

Larry Olexiuk Field celebration honours revered football coach

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Jeff Hansen



GUEST OF HONOUR - Larry Olexiuk is greeted with applause from his bride of 50 years, Colleen, during Saturday's celebration of the renaming of the Riel Recreation Park artificial turf field and change room amenities building to Larry Olexiuk Field.

A humble Larry Olexiuk felt the love as the football fraternity, family and friends embraced the man called Coach O during Saturday's renaming ceremony at Riel Recreation Park. Larry Olexiuk Field was officially christened during Minor Football Day in St. Albert as the St. Albert Minor Football Association celebrated its 55th anniversary. "I'm blessed," said Olexiuk with an overwhelming look of gratitude. "There are a lot of outstanding football coaches around this community that don't have a field named after them. I have one and it's a legacy that I will never forget." St. Albert City Council approved the naming of the artificial turf facility and change room amenities building in Olexiuk's honour on Aug. 28 after SAMFA submitted the naming request. "Without Larry you may not be in the stands and these players may not be playing here because Larry was the person who brought football to St.

Albert,” said Mayor Nolan Crouse during the on-field formal announcement with rows of SAMFA players in the background and Olexiuk, his “bride” of 50 years, Colleen, son Brett, grandson Connor, 11, and granddaughter Brooklyn, 8, as the special guests. “This is Larry’s 50th year of providing leadership in football and that requires a special thank you,” Crouse said. Darryl Moroz, general manager of Bulldogs Football at Bellerose Composite High School, described Olexiuk as an individual with noble qualities “who reaches out and touches humanity in ways that leaves us inspired and gives us a feeling of wanting to do better and be better people. “His unselfish demeanor and the values he teaches our athletes every day is something you can learn from,” Moroz said of the Bulldogs’ assistant coach who is idolized by past and present Bulldogs Nation players and the alumni of the legendary St. Albert Storm. “It is a very special day to honour a true gentleman of our sport,” Moroz added. “He volunteers his most valuable commodity, his time.” Olexiuk’s rock is his wife. “Colleen is gracious and elegant as Larry is passionate and humble,” Moroz said. “Without Colleen in the background supporting Larry and allowing him to be Coach O to the rest of the world we would not be here today. “There are two Coach Os that equally deserve recognition today.” Olexiuk’s accomplishments, initiatives and success in football includes coaching the bantam St. Albert Palmer 49ers in the early years and playing a prominent role in the creation and initial funding of the St. Albert High School Football Association in 1986 so players could remain in St. Albert to play high school football instead of leaving the city in pursuit of the sport. There are now three high school football programs in St. Albert instead of the one senior team. After the breakup of the Storm and the birth of Bulldogs Football, Olexiuk was a fixture in a variety of coaching capacities with the Bellerose teams that continues today for the 2017 Football Alberta Life Membership/Hall of Fame recipient. Olexiuk, 70, reflected on the special day during a break from the outpouring of emotional congratulations, massive hugs and hearty handshakes from the overflow crowd of life-long supporters at Saturday’s ceremony. **Describe what it’s like to have this football facility named in your honour? Olexiuk:** “A lot of tears and memories I’ve shared with guys who’ve called me and texted me and emailed me, hundreds and hundreds of messages, and visits to my home by dozens of former players and some I haven’t seen for 30 years. It’s the most humbling experience I’ve ever had in my life. “It truly is incredible. I have many people to thank for that, starting with Nolan Crouse, our mayor, and city council. His regimen for the last 10 or 12 years has been to name facilities after citizens who have contributed to the community rather than taking the money grab for the funding for the naming and without his pushing through council this naming I wouldn’t be standing here today.” **It must be very special to see so many individuals here for the ceremony, from the former players you coached to people like Bob Brayman, the first Storm head coach and your buddy while standing shoulder to shoulder together as coaches on the sideline for so many years, and he flew in from Kelowna today to attend this event. Olexiuk:** “It’s the whole memory thing. I look at these people and I say wow, I’ve got five memories with you, I’ve got 20 memories with you, 10 with you and we shared this and for you to come by and see me 30 or 40 years later to pay attention to the fact we have a naming after me and you took the time and the effort to come out today I treasure that time.” **What makes you**

still want to coach year after year after year? Olexiuk: “It’s the boys that have kept me young. I get more from coaching the boys than I give to them. I really believe that. Yes, I try and teach them life skills and I think it’s important that we have coaches like that to pass those skills on to the boys in the community but in return I have lots of laughs. I treasure the moments I spend with these young guys because they’re enthusiastic, they’re young, they do stupid things that remind me of things that I did and it’s just nice to see the youth hasn’t changed in that regard.” **Can you sum up how football in St. Albert has grown from when you started coaching to now where we have this facility now known as Larry Olexiuk Field? Olexiuk:** “When I first moved to St. Albert almost 50 years ago this was a garbage dump and when we renovated our place in Grandin I dumped the wood and the gypsum rock and all those sort of things out of my station wagon about 100 yards away from here. “When we first started coaching way back in the ’70s and in the ’60s in St. Albert we played on elementary school fields. There were no change rooms so kids changed outside on the field before practice and they changed on the field as they left the practice. “We played home games on high school fields behind Paul Kane and behind St. Albert High on fields that were not very well maintained to be honest with you, if they were maintained at all. We got a room finally for a high school team, it was supplied by St. Albert High and it was a former janitor’s room, so the boys could have some change facilities. “We got three high schools together at that point in time to form the St. Albert Storm.” **When did you start out in football? Olexiuk:** “I had a passion for football in high school. I played with Victoria Composite High School back in the ’60s. I graduated and I missed football so much that two years later in 1967 I asked my wife if is there any chance I could maybe help and assist with a bantam football team because they were looking for people to coach bantam football. That was the start in 1967. I started coaching quarterbacks, I was a quarterback myself, and just fell in love with the game, fell in love with what I was able to pass on to the boys and we went from there.” **What is your favourite part of coaching? Olexiuk:** “The boys. The relationships and watching the boys grow as a unit, grow as individuals, watching them literally change almost overnight with respect to some of the things like the patterns in life that they had been pursuing and then near the end of the season seeing them in a total different pattern and the joy they had from achieving and the camaraderie and the fun they had. That was my gift from them.”

About the Author: Jeff Hansen

Jeff Hansen joined the St. Albert Gazette in 1991. He writes about sports, athletes and teams from St. Albert and area.

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