

Leon coaching legend Jimmy Sauls dies, remembered by ‘thousands’

[Brian Miller](#), Democrat staff writer Published 1:07 p.m. ET April 14, 2017 | Updated 6:37 p.m. ET April 14, 2017

The Lions’ long-time football coach had a “heart of gold” amid passion for Red and White



(Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

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A community fixture in Tallahassee most of his life, from Leon High School class of 1964 to assistant coach and 10-year head coach of the Lions’ football team, Jimmy Sauls died Thursday night.

Sauls was stricken by breathing issues and rushed to the emergency room, where he died of cardiac arrest, according to his family.

Sauls was 71.

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Leon County Schools Superintendent Rocky Hanna hurried over when he heard the news. He had to.

When Hanna was 16 years old and a junior at Leon, Sauls was the first person to visit Hanna when his father died suddenly in 1981 from a heart attack, leaving a stay-at-home mother with three children to care for.

“It’s at the end of spring practice on Mother’s Day of all days,” Hanna recalled. “We were about to go to church. We rushed to the hospital and he was pronounced dead.

“We went to the funeral home, come home and Coach Sauls is standing at my front door, first person to greet me. Coach Sauls became a father figure to me and was someone I could always count on for advice, and not just for me but for thousands of young men over the course of his career.

“He taught young boys to become young men and take responsibility for their lives.”



Leon football coach Jimmy Sauls speaks with football players during an FCA huddle. LCS Superintendent Rocky Hanna (on row at left), who played football under Sauls, listens intently

along with Fairview Middle principal Scott Hansen (second from right). (Photo: Courtesy of Rocky Hanna)

Hanna contemplated dropping out of school. He wanted to help his mom support his younger brother and sister.

Sauls wouldn't hear of it, letting Hanna know the Leon community would help the family as he continued his education.

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There are countless stories of Sauls doing what he did for Hanna – dropping what he was doing for the well-being of someone he knew or vaguely knew, driving miles that wore his tires but never his heart.

“When I was younger, I was scared to death of him because he was bigger than life,” Hanna said. “He demanded and commanded respect. He was someone every young boy aspired to grow up to be like.

“Although he was gruff at times and very pointed, he had a heart of gold. He'd give you the shirt off his back.”

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A young Jimmy Sauls Democrat files

God, Family, Leon Football

Sauls coached with legendary Leon head coach Gene Cox for over 20 years. He became the head coach when Cox retired following the 1990 season.

Current Leon athletic director Mark Feely was an assistant coach with Sauls in 1999. That year the Lions passed nearly every down.

On a bus ride to Jacksonville to play a game at beaches-based Fletcher High School, the skies became black as wind and storms threatened. Feely rushed into scramble mode, trying to figure out how to keep his offense on track.



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The Leon football team won game No. 500 on November 12, 1993, beating Taylor County 40-23. (Photo: Democrat digital archives)

“I knew the rain would affect us and I was fretting,” Feely remembered. “I’m making all kind of notes and Coach Sauls puts his hand on my notebook and says, ‘Mark, we can’t worry about the things we can’t control.’”

“When I was diagnosed (with cancer), I thought about, ‘You can’t worry about the things you can’t control.’ I just had to do the best I could with it.”

“That one thing he said washed me over with calm that day and the rest of my career when I was anxious. He was very calming and would just come up with the perfect thing to say. He was just a wise person.”

Sauls was the 1992 All-Big Bend Coach of the Year as Leon finished as state runner-up. In 1993, Sauls was coach as Leon hit 500 program wins.

Professional and hard-working, Sauls always put family first. He was a man of fervent faith as well, working with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

“He’d go to Sunday church, spend time with his family and then go to coaches’ meetings,” Feely said. “There’s a sign in the Leon gym that says, ‘God, Family, Leon Football,’ and that was him.”



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Mike Feely, Leon High School's athletic director, and Jimmy Sauls, who played integral roles with the Leon High School football team as the head coach, offensive and defensive coordinator from 1974-2000 stand in the school's trophy room on Monday, July 27, 2015. (Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

Mentor for many

Garrett Jahn played quarterback under Sauls. He graduated in 1999 and went on to become the first quarterback to take a snap at Florida International.

He returned to the area first as an assistant coach for a year at Chiles, then for two years as head coach at the school.

Recently, he returned to his alma mater to become its head coach; Sauls was right alongside him helping with the transition.

“He visited me in college and watched my games, he kept in touch with me like he did with a lot of players, and then when I started coaching, he became my guy,” Jahn said. “He taught me everything.

“It was a very eerie feeling this morning opening the old gym at 6:30 and I’m walking into the office and it’s his office and I’m now sitting in it,” Jahn said. “I owe a lot of that to him.”

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Jahn still gets goose bumps thinking about something Sauls used to do on game day – stand at the corner of the field house with arms crossed as players exited to the buses in uniform, staring in the direction of then-Capital Stadium some five miles away.

“You could see an intense look on his face and you’d know it was go time,” Jahn said. “He had his red belt on. As a kid, you only saw it. As I get older, I realized the passion he had for Leon and football.

“His approach and his passion made me try to find something that I was that passionate about.”



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Garrett Jahn became Leon's head coach after spending two years at Chiles. Jahn is Leon alum and in the Lions' hall of fame. (Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

Jahn only met Gene Cox a couple times, but through being part of the Leon Football Hall of Fame and going to alumni meetings, he’s heard plenty of stories from former players.

The same rings true for Jahn about Jimmy Sauls, whom he calls “my Coach Cox.”

“You wanted to make him proud because you knew he cared about you,” Jahn said. “He’d do everything in his power to make you a better man.

“It’s a sad day for Leon and for Leon football, and it’s a tough day for me being in a building named after him, knowing just last week I was standing outside the building talking to him.”

Cox, who died in 2009, and Sauls created a tradition in 1977 called “The Rope,” which hangs in Leon’s field house as a remembrance to support teammates.

But their legacy lasts beyond symbols. It’s in the hearts and minds of those in the community that interacted with them. They were the rope.

“Coach Sauls gave the majority of his life to Leon and to many of young men that went through that program in the old gym,” Hanna said. “He bled red and white. He was there for me and there for thousands.”

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