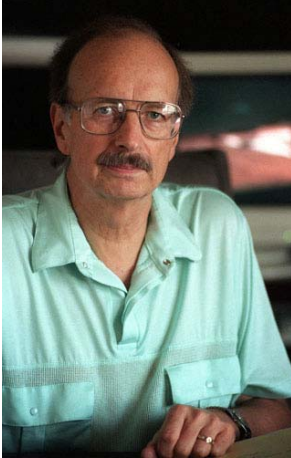


Dwight Merkel – The Man behind the Name



"His biggest contribution was to make sure every kid got a chance to play, to have his day in the sun, by making a policy that everyone got to play at least half a game," said longtime friend, Kirby McKee.

Youth Sports Champion Merkel Dies

Jim Price Correspondent. The Spokesman-Review. Spokane, Wash. June 4, 1997
Photo - Shawn Jacobson, The Spokesman-Review

Dwight Merkel, the city's most influential figure in the development of athletic competition for children, died Tuesday afternoon, June 3, 1997 following a long illness.

The guiding force behind Spokane Youth Sports Association, Merkel succumbed to cancer in his Spokane-area home. He was 55.

Merkel, a Spokane native, graduated from North Central High School and Eastern Washington University. He served the organization which became Spokane Youth Sports for 31 years, first as a volunteer and later as executive director. He devoted countless hours to several civic organizations, including the Spokane Park Board and the Greater Spokane Sports Association.

He launched a career in television, primarily in advertising sales, in 1959. He became SYSA's first paid executive in August 1983.

Under his direction, Spokane Youth Sports grew from a single-sport program serving a few hundred football players to a year-round organization providing indoor and outdoor soccer, softball, baseball, football and golf competition, as well as many summer camps.

He leaves behind a legacy of athletic opportunity for children and a strong sense of commitment to the community. He'll also be remembered for spearheading development of the North and South sports complexes used by SYSA teams.

Merkel is survived by his wife Sharon and her two grown sons.

A memorial service is pending. Hennessey/Smith Funeral Home is handling the arrangements.

Merkel, who went to work at KHQ-TV in 1959, turned out for an organizational meeting of prospective Spokane Junior Football coaches in 1966. After coaching for a season or two, he took a more-active role as a volunteer and soon became the organization's president.

Merkel and a handful of others steered the Spokane Junior Football through the transition into Spokane Youth Sports, which soon sponsored a growing soccer program for boys and girls of all ages.

He and a pack of volunteers did everything from picking up rocks and sowing grass seed to lining fields and passing out equipment when the North complex, adjacent to Albi Stadium, came into being in the mid-1970s. The South complex opened in the early 1980s. Merkel did the bulk of the fund-raising and recruited many of the volunteers himself.

"When he became the executive director, that was the hardest thing to get him to do," said SYSA board member Kirby McKee, a longtime friend and fellow KHQ employee. "We had to make him quit doing all the work and be the executive director."

McKee and others, including board chairman Jerry McDermott, emphasized the influence of Merkel's philosophy toward sports for children.

"His biggest contribution was to make sure every kid got a chance to play, to have his day in the sun, by making a policy that everyone got to play at least half a game," McKee said.

"He's an individual who is irreplaceable," said McDermott, chief financial officer for Educational Service District 101. "His philosophy has held true throughout the organization, the idea that all children be allowed to participate."

Von Graf, named acting executive director in March, after Merkel became incapacitated, expressed similar thoughts.

"Dwight was concerned with the kids who might not have a chance with sports," Graf said. "He saw that most kids aren't Michael Jordan and that they just needed a chance to enjoy their sport and make friendships."

Jeff Heimbigner, general manager of the Spokane Shadow and a close friend, believes Merkel has had a profound influence on his sport, soccer, and on his career as a coach and administrator.

"He wanted to teach children to learn lifetime skills through sports in an enjoyable atmosphere," Heimbigner said. "Take care of the children first and the rest will take care of itself."

"He was instrumental in bringing about high school soccer in the early 1980s, and he found a way to get all the organizations in the city working together. He also gave me a lot of guidance with the Shadow."

Merkel, a member of the fourth Leadership Spokane class in 1986, spent almost two decades on the Spokane Park Board. In 1984, he received the Washington Parks and Recreation Association's citation of merit, its highest lay award. He was park board president in 1986.

He also spent many years as a volunteer with the Greater Spokane Sports Assn. After chairing that group's annual sports award banquet in 1988, he became the president the following year.

The Spokane Parks and Recreation Department presented Merkel with a plaque prior to the city's celebration of Dwight Merkel Appreciation Day on April 28. The plaque will be installed at the North complex later this year.

"He's going to be missed," McKee said. "He was a heckuva guy, and we probably won't know, until the funeral, how many friends he really had."