

Peter L Johnson 1922-2021

Coach Peter L. Johnson passed away peacefully on August 19, in his home. He was born at the Sycamore Hospital on November 18, 1922, the first child of Peter and Marie Johnson. His brothers Frank and Wes followed.

Peter lived his entire life in the Sycamore area and was married for 50 years to Rhoda Begley who preceded him in death in 1993. He and Rhoda raised three children, Jill Rahn (Bill), Rebecca Feaster, EdD (Kurt), and Peter Nels Johnson (Donna). He doted on, guided and supported his six grandchildren Peter Rahn, MPT (Tiffany), Kristina Feaster Sipma, CPA (Kyle), Johanna Feaster Sailor, EdD (Ross), Heidi Rahn, MD (Tyler, MD), Jillian Feaster Depue, MS, and Danika Rahn Von Dollen, DVM (Mark). He spoke so proudly of their educational achievements and until his death, they sought his counsel. He delighted in his 11 great grandchildren.

In 2000 he married Charlotte Carley. They traveled internationally taking 11 trips abroad. They also wintered in AZ and while there, enjoyed seeing old friends including many of Pete's former football players. They were also big NIU fans and attended home and bowl games. He had 4 stepchildren, Renee Bergeron, Brad Bergeron, Jodi Long (Jim) and Lisa Bergeron. Pete also had many nieces and nephews.

Peter's father passed away when he was 9 and his Danish-born mother raised him-instilling hard work, honesty and faith. Peter attended Sycamore Schools. Growing up fatherless during the depression was difficult. He proudly described the jobs he held to support the family including setting up pins at the Sycamore bowling alley and starting the furnace in Dr Clark's office each morning. Johnson credited many in the Sycamore community for helping him grow up, in particular, his coach, Leland Strombom.

Impacting his life was the location of Sycamore High School. It was across the street from his childhood home on State Street.

As a boy, he hung around the high school where some of the varsity football players smuggled him on the bus for away games. The coach finally made him the team manager.

During high school, Pete participated in track, basketball and football.

Upon graduation, he attended NIU. Like many boys of the time, he enlisted in the military serving from 1942-1946. He recalled that the student enlistees marched together in formation from the college campus to the DeKalb train station to travel into Chicago for processing. When WW II started, Pete enlisted in the Army. He was so proud of his brothers, Frank and Wes, who while still in high school, enlisted in the Marines and Navy.

While on leave in Little Rock, AR, Peter married Rhoda in 1943. He then traveled by train to Seattle, WA and shipped to Hawaii and on to Saipan where he served as a member of the Signal Corps. When he was in the Pacific Theatre, he was thrilled to meet up with his brother Wes during a typhoon.

After the war, Pete returned home and finished college. Over the years he received a BS and CAS from NIU, MS from Colorado State University, basic engineering certificate from St Norbert College and a Vocational Education certificate from the University of IL.

He started teaching and coaching in the Sycamore elementary and high schools. He was in education for 49 years including 34 years in the Sycamore Schools as teacher, coach, Athletic Director, Adult Education Director, Vocational Educational Director, Assistant Principal and Principal. He also implemented Sycamore's first GED program. Successful at all, he was most noted for starting a nationally recognized cooperative education program in 1953 and also for his 17 years of coaching the Sycamore High School Varsity football team.

The innovative diversified education program provided opportunities for kids to start careers and later businesses, earn money so they could stay in school, and to prepare for more formal education if they wanted. Pete was so proud of the chances it gave his students. He became a national leader in the creation of these programs throughout the country.

Although he coached a variety of sports at all levels, his successful football teams stood out. His teams won over 80% of their games with 10 conference championships, 8 undefeated seasons, and a 33 game winning streak. Johnson was so proud of the successes his players had on the Sycamore and college playing fields, as well as their accomplishments in life. For 3 years, Pete served as Chairman of the Football Rules Committee for the Illinois High School Association.

After retiring from Sycamore, Peter was an adjunct visiting professor at University of IL and Northern IL University. He also served as Executive Director of the Governors Advisory Council on Vocational Education.

Other professional contributions include serving on the committee for establishing high school football playoffs in IL; representing the State of IL on a European trip to study how school-to-work programs are implemented in high schools and junior colleges; and advocating for the education of inmates to the IL State Senate.

Peter Johnson was active in the Sycamore community his whole life.

His contributions are many. He was particularly proud of his participation on the committees to build the YMCA and the Sycamore Veterans Home as well as being a member of CASA (court appointed special advocate for children in DeKalb County) He also served as Charter President for the Jaycees and Rotary President. His community memberships included the United Methodist Church, Chamber of Commerce, VFW, American Legion, and the Elks.

His Sycamore community honors include the Clifford Danielson Award by the Chamber of Commerce, 1963 Man of the Year, and Pumpkin Parade Grand Marshall.

In 1982, Pete was honored as NIU Alumnus of the Year. In 1968, he was selected Illinois Football Coach of the Year. In 1977, Pete was named to the first class of the Illinois Football Coaches Hall of Fame.

In addition, he spoke at the American Football Coaches Association.

The American Vocational Association awarded Pete the “Outstanding Service Award” in recognition of distinguished leadership and service.

The Illinois Vocational Association presented him with a “Citation for Meritorious Service” in 1981. He was also the guest speaker at a Great Lakes Naval Station graduation ceremony. Most recently in 2017, Pete was selected by the Boy Scouts of America to be part of their Salute to Hero’s designation.

The Sycamore community and his former players and students have honored him in many ways including a book, yearbook dedications, and a variety of published articles. In 1991, the Sycamore High School Wall of Fame was named after him. In October 2010, a group financed and commissioned a life-like bronze statue of him that stands adjacent to the Sycamore High School football field.

Although his childhood was challenging, his positive attitude greatly contributed to his successes and positively affected those around him. Johnson felt a deep gratitude for all that the Sycamore community did for him. He expressed his hope that as he had helped others and they would go on to help those after them.