

# THE CHARLIE WEDEMEYER STORY

By Dick Sparrer

For 21 consecutive summers, Charlie Wedemeyer was a regular at the Silicon Valley Youth Classic played in his name—the Charlie Wedemeyer All-Star Football Game. Sadly, in the summer of 2010 that game became the Charlie Wedemeyer Memorial All-Star Game.

The talented former high school football coach died in the early morning hours of June 3 that year, after a courageous 32-year battle with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis—more commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

Still, his presence remains strong at San Jose City College stadium each summer for this evening of football—Jim Guido and the sponsoring Almaden Rotary Club have seen to that.

"We will continue to honor Charlie's memory," said Guido, the game chairman since the inception of the now historic event.

That should come as little surprise. After all, it was Guido who first contacted Wedemeyer to get him involved in the summer classic.

"I called him in the late '80s to tell him we'd be interested in naming the all-star football game after him. He thought that was quite an honor," said Guido. "He'd been at every game since. Even when he was sick and in San Jose Hospital, we hooked him up with phones in his room so he could be part of the game."

Wedemeyer first took part in the game in the summer of 1989.

Charlie welcomed each player— from both the North and South teams—to

## Devastating Diagnosis

It was 1978, just a year after he had taken over as a math teacher and the head football coach at Los Gatos High School.

Charlie Wedemeyer was having difficulty writing on the chalkboard in his classroom. For a guy who had always been an excep-

credible athletic skills, it was difficult news to accept. So he chose not to.

Charlie Wedemeyer defied the odds and broke all of the records. He lived for 32 years with his fate before the disease ultimately took his life.

Wedemeyer, with his loving and dedicated wife Lucy constantly at his side, spit in the eye of his ALS and continued to coach football for many years following his diagnosis. But Charlie

Wedemeyer was more than a football coach—he was an inspiration.

"Charlie was really a very talented high school football coach," said Butch Cattolico, an assistant on Wedemeyer's staff who would go on to become a great high school head coach in his own right. "But he went from being a really good coach to becoming a legend and an inspiration. Not because he had the disease, but because he continued to coach after he had the disease.

"Here's a guy who could have been a good high school coach. Instead he became an inspiration to everybody"

Even as ALS began to ravage his body, Wedemeyer persevered. Unable to

walk, he coached from a golf cart. Unable to speak, he communicated through his wife, who read his lips and passed along his thoughts to the players and coaches.

His teams continued to excel, reaching the Central Coast Section semifinals in 1984, then claiming the ultimate prize a year later with a 14-12 win over St. Francis in the



tional athlete, the loss of such simple motor skills was both confusing and disturbing.

He went to see to Dr. Frank Griffin, the team physician for the Wildcats, and the news was both disturbing and frightening. He was diagnosed with ALS, and it was estimated that he had only two or three years to live.

For a 32-year-old man with in-

finals to win the CCS Division I championship.

Though it would be in a lesser role as his disease took its toll, Wedemeyer would continue coaching at the school over the next two-plus decades first on the varsity staff, and later with the frosh-soph squad.

## Learning Experience

Scott Downs, the former frosh-soph football head coach at Los Gatos, worked with Wedemeyer for nine seasons. "It was like having your professor help you take the test," said Downs of his years coaching with Wedemeyer. "I learned a lot from him"

The Los Gatos frosh-soph squad had a successful run during that period, dominating the competition in the De Anza Division of the Santa Clara Valley Athletic League.

"We were more like a varsity staff than a frosh-soph staff," he added. "We wouldn't have done what we were able to do without him. He made us better in the early years." Wedemeyer was especially gifted as an offensive coach. "Offensively, he was honestly ahead of his time at the high school level," said Cattolico. "He was a pretty sharp offensive guy" But his reach as a football coach went much deeper than the Xs and Os. "I don't think anybody will ever realize how important it is to the kids of this community to have played football for coach Wedemeyer," added Cattolico.

Receiver and defensive back Craig Springbett recalled Wedemeyer as a "great" coach. Springbett who is a 1981 Los Gatos graduate, played for Wedemeyer during his junior and senior years. "He was different from your regular coaches," Springbett said "A lot of coaches are militaristic and loud. They get their point

across by yelling, at you. Coach Wedemeyer expected a lot, but he didn't have to yell at you He just gave you a look."

Springbett said Wedemeyer would not tolerate swearing on the field. "The punishment for swearing was he'd make you run a mile after practice, in full gear, with a big rubber tire around your neck." Springbett said he only had to be punished like that once before learning his lesson.

Springbett described Wedemeyer as being very approachable. "If you had a problem, he'd help you find a solution," he said "He was like a second dad to me, someone I could always trust."

While Wedemeyer was best known for football, Springbett said the coach was instrumental in getting a baseball exchange program going with his high school in Hawaii. "The whole baseball team went to Hawaii in 1981," Springbett said "I've been a fan of Hawaii ever since." In fact, Springbett now lives in Hawaii, an indication of the far-reaching impact Wedemeyer has had on so many lives.

## An Inspiration

"He was just one of the most inspirational people I've ever met," former quarterback Greg Rabitz said "There's a place in our hearts for Charlie; he's touched so many lives."

Rabitz is a 1991 Los Gatos grad. By then, Wedemeyer was sick, but Rabitz said he was always around the football field helping out "His presence was there and it was felt by everybody"

Rabitz says he still feels Wedemeyer's impact today "Whenever there's an obstacle to overcome, it's much easier to think how hard it would be if you were in his shoes. He was able to achieve so much and he did it with such grace."

That speaks volumes for Wedemeyer, because while he was a great high school football coach, his legacy goes much deeper than that

His family established One Charlie Wedemeyer Family Outreach program that would present scholarships to deserving young people and raise funds for others coping with ALS; his autobiography, Charlie's Victory, offers an inspirational story of love, courage and commitment; and the Wedemeyers would travel the world, according to their website, "to share their message ... that he is a living testament that, with God, all things are possible."

Charlie Wedemeyer was the Hawaii Prep Athlete of the Decade in the 1960s after starring in football, basketball and baseball at Punahou High School. He went on to star for Coach Duffy Dougherty at Michigan State University, where he represented the Spartans in the East-West Shrine Game and the Hula Bowl, and marry his high school sweetheart, Lucy Dangler. Their life story would become the stuff movies are made of and it was, twice. The PBS documentary, One More Season, and the CBS-TV movie, Quiet Victory: The Charlie Wedemeyer Story, chronicled their lives.

Not long after Wedemeyer led the Wildcats to the CCS championship in 1985, the organizers of the Silicon Valley Youth Classic, the summer all-star football game for graduating high school seniors, contacted him with a special offer.

"He's been one great inspiration for us, let alone for all of the kids who have played in the game," said Guido. "They would go by and touch Charlie after they were introduced before the game."

It was a fitting tribute to the man who touched so many others during his eventful life.