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Goodbye to a good guy

After 33½ years, Walters hangs it up

By KARL GRUBAUGH
Special to the Sentinel

THE WALLS ARE mostly bare in Ron Walters' office at Soquel High. A few pictures are still in view, a couple of the thousands of school district notices printed over the course of a 33½-year career are posted near the door. But blank space dominates.

Most of his mementoes are at home, he explains to a visitor. Trophies, plaques, some photographs. But Ron Walters, after nearly 3½ decades as an educator and coach (educator first, please — "If athletics has no educational value, it has no place in the curriculum," he says), has something else he values even more as he retires this week from Soquel High: a trunk full of friends and memories.

There are no blank spaces on the walls of Ron Walters' heart.

"We met when I started teaching at Santa Cruz (High). It was the 1950-51 school year and Ron was in the senior class. He was quite a baseball player, an excellent fielder; he hit OK. He was a good kid to have around."

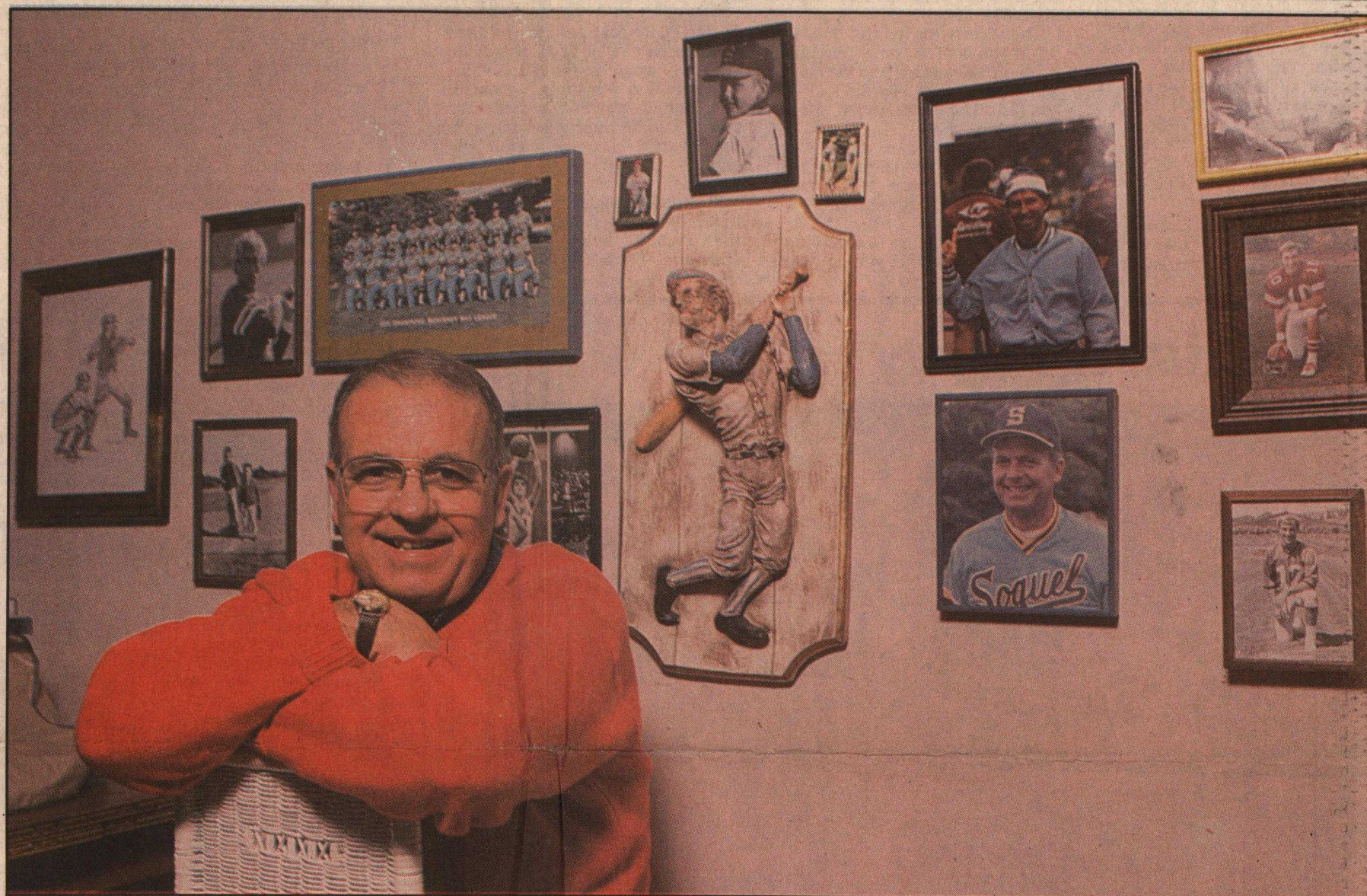
— Emmett Thompson
retired teacher and administrator

Walters, 56, is a *real* local, much more than the little surf moppets who go around screaming at tourists, "Valley go home!" He was born, raised and educated here. His father, Norman Walters, was an elected city councilman for eight years and served a term as mayor of Santa Cruz.

After graduating from Santa Cruz, Walters spent a year at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, then transferred to San Jose State. He met his future wife, Marilyn, in a sophomore anatomy class — both were physical education majors. "I'd hate to think what would have happened to me if I had married someone who didn't like sports," Walters says, grinning.

A brief stab at professional baseball didn't work out and Walters started his teaching and coaching career at a junior high near Fremont. Four years later, he was back in Santa Cruz to stay, teaching at Mission Hill Junior High for a year before moving over to Santa Cruz High for two years.

In the fall of 1962, he was picked to run the P.E. department and coach varsity baseball at a new high



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

The walls of the Walters' house in hills above Scotts Valley are a constant reminder to the good times of years gone by.

school opening in Soquel.

"His first emphasis was fun. Then came winning. Sandwiched somewhere in between was being a good sport. If you lost, he always told us to go over and shake their hands, smile and tell them they played a nice game, even if you felt like hitting them in the mouth."

— Pete Hamm, Soquel Class of '65,
former pitcher with the Minnesota Twins,
owner of a construction cleaning business

In the early days at Soquel, the Knights were perpetual runners-up to Bill Dodge-coached teams at Santa Cruz. It always seemed like the Knights needed a bit more pitching, or better clutch hitting, or a bigger stick.

Walters was never a very successful baseball coach, if success is measured solely by wins and championships. The Knights won only two league titles under his guidance, in 1974 and 1975.

But Walters knows that winning is secondary in high school athletics; he realized early in his career that his ability as a baseball coach was not measured by the number of wins his team chalked up. "Generally speaking, the coach with the best players wins," he says. And wins are low on the Walters list of priorities — other things are more important.

"All of us in athletics can look back and see somebody along the line that had a real impact, somebody that you emulated," Walters says. "That's what I look for in a coach, and what I hope I was as a coach; a good role model, someone the kids 15 or 20 years down the road are going to remember in a positive way."

"He had a real positive attitude and brought out the best in folks. Playing for Ron was always fun, absolutely a good experience."

— Scott Hamm, Soquel Class of '66,
field supervisor for the Scotts Valley Water District

"My senior year, I was captain. I didn't play very much, but I was a hell of a third-base coach. Ron told me he wanted me to be sort of an assistant coach as well as captain. He let me make trips out to the mound to calm down pitchers, talk strategy, whatever. It was a good opportunity for leadership at an early age. That was a great time for me."

— Jay Bartle, Soquel Class of '71,
a manager for Miss Smith's Frozen Foods, San Jose

"I was 9 years old, playing farm-league baseball, and it was All-Star time. I was just hanging around practice, even though I wasn't picked for the team, and the coach said I could stick around — he needed more bodies. A week later he said I wasn't on the team."

"I was crushed and started to walk home, crying all the way. Ron was the director of the entire program and he drove by on his way home, saw me crying and

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stopped. I told him what was wrong and he gave me a ride home. He said he'd take care of it — and I ended up on the team. I remember thinking, 'Why does he care?' But he did.

"I ended up playing catcher in high school against him for three years — who knows what I would have done in baseball if it hadn't been for him."

— Mike Gruber,

Harbor High boys' basketball coach, Aptos dentist

"Ron and I saw the world very differently. He's sort of a crew-cut kind of guy and I'm sort of a long-hair kind of guy. But we still have a close friendship. Baseball is at the center of it, but we both love life. He's a man interested in understanding life — I've always enjoyed that about him.

"Playing for him and with my teammates was probably the most enjoyable experience I've ever had."

— Geoff Dunn, Soquel Class of '73,
Santa Cruz writer and filmmaker

After winning his second championship at Soquel, Walters left coaching and teaching to enter administration. "I didn't really want to do it," he says, "but I thought I might not get another chance if I didn't."

His wife Marilyn explains it differently. "Coaching baseball is something he has always loved," she says. "But he felt he needed to watch his kids play (sons Stu and Kevin were at Aptos High at the time.) It was a hard decision, because he loved coaching, but he thought it was more important to watch his sons."

Family comes first to Walters. He and Marilyn have three grown sons: Stu, 29, (who is following in his father's coaching footsteps at Soquel where he is the girls' varsity basketball coach), Kevin, 27, and Matt, 23.

In the me-decade, the selfish '80s, Walters is a throwback to an era when parents sacrificed for the well-being of their children. He remembers being upset one New Year's Day when his entire house filled with screaming adolescent boys, all football fans and all plopped in front of his television screen.

"I was ticked," he recalls. "I told Marilyn, 'It's my house that I bought with my money from my job, and I can't even get a seat in front of the TV for the Rose Bowl!' She asked me if I would rather have the boys at someone else's house. 'No,' I said. 'Well,' she said, 'then shut up, go upstairs and watch it in the bedroom.'"

"Why have we been able to stay married so long? Because Ron's my best friend. We do everything together. We never missed a Soquel game, baseball, basketball or football, until Stu started high school. We centered our lives on the kids and the school."

— Marilyn Walters

"His wife was a real character. She used to bring the kids to the game and sit in the dugout. Stu and Kevin were batboys and Matt was with Marilyn, all wrapped up in a blanket. Everyone was always knee-deep in sunflower seeds. Ron always had a bag of sunflower seeds somewhere."

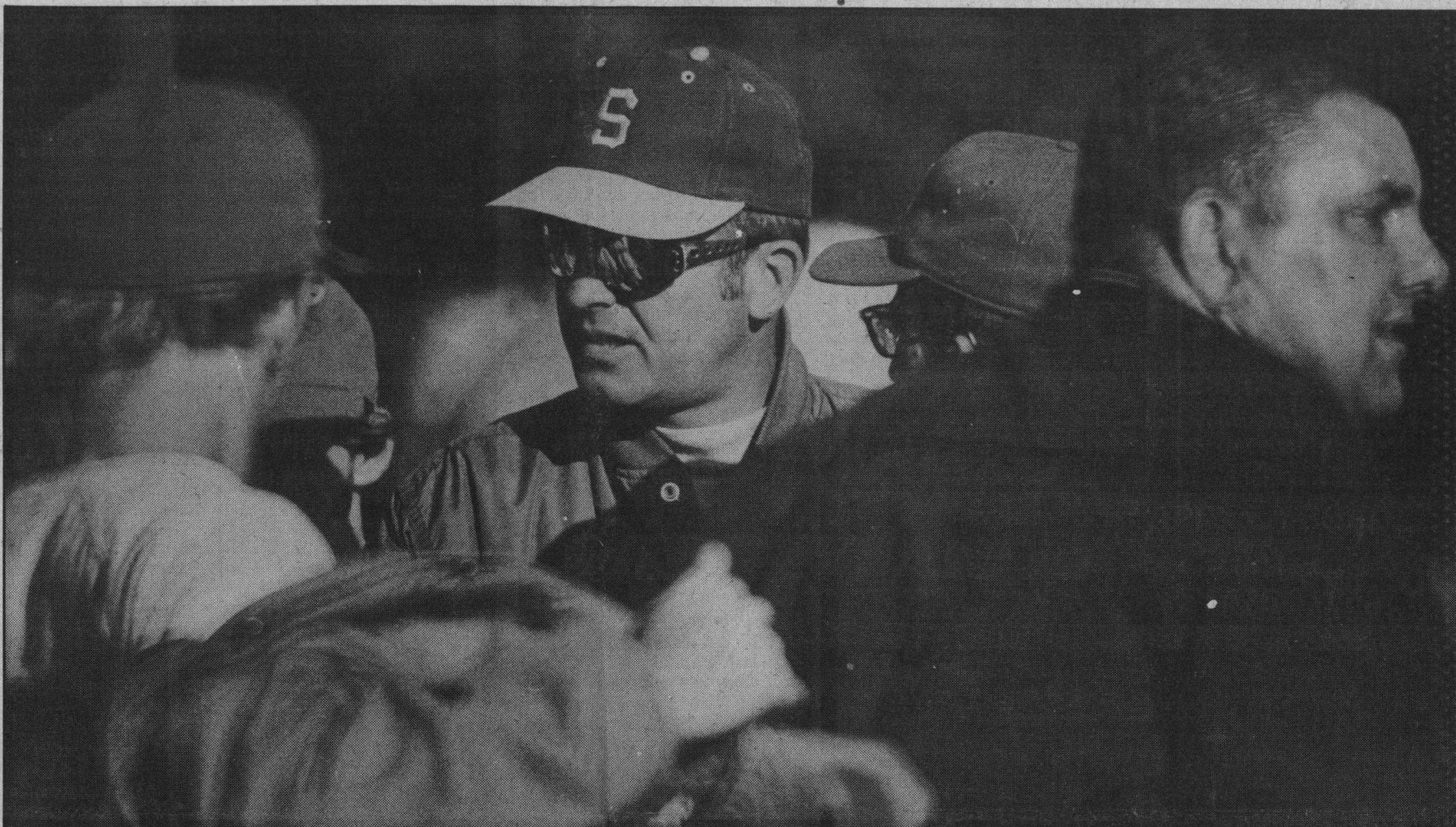
— Chris Crabb, Soquel Class of '68,
manager of Mid-County Auto Supply

"He's a good father. He always let us make our own decisions, and tried to teach us to be responsible for ourselves.

"He was looking for a coach when I was still living at home. It started getting desperate, and one day he came home and said, 'Well, if you don't want to sleep in the garage, you'll coach the team.' I've been doing it for six years now."

— Stu Walters

Walters has been hiring coaches at Soquel High for 13 years. Two years ago, Soquel teacher Mark McConnell took over most of the athletic director's



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

On the occasion of Ron Walters' retirement, those who came to know him took time to reflect on his years as a teacher and coach.

responsibilities, but Walters has remained closely involved with the sports program at the school.

"I look for someone who is going to give the kids a good experience," Walters says. "X's and O's are not the first thing I look for. You've got to take care of your kids."

His role changed, of course, when he left the playing fields for an administrative office. He was forced to see what he calls "the big picture." He had to meet the needs of all sports, not just baseball, and he had to worry about all the coaches, not just his baseball assistants.

Talk to any of Soquel's coaches and you hear accounts of Walters' support for them and their programs, win or lose. "Administratively, there is no one better," says Soquel boys' basketball coach Dave Spencer. "But I look to him for more than that. He's so supportive — I don't know what I would have done without his help and support."

"He's always been willing to talk to me, to give me any help he could," says Mitch Meyer, the baseball coach at Soquel.

"Ron taught the human element rather than winning and losing.

"I was on the basketball team and we were struggling to make the playoffs. After a tough loss on Friday, he came down from the AD's office on Monday. He told us we shouldn't be frustrated, that he felt we were playing to the best of our ability, that we were excellent representatives of the school, and that it didn't matter if we won or lost.

"It was tough to see at the time because so much of your sense of accomplishment as an athlete is tied to winning. But now, as a young coach, I see it much

more clearly."

— Russ Miller, Soquel Class of '81,
assistant Knight baseball coach,
assistant vice-president Pajaro Valley Bank

Walters is proud of the progress girls have made in athletics at Soquel High. Ten years ago, he says, there were no sports for girls at the school. "And they've come so far," Walters says, recalling earlier days when halftime scores at girls' basketball games might be as low as 6-2.

"Now, they're hitting the 80s, even 100," he continues. "I'm so proud of our girls' programs. If athletics is good for boys, it's got to be good for girls."

"Ron was in a position three of four years ago, looking toward retirement, where he could have just done his job and not taken on any new responsibilities. But he had a vision for a first-class sports facility in our community. Many people contributed to it, of course, but his ability to share his vision, and act upon it, had a lot to do with seeing it through.

"The Soquel Stadium is a legacy to him, something that will benefit people for years and years."

— Ken Thomas, Harbor High principal

As proud as his career accomplishments have made him, people have always come first for Walters. If he can offer support, encouragement, or just a shoulder to cry on, he does so.

In 1968, Randy Peck, a former Soquel three-sport standout, was killed in an automobile accident. Marge Peck, Randy's mother, was Walters' secretary.

"He was a real source of strength then," says Peck, who still serves as Walters' secretary, a post she has held for 26½ years. "And ever since. He's somebody I can go in and talk highs and lows with.

"My granddaughter never knew her uncle (Randy). Ron has sat down with her on a number of occasions to try and acquaint her with him. When my husband died, he was one of the first people in touch with me. If I needed him, I could pick up the phone and he'd be there.

"You don't have too many friends in your life like that."

Walters' retirement won't slow him down much. He has signed a full-time scouting contract with the Montreal Expos and is responsible for much of Northern California. He has bird-dogged and scouted part time for several different major league baseball clubs over the years, but this is his first full-time baseball job. He has come full circle, back to his baseball roots.

After a career orchestrated by school bells, Walters is ready for a change. "This is something completely different, which is why it's so nice," he says. "As long as I get the job done, I can go where I want, when I want, and nobody cares. And not only will I be doing something I enjoy, nobody plays before noon."

Walters laughs with the gusto of a man about to embark on an adventure, looking forward with pleasure to the thought of unhurried mornings spent preparing to watch young baseball players romp in the sun. He bids his guest farewell and begins taking down the few pictures left on the wall.

No, there are no blank spaces in Ron Walters' heart.