

Note: This is part of one chapter of a short book I wrote about my high school football coach, the late Verlon Myers. The excerpt of the chapter deals with major influences in Myers' life who were non-family members.

Chapter 4

Verlon Myers said he knew he wanted to become a coach from his junior year in high school, when his coach was Merv Baker, who had a long and successful career at Charleston High School.

“Everything Merv said, I recorded in my memory,” Myers said. “It was like a coaching clinic to me.”

Baker continued to be a major influence as Myers got his start.

“He was very influential,” Myers said of Baker. “I spent a lot of time with him the first year. He shared playbooks with me. He was always very helpful. If I had a question, I would phone and he would always answer.”

Another major influence came off the football field in Verlon's days at Eastern Illinois University. Myers early on in college was introduced to Walt Warmoth, a local restaurant owner who, among other things, helped young athletes pay bills through their work at his businesses.

In those days, the college scholarship was working at places like Walt's, which turned out to be far more than a job. Walt had managed the Walgreen's in Chicago at age 19 during the World's Fair in Chicago, the youngest manager at any Walgreens. Warmoth was a close friend of Baker, and took a big interest in helping Myers and others. The money from a job with Warmoth was important to athletes like Myers. The life lessons were even more valuable.

“The biggest influence was Walt Warmoth,” Myers said. “He gave me discipline and organizational skills I needed to be successful.”

Those lessons were free along with the opportunity to work in what Myers kidded was the Walt Warmoth scholarship, the opportunity to mop floors and related tasks for books and tuition.

On many a Friday night, Warmoth met with those he was mentoring. He required them to read books like “How To Win Friends and Influence People” by Dale Carnegie. The book helped the athletes know how to provide good customer service at Walt's, and helped prepare the athletes for their life ahead. Warmoth wanted his employees to know, both now and in the future, how people think. And that some people think differently, and thus an approach that works with one customer (or athlete), isn't the best approach for someone else.

Myers used these principles throughout his career. He remembers a situation in which a player told him he didn't feel he had the commitment to stay with football. Until the player admitted he had the problem, Myers knew it would be difficult to solve. Once the player admitted the issue, Myers said they could address it together if the player would give it a chance. In the end, it worked out for all involved, most importantly the player and his teammates.

Another way that Warmoth helped was by sharing the principles needed to be successful. "Walt had the ability to recognize that sitting down for 20 or 30 minutes to get things written down with a schedule with plans involved was critical to success," Myers said.

The necessity of planning your work, both from an efficiency standpoint and from knowing in advance what you needed to accomplish, were things Myers carried with him through his career. His practices were scheduled, with coaches having a written, detailed plan of what drills would be used in a particular practice, the order for the drills, and how long would be spent on each drill.

Road trips were the same. Everyone knew when the bus would leave, when it would arrive, and when the team would go to the field for warm-ups. If something went off schedule, you would adjust. But the schedule meant that things would not be left to chance. The important details were planned in advance, just as people like Warmoth planned their success in business.

For helping student athletes like Myers, Warmoth is in the EIU athletics Hall of Fame as a friend of the program.

The EIU athletics Web site has this to say about Warmoth:

"Walt Warmoth was a staunch booster of Panther athletic teams by serving the campus community for over 40 years as an area businessman.

"Starting in 1937 when he opened the Little Campus restaurant, Walt never lived more than 150 feet from the university except during the war years.

"Because of a booming business he expanded his operation by opening a second restaurant, the Co-op in 1940, followed by the establishment of Walt's in 1953 and the Shortstop in 1965.

"During four plus decades he employed an endless number of EIU athletes who were in need of financial assistance, most prior to the existence of athletic scholarships. Among the many student-athletes he hired to work at his business was future Major Leaguer Marty Pattin.

"His restaurants became the gathering place for students, faculty and townspeople alike to discuss Panther athletics and, for returning alumni, a time-honored assurance that some traditions remain unchanged.

"In 1957-58 he was vice-president of the Alumni Association, and is a past member of the executive committee.

“A 1932 graduate of Browns High School, Walt was a chemistry major as an EIU undergrad and originally intended to become a physician. However, his decision to turn businessman has a lasting and positive effect on the Panther athletic scene.”

Another way that Warmoth helped Myers was by helping Myers understand the need for a head coach to develop and live by a persona in the community.

“He talked about the persona of a coach,” Myers said.

When Myers took over a struggling program at Newton, he knew he had to make an impression to show there was a different attitude. The first game Myers came out in orange pants, an orange shirt and orange tie. The team was in new uniforms for the first time in many years. There was visible evidence that things were changing.