

# Former Leon coach devoted to faith, family and friends

[Jim Henry](#), Democrat sports editor Published 8:16 a.m. ET April 14, 2017 | Updated 9:46 p.m. ET April 14, 2017



(Photo: Jim Sauls photo)

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Jimmy Sauls was selfless.

Once, when a coaching colleague in Houston was battling cancer, Sauls drove 10 hours from Tallahassee to Texas to visit and bring sausage from Bradley's Country Store. Sauls stayed a few hours and made the 700-mile drive home.

There was the time when, on a family vacation to Baltimore with his wife Lynn and son Jimmy, Sauls was informed one of his former players at Leon High had died. Sauls immediately cut short the vacation and returned to Tallahassee, driving more than 900 miles nonstop.

And last September, when Hurricane Hermine barreled through the Big Bend, Sauls cleaned up debris at a local church and neighborhoods.

Sauls, known for his faith, character and devotion to family, friends and Leon High football and athletics, was always ready to help with a grin and a smile.

"He went above and beyond for everyone; he was the most selfless human being I have ever been around," son Jimmy Sauls, 36, said Friday afternoon.

"Whatever decisions he made, it was always what was best for the other party. What was best for Leon football? What was best for his players? What was best for his family?"

"It was never about him."

Sauls, who played football at Leon High and later coached at his beloved alma mater, died Thursday night.

He was rushed to Tallahassee Memorial Hospital by ambulance after experiencing breathing problems related to asthma. Sauls died moments after he arrived in the emergency room from cardiac arrest, according to his family.

He was 71.

Jimmy Sauls said the family has been overwhelmed by an outpouring of support from the community.

"This is an absolute gut punch to us all," said Jimmy, who played baseball at Leon and is an operation manager at Mainline Information Systems.

"He loved telling stories and going 100-mph."

Jimmy and Lynn Sauls celebrated their 49th wedding anniversary earlier this month, and Jimmy is the couple's lone child.

Sauls' love for Leon High was well known. His father played for the Lions. So did Jimmy's brother Leonard.

Jimmy Sauls was considered by many as the football program's historian, heavily involved in its Hall of Fame – dad, Leonard and Jimmy are enshrined on its walls.

Former Lions and FSU standout Tanner Holloman credited Sauls and Leon coach Gene Cox for teaching players important life lessons, in addition to football.

Holloman last talked with Sauls at an alumni meeting at Leon that was focused on helping raise funds for the football program and first-year coach Garrett Jahn, a Leon alum.

"I am sure after coach Cox, there was nobody who was more a Leon Lion than coach Sauls," said Holloman, director of Division of Workers' Compensation.

"More than football, they groomed me and instilled in me to being an asset within the community. This is a sad day for the Leon High family."

Sauls, bald headed and muscular, stayed busy in retirement lifting weights, competing in the Senior Olympics – winning numerous medals – and riding his bicycle.

He was a fixture at Premier Health & Fitness Center, often holding court with fellow members and talking sports.

"He will be sorely missed; he touched the lives of so many people and set good examples," said former Leon player Len Harvey, executive director of Premier Health & Fitness Center who worked out with Sauls and helped train him at the facility.

"He's one of those guys when you first met him you felt like you had known him for 10, 20 years. He was very personable, always upbeat, always positive. He'd give you his shirt off his back if he needed to.

"This is a big blow."

A celebration of Sauls' life will be held at City Church on Saturday, April 22, at 2 p.m.

### **Earlier Story**

Leon High – and the Tallahassee football community – is in mourning.

Jimmy Sauls passed away Thursday night following a heart attack.

He was 71.

“We are in shock,” Leon High Athletics Director Mark Feely said Friday morning. “He did so much for Leon.”

Sauls, a 1964 graduate of Leon, played for coach Gene Cox’s first teams at Leon.

He also worked as an assistant from 1974 to ’83 under Cox, whose 238-68-4 record made him one of the winningest high school coaches in the state.

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Photos: A look back at Jim Sauls

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A young Jimmy Sauls Democrat files

Sauls replaced Cox upon his retirement and added to the Leon legacy during his stint as the school’s athletic director and head football coach from 1991-2000.

Sauls compiled a record of 57-48 for the Lions, earning a trip to the state finals in 1992.

He also coached at other schools in the southeast, developing a reputation as one of the best in coaching circles.

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