

Jon Roehlk’s legacy lives on after his death

By Lauren Callison

As the weather gets colder and Saturdays are spent watching the Iowa Hawkeye football team, one can’t help but think back to a former Hawkeye offensive lineman who was arguably the best male athlete to come out of Durant High School.

Unfortunately, Jon Roehlk, a 1979 Durant graduate, is not able to tell his story because he died in 2016 at the age of 54 from a heart attack.

After his death, Jon’s brain was sent to Boston University where it was discovered that he had chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) from the head trauma he suffered throughout his football career, according to his brother, Phil Roehlk, a Durant resident who coached football at Durant and has worked in various positions with the school district over the years.

“He had no diagnosed concussions,” said Phil, who indicated Jon had stage two CTE out of four stages. “We didn’t really worry about that then. As a lineman, you don’t get as big of hits as receivers, defensive backs, linebackers, etc. Linemen, however, get sub-concussive blows, which don’t register as a concussion, but it’s wear and tear that’s constant on your brain.”

Phil, who is a 1982 Durant graduate, walked onto the Iowa football team in the fall of 1983 during his brother’s final year at Iowa.

“He didn’t take it easy on me just because I was his brother, that’s for sure,” said Phil. “We would go after each other at practices.”

The brothers played one season together, but Phil did not make the cut his sophomore year with the Hawkeyes.

Because of his brother’s CTE, Phil stressed the importance of following concussion protocol with high school athletes

“When I knew a kid had a hard hit to the head, there was no way that kid was going back in the game,” he explained. “When Jon and I played, if you could stand up, you’d go back in.”

Phil and Jon grew up playing and loving football together, and Phil still remembers his older brother’s football legacy fondly. The Roehlk family grew up in Durant, a block away from Jaycee Park, where a lot of their early competitions took place.

“In the summer, we would play baseball at the park,” he said. “We would set up bases in the outfield to play a game of wiffle ball too.”

The real fun for the two brothers started in the fall when they would bring their lawn mower from home to mow out a football field in the park. They would turn the field lights on and play a lot of night games with other kids in the neighborhood.

“Jon was the ringleader of this,”

Phil explained. “He just wanted everyone to get together and have fun playing some football.”

“He was the guy that brought everybody out, knocking on doors, making calls, whatever it took.”

Being an older brother, Jon was a natural leader, and it contributed to his competitiveness.

“Growing up, we were always competing at something,” Phil said. “Jon was just a very driven individual.”

Jon was a three-sport athlete at Durant High School, participating in football, wrestling, and baseball all four years. He was recruited to play football at Iowa because of his tenacity and overall athleticism.

“Jon had always played basketball, and in his eighth grade year, he fouled out of every game because he was just that physical of a guy,” Phil said.

“The wrestling coach at the time [Chuck Rogers] had said, ‘What is this kid doing playing basketball? He needs to be wrestling.’”

Rogers, who died a couple of years after Jon in 2018, pushed Jon to wrestle, and it may have been the best thing for Jon and his football career.

Jon went on to have a great wrestling career at Durant. His senior year, he placed fifth at state going 28-2 on the season.

“Jon was successful in every sport he played at Durant, and he has the records to show for it, but as for football, Jon didn’t play positions that were generally recognized in the stats,” his brother said.

“But if you knew him, you knew football was his passion, and he always wanted to play in college and go pro from there.”

Jon played center his freshman and sophomore seasons at Durant, but his junior year he was moved to tight end. His senior year, he played nose guard and fullback and stood at 6’ 2” and weighed 210 pounds.

During his junior year, 1978, he was recruited by former Iowa head coach Bob Commings. When Commings was fired after the 1978 season, Roehlk considered playing baseball at a smaller school as he thought his chances for playing football for Iowa were over.

However, the new Iowa coach, Hayden Fry, saw tape of Jon playing nose guard, and Fry’s assistant coach, Carl Jackson, came to watch Jon wrestle at Durant. After that scouting trip, Roehlk received the last Iowa scholarship for the year, and his dream to play football at Iowa was fulfilled.

“That has always kind of been the mentality with Iowa football,” Phil said. “They want three-and four-sport athletes, real physical, versatile, guys.”

After a redshirt year, Jon was a line-

backer in the 1980 season, but he switched to the offensive line for his final three seasons and participated in the Rose, Peach, and Gator bowls.

“Jon’s senior year at Iowa was memorable,” said Phil. “He was named team captain, made All-Big Ten for the second year in a row, and was still on the offensive line but participated in kickoff duties as well.”

Jon’s family, including his father, Ron, and mother, Flo, along with his younger siblings, Phil, Tony, and Shelly, attended all the home games at Iowa as well as some road games.

It was on that Hawkeye offensive line that Jon met center Joel Hilgenberg, who played football at Iowa City High but has family ties in Wilton. Joel’s father, Jerry Hilgenberg, grew up in Wilton on Chestnut Street.

“He went to Wilton High School, and his senior year marked the inaugural season for football at Wilton,” explained Joel.

Jerry played football at Iowa, and his brother Wally, and three sons, Jim, Jay, and Joel, all followed in his footsteps, creating a legacy that would continue into the NFL for Wally, Jay, and Joel Hilgenberg.

Jon and Joel were roommates together and got to be pretty close over the years.

“He [Jon] had great athleticism—powerful, explosive, a fantastic teammate and competitor,” Joel said. “We had good success at Iowa and had the bond as teammates and fellow offensive lineman that always remained with us.”

Joel played 10 years for the New Orleans Saints, following in the footsteps of other Hilgenbergs in the pros, including his uncle Wally who played 12 years with the Minnesota Vikings and older brother Jay who played 11 seasons for the Chicago Bears.

Although it was Jon Roehlk’s dream to go pro after college as well, he attended three NFL training camps but never made the final cut. In 1984, he trained with the Detroit Lions, in 1985 with the Pittsburgh Steelers, and in 1986 with the Philadelphia Eagles.

“He got to play for Buddy Ryan [Eagles head coach] in ‘86, and I went to watch a preseason game for the Eagles in California against the Chargers, and Jon actually kicked off a couple times in that game,” Phil said.

In 1987, NFL players went on strike, and Jon played three games for Coach Mike Ditka and the Chicago Bears.

“When the regular team came back, unfortunately, he did not make the cut,” Phil said.



Photo courtesy of the University of Iowa
Former Durant graduate Jon Roehlk blocks during a Hawkeye football game.

After several disheartening years moving from one preseason team to another, Jon turned to Arena Football.

“End of ‘87, he was able to play a couple games with the Washington Commandos, but eventually he moved to Detroit to play with the Detroit Drive from 1988-93,” Phil said. “As their center, he won four titles with them.”

In 1994, he played one season for the Miami Hooters before he came back to Iowa in 1995 and played for the Iowa Barnstormers.

“That 1995 Barnstormer team had a lot of talent,” Phil said. “Jon was blocking for Kurt Warner when his career was just taking off, and six games in, Jon blew his knee out, and that was the end of his football career,” Phil said.

Jon was inducted into the Arena Football Hall of Fame in 1999 and coached for the Quad City Steamwheelers from 2002 to 2006. Even though he never made it in the NFL like he had dreamed, Jon found a way to continue to play, and eventually coach, the sport he loved.

“I kept tabs on him [Jon] and admired how he refused to give up his dream easily,” said Joel Hilgenberg. “He had a great love for every aspect of the game, and he pursued his dream to its fullest.”

“Jon’s competitive spirit, boundless energy, and enthusiasm for the game and life is what will always stay with me when I think of Jon.”

Wildcat assistant coach former star at Iowa

By Josh Peel

When Durant’s new assistant football coach gives instructions to players on special teams, they listen intently.

That’s because Coach Jordan Cotton, a former Iowa Hawkeye football player, has the longest return in Outback Bowl history, 96 yards, in a 21-14 loss to LSU in 2014.

In his Hawkeye career, Coach Cotton started slow. He saw no action in his first two years. In 2011, he saw limited action in two games. Then as a redshirt junior in 2012, he played in all 12 games as a wide receiver and had 19 kickoff returns for 536 yards. He led the Big Ten in kickoff return average with 28.2 yards, and he was ranked 14th nationally.

In his last year, 2013, he led the team in kickoff returns with a 25.2 average

in addition to setting the Outback Bowl record.

He finished his career at Iowa with 15 receptions for 234 yards and a touchdown as a wide receiver.

Playing at Iowa was very special for Coach Cotton because he is from Iowa. His father, Marshall Cotton, was a running back at Iowa in the 1980’s.

Coach Cotton played his high school ball at Mount Pleasant before choosing Iowa over other schools that showed interest in him, including the University of Notre Dame. At Iowa, Coach Cotton got to play in front of all his friends and family, and he still talks to a lot of the coaches at Iowa on a weekly basis.

“That’s what made playing at Iowa great is the coaches stay in contact with you even after you’re done playing,” said Coach

Cotton, who was recently chosen to be honorary captain of the Iowa football team in its September 14 game against Troy.

“Being honorary captain was truly an honor,” said Coach Cotton. “There have been a ton of great players that came through Iowa and for Coach Ferentz to choose me to be honorary captain was a blessing and something I’ll remember forever.”

After playing at Iowa, Coach Cotton had the opportunity to play at the next level for a couple of teams in the Canadian Football League.

He also had the opportunity to try out for the New York Giants, but two weeks before the tryout, he tore his Achilles tendon, which ended his football career.

The career-ending injury hasn’t kept him away from football, though. He plans on coaching as long as he can.

“I would love to be a head coach someday,” said Coach Cotton. “The opportunity just has to be the right time.”

Despite the rough season so far for the Wildcats, Coach Cotton still has high hopes to finish the season strong.

“The biggest thing to take away from this season so far is that it’s not over,” he said in an interview midway through the season.

“I am going to coach to the best of my abilities to keep the team working hard and going out there every Friday night and playing to the best of their abilities.”

Junior Colby Gast, the Wildcats’ leading wide receiver, said Coach Cotton brings a lot to the table for the team.

“With him having experience from a D1 program to give us, he has brought a lot to the team this season alone,” said Gast.