

# Longtime coach Sharp remembered

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By MARK CONLEY  
SENTINEL SPORTS EDITOR

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His nickname was simple and straight to the point. "Coach."

Unless, of course, one of his five grandchildren decided to complicate matters. They usually called him "Grandpa Coach."

Claude Sharp, a longtime presence on Santa Cruz County ballfields, died at the age of 71 Sunday after a year-long battle with cancer.

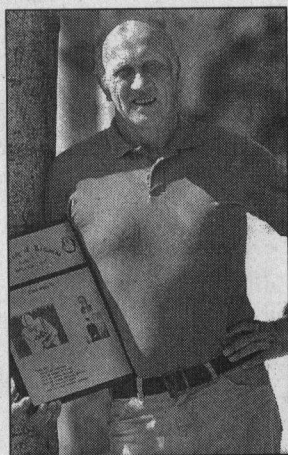
Sharp finished off his life with the same vigor and stubbornness those who had him as a teacher or coach at Soquel or Harbor highs might recall vividly, his daughter Nancy Sharp Gragnani said.

"He was such a fighter. He didn't want to give up," she said.

Sharp was only expected to live three to six months when he was diagnosed with Stage 4 bone cancer last July. He was one day away from making it a year when he passed "peacefully" Sunday morning, Gragnani said.

"He never let it get him down, never said 'poor me'" even though he was in much pain, she said. "The hospice nurse said Dad was the first person she's had who [got out of bed and] would greet her at the door in the morning."

Sharp will be cremated — "He said he wanted to kill the cancer that killed him," his daughter said — and will be given a military burial at the San Joaquin National Cemetery in Santa Nella at 10:30 a.m. Friday.



Sentinel file

Longtime Harbor High coach Claude Sharp received hundreds of notes, calls and e-mails as he fought cancer for the last year.

**Obituary, page A8**

See **SHARP** on **PAGE D2**

## Sharp

Continued from D1

Sharp was born on a dairy farm in Nashville, Tenn., in 1933. He took to football early and played a year at Ole Miss before joining the Air Force to fight in the Korean War. He later played at the University of Redlands, where he is a member of the school's athletic hall of fame, and was a Division II All-American in 1959.

The offensive lineman was drafted by the Baltimore Colts, but did not make the team due to bad knees. He began his teaching and coaching career in Manteca shortly thereafter, then joined Dewey Tompkins' football staff at Soquel High in 1962.

Sharp joined Bob Nicolaisen to help establish the Harbor football program when the school opened in 1968. He also coached baseball at Harbor. Until his retirement in 1995, Sharp literally coached or taught thousands of kids in the county.

A Sentinel article on Sharp's cancer last August prompted an outpouring of letters and e-mails from former students and colleagues. Living with his daughter in Kerman, outside Fresno, Sharp would glow after every correspondence, then turn to his daughter and relay a story about the author.

"He really loved the kids and other coaches and teachers he worked with in Santa Cruz," she said. "There were hundreds of e-mails, letters and cards. Almost every single one was a testimonial to how he had touched their lives."

He was especially proud of one phone call he received from a "young lady" who told him he was the "best teacher/coach she ever knew." Her name is Juli Simpson Inkster.

"I can still see his smile after that call," Gragnani said.

Gragnani also shared a message she received from longtime Santa Cruz High coach Bill Dodge — whose teams squared off against Sharp's for many years — after Dodge learned of Sharp's passing.

Of the coach many former players have called "old-school," Dodge wrote: "Claude was one of the few coaches I know who just coached his team the right way without trying to play tricks and games within games to gain an advantage. Lets just play the game the way it is supposed to be played and may the best team win."

"I always respected him for that. It was just a game you could enjoy and not have all the grandstanding and outside forces coming into play."

Gragnani laughed when relaying the fact her father drove a beer truck during the summers to make ends meet.

"It was such a conflict of interest [being a coach and driving a beer truck.] He'd wave at some of his kids as he drove around town," she said. "But Dad didn't care what part of Santa Cruz you came from, if you needed a pair of shoes, you got a pair of shoes. Mom was livid because he'd spend all his paycheck buying stuff for kids."

*In lieu of flowers, remembrances may be sent to Nancy Hinds Hospice, 1616 West Shaw Ave., Suite B-6, Fresno, CA 93711-3513 or to the Harbor High athletic department, 300 La Fonda Ave., Santa Cruz, CA 95065.*

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