor of the mountains," said Jesse Peck, Johnson Central's defensive coordinator and someone who knew Jim for more than two decades. "He could rally the troops from every small town, every small region that's around us. And they followed him."

Debby said Jim felt a responsibility to the area and had a mission to lift up its residents, and in particular its youth, through his work as a coach and educator.

“That’s another part of (his) legacy. If you have a responsibility, you’re going to fulfill that responsibility,” Debby said. “You’re not going to shirk, you’re not going halfway, you’re going to fulfill your responsibilities. It included work, it included family, it included any kind of thing that you commit to. You do it 100%.”

As Jim’s [condition worsened](#) in recent weeks, and in the days following his death, tributes to his life and legacy have poured in from every corner of the state.

A [tweet](#) from the office of Gov. Andy Beshear offered sympathies to Matney’s family, while earlier this week football stadiums [across the commonwealth](#) turned their lights on in his memory.

The gesture mesmerized the two Matney sons — Dalton and Carson — as the family saw all levels of Kentucky football, from UK and Eastern Kentucky to the high school ranks, pay respect.

“The thought of people honoring him just makes me so happy. Most of those tears, those kind of tears are me being so happy and so proud of him,” Debby said. “He would have been so tickled.”

Moments like these, and the hundreds of messages that have been sent to Carson, Dalton, Debby and their extended family and friends, were as much due to Jim’s success as a coach as it was a reflection on his outlook on life, and the values he instilled in those he interacted with.

"Just seeing how much he included (people), like myself, versus someone who came out of a hollow with no shoes, no (nothing). We were the same person," said J.J. Jude, the [all-time leading rusher in Kentucky high school history](#) who played football and also twice won state wrestling titles at Johnson Central with Jim as his coach.

"There was no difference between him and I. That's the way (Jim) treated every person that he met."

Johnson Central's Keygan Pelfrey and his teammates wore stickers on their helmets to honor Jim Matney.

Ryan C. Hermens rhermens@herald-leader.com

Larger than life

Sunday evenings at the Matney house were reserved for coaching staff dinners.

Other coaches and their wives from the Johnson Central team would stop by for film review and food, creating a chaotic, jovial atmosphere that Debby and Jim had long ago embraced.

Justin Arms, the current principal at Johnson Central, was a part of these nights for 13 years as the defensive coordinator and secondary coach for the Golden Eagles.

"The thing that I'm going to remember about him is his compassion for kids, just in the community (and) at the high school," Arms said. "His relationship that he was able to develop with a lot of those kids that really come from tough backgrounds, that needed some kind of stability in their life."

Silence would occur at Johnson Central pep rallies when Jim spoke,

with the Golden Eagle student body lingering on his every word.

Arms remembers when Jim spoke at a pep rally for the school's academic team, and the team members left ready to run through a wall.

"He had a calling to stay here to help the mountain people," said John Blair, Johnson Central's offensive line coach who was part of Jim's staff at Johnson Central since 2004.

Blair said Jim would ensure players' families had Thanksgiving dinner when faced with economic difficulties or illness.

"It means a lot to know someone has your back," Blair added. "When we took the field we always knew Jim Matney had our back."

Blake Gamble won a state championship as a football player and was an accomplished wrestler at Johnson Central while being coached in both sports by Jim.

After graduating in 2018, Jim quickly brought Gamble back in a coaching capacity for both sports, allowing Gamble to gain a greater appreciation for the work Jim did.

"Coach Matney is a lot of the reason that I decided to do what I decided to do with my life," Gamble said. "He genuinely did it for the kids, more than anything else. He didn't take a whole lot of personal credit for anything that we ever accomplished. Once I got to see things from this side of the curtain, that kind of opened my eyes to just how special of a person he really was."

Peck described Jim as a "larger than life" individual who was ready to risk friendships in the name of promoting his students, something

highlighted in video clips shared on social media of Jim since his death.

"He was mountain football. He was mountain wrestling. He wanted everyone to know that his boys were as good if not better than where we were going to," Peck said. "He would go to bat for us, he would fight for us at any chance that he got."

It was announced before Johnson Central's home game against Clay County on Friday night that the name of the school's football field would be changed to Coach Jim Matney Field. Ryan C. Hermens

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Coach Jim Matney Field

Arms said that Jim's legacy will continue for "as long as there's a Johnson Central football program."

On Friday night, a tangible permanence joined that statement.

Prior to Johnson Central's 42-6 home win over Clay County — the Golden Eagles' first game since Jim's death — it was announced that Golden Eagle Field would be renamed Coach Jim Matney Field.

A slew of former Johnson Central players were on hand for the announcement, as was Carson, Dalton and Debby, all three of whom helped unfurl a new banner displaying the stadium's new name.

Pregame ceremonies featured former players lining the track surrounding the field located behind Johnson Central High School, with the Matney family standing at midfield in the shadow of the mountains that tower over the stadium.

Also as part of Friday's pregame events was a [free COVID-19](#)

[vaccination clinic](#) at the stadium, something Arms said was planned for a previous Johnson Central home game this season that was ultimately canceled due to COVID-19 protocols.

"We want to make sure that we give every person the opportunity and hopefully the knowledge to ensure that they make the best decision for them, they make the best decision for their families and they make the best decision for the community and state," Arms said.

Johnson Central's Hudson Lewandoski, center right, and his teammates listened to interim head coach Steve Trimble after their team defeated Clay County 42-6. Ryan C. Hermens *rhermens@herald-leader.com*

The man tasked with overseeing the Golden Eagles for the rest of the season is a familiar face at Johnson Central.

Steve Trimble went to Johnson Central in the 1970s before returning as a coach and administrator, eventually becoming the school's principal. Like Jim, Trimble was head football and wrestling coach at the school as part of his more than 30 years of work in the school district.

Trimble said he knew Jim for more than 40 years, dating back to when they were high school students at Belfry and Johnson Central and they played football against each other.

Trimble helped call offensive plays for the Golden Eagles with Jim as head coach before stepping into the interim head coach role when Jim's health declined in August.

"The only reason I was willing to do it was because of Jim Matney being my close friend and because the kids needed somebody familiar with the program," Trimble said. "This man was the best coach in the state and maybe ever, anywhere."

"There was talk of maybe canceling the (Clay County) game, but that would be the last thing that he would want us to do," Trimble said. "I think the best thing that could ever happen for them now is to get out on the field and play and do the things that he's taught them to do and that he's instilled in them."

"I think it will be therapy for them, not just them but the coaches, too."

By the time the game ended, and Johnson Central's [comprehensive victory](#) was confirmed, Trimble gathered the Golden Eagles and their family members on the field, newly christened for their former coach.

"I've never been more proud of a group of kids in my whole life," Trimble told the team, reminding them of the responsibility they still have to Jim before delivering a team prayer.

Soon official lettering and signage will arrive in Paintsville to officially mark Coach Jim Matney Field.

Until then, reminders exist in the words and worship of Jim Matney, and in the life lessons that everyone expects to follow.

"It's going to be like that for years on out," said senior Reece Goss, who plays football and wrestles at Johnson Central. "He might be gone, but he's never forgotten."

Helping the Matney family

Donations to the college funds of Dalton and Carson can be made through City National Bank at 632 Jefferson Ave. in Paintsville.

This story was originally published October 02, 2021 3:58 PM.