

Bowie Blade-News / Bowie News

Youth coach had huge impact on Bowie

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Graham dead of heart attack at 62

NOVEMBER 4, 2015, 5:13 PM

Sam Graham had his own ideas about coaching, and hundreds of kids in Bowie benefited from his philosophy.

Graham, a volunteer coach with the Bowie Boys & Girls Club for the last 25 years, died suddenly of a heart attack on Oct. 22. He was 62.

Graham had returned home from working an overnight security shift that morning when he suffered the heart attack. He liked working that shift because it afforded him extra pay and gave him the chance to be there when his school-age children returned home at the end of the day.

"He never had a regular schedule," said his oldest son, Sam Jr., 29. "He would try to change his schedule up to be with us."

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Over the years, Graham looked after almost everybody's kids as a basketball coach, a soccer coach a baseball coach — and also a referee for the club.

"You name it, he did it," said Sharon Taylor, a coaching colleague for many years.

Graham's teams had their share of successes. But it was his approach to youth sports that endeared him to so many through the years.

Graham wanted three things from his players — for them to play hard, play together and have fun.

Unlike some coaches, he understood the games should be enjoyable, above all else.

"He tried to promote the idea that playing sports was mainly about fun and teamwork," Taylor said.

One year, Graham was slated to coach a team that would include his son Brian. Brian, wanting to play on the best team possible, urged his dad to try to stack the roster with as many good players as he could. His dad would have none of it.

"I don't need that," Graham told his son. "I've got you. I want to get some of the other kids because I want to teach them how to play."

Having a superior team "was what I cared about, but it wasn't what he cared about," recalled Brian, now 23. "He wanted to teach kids how to play the game."

Ability didn't matter to him. Effort did.

"He was always fair and impartial to everybody," Sam Jr. said. "It didn't matter how good you were or how bad you were as long as you were giving your all and having fun, he wanted you on his team."

Graham was known primarily as a soccer coach, a job he came upon quite by accident. His expertise was in baseball. He'd played minor-league ball in both the Yankees' and Pirates' farm systems as a shortstop.

Truth be told, he'd probably have preferred that his own kids played baseball. But once they took to soccer, he devoted himself to the game.

"He learned everything he could about it because that's what we were interested in," Sam Jr. said.

He wanted to play a big role in the lives of his own children and wound up having a major impact on the lives of many others.

"While he coached, he loved all of our friends and the relationships we built," Brian said. "He wanted to make sure every kid he had an influence on learned to play the game."

Many of them learned their lessons well. Brian was a starter on the Bowie High School team that won the 2008 state Class 4A soccer championship and finished 18-0. He estimated that half the players on that team played for his father at one time or another.

Some of them had turned their attention to baseball or lacrosse by the time they reached high school. But, Brian said, they wanted to play with their friends on the Bulldog soccer team "because of the friendships they made on the Bowie Boys & Girls Club playing for my dad."

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