

A father-son football/NMU legacy

In 1957, a young man (well maybe not so young for a college freshman) known as “Sugar Popp” (a.k.a. **William D. Popp ’63 BS, ’67 MA**) left his hometown of Johnstown, Pa., in the footsteps of his admired brothers, to pursue a college degree and with dreams of playing college football. He started with a stint at the Fork Union Military Academy ’58 and then headed to Arizona State University where he would join the first ASU football team of the legendary college coach Frank Kush. But after two years and the realization that ASU was just not the place for him, Sugar heeded the advice of his brother Bob, then playing football at Michigan State University, and decided to transfer to NMU in 1959... and that’s where this legacy begins.

For the next few years, Sugar, my dad, and the many great Northern people of the ’60s (students, faculty, administration, and residents of Marquette) formed hundreds of stories that would later be passed down to my brothers, sister and me, including stories of our dad hitchhiking from Marquette to Johnstown to visit his family and girlfriend (later our mother), stories of college pranks, and great athletic events like the 1962 ’Cats beating Lenoir-Rhyne College in the first NMU playoff victory.

After he graduated from NMU in 1963 (by the way, he jokes it only took him four terms to graduate: Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon), he and my mother, Bernice,



moved to L’Anse, where their four children were born, and soon after moved to Iron Mountain. So I grew up in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, quite close to NMU, with a father who had thoroughly enjoyed the NMU experience and continued it with us. I have many childhood memories of Northern, including Saturday trips to Memorial Field to watch the Wildcats play football, to Hedgcock to watch the basketball ’Cats, and then to Lakeview to catch the hockey ’Cats. I would meet my dad’s former teammates and classmates, and watch how happy they were to see each other and listen to their stories, told as if they just happened the week before. And I was entertained beyond that which any comedian could accomplish. I fondly remember the 1975 national championship in football, idolizing the players of that time, and thinking about someday being able to be part of a national championship.



Sugar and Rick Popp enjoying one of many Memorial Field moments together. Above, a recent photo of Rick.

So 24 years after the Pennsylvanian found his way to NMU, I took a much more direct route in 1983: 90 miles from Iron Mountain to Marquette. I, too, was in search of a college education and the chance to play college football. And with that, I added a few more NMU memories. There were even more Saturday trips to Memorial Field, but this time I was wearing the olive green and old gold once worn by my dad. I had the chance to be part of one of the greatest NMU football teams ever, playing in the 1987 NCAA II national play-offs and reaching the semifinals. I cherish the memories of playing with great athletes, even with some of my best friends from childhood—and knowing that my dad was always pulling for me and the Wildcats.

Since my graduation, my dad and I have shared several great reunions at Homecoming and other alumni events. I, too, meet up with

my old teammates, and tell the same stories over and over as if they happened the prior week, laughing as hard each time the story is told—and it's extra special when my dad is there in the middle of the gang. Together, we have grown to know and respect many former NMU athletes and other alumni; from my dad's era of the '60s, through the time of our family visits to NMU in the '70s, to my own NMU experience in the '80s, and recently at NMU alumni activities.

Now I'm living in Mexico City and my dad is in Iron Mountain. But no matter how far apart we began our journey to NMU, nor how far apart we live today, we know that we'll always share a special father-and-son relationship; one that includes a unique bond, forged in part by the one and only "Northern experience."

When my dad asked me to write this story for both of us, he wanted me to include the thrills he had in bringing his brothers and sisters to NMU when my brothers, sister and I were kids, and the greater thrill of being able to go together to so many great alumni events. He also wrote, "...the greatest thing for me is that having you go to NMU has given me two chances to go through the same college in a lifetime. Can you imagine how many pre-game 'jitters' that was for me?" And he said, "You and I will be college alumni friends forever. Back in my day, I thought I would never get out of college with a degree. Now I will never get out of there with you around!"

And neither of us is complaining about that.

—Rick Popp '88 BS, '90 MPA

Rick Popp is the human resources director for Ford of Mexico.

Jenny Ryan



WILDCAT SKIERS MAKE NCAA HISTORY

Three members of the women's cross country team made history in March in New Hampshire. They became the first group of women skiers from one school to sweep two events in an NCAA Championship. The photo shows Lindsay Williams atop the podium after the 5K freestyle race. She's joined by teammates Morgan Smyth (right) and Lindsey Weier (left), who finished second and third, respectively. In the 15K classic race, Weier crossed the line first, followed by Williams and Smyth.

"This is unbelievable," said Coach **Sten Fjeldheim '86 BS, '93 MA**. "These women have trained so hard and so well. They are just so professional about it. They balance their academics and athletics so well. As a coach, this is just something that you dream about and it is something that may never happen in a coach's lifetime. I have them to thank for it."

END IS NEAR FOR PEIF POOL

The 31-year-old PEIF pool is nearing the end of its lifespan. An estimated \$2 million would be required to renovate, which isn't feasible in the current economic climate. But the pool will stay open as long as it poses no risk to users.

The Division II swimming and diving team has been guaranteed one more competitive season, but has been warned that its future beyond that depends on the pool.

"This is worrisome from a revenue standpoint because aquatic programs are a major part of our operation," said Brian Gaudreau of Intercollegiate Athletics and Recreational Sports. "It might also impact students who visit campus. Recreational facilities can be a big draw. Even if students never use them, they want to know that those options are available."