

George Welsh, Navy football legend, dead at age 85



George Welsh, one of the most legendary figures in Navy football history, died Jan. 2, 2019 in Charlottesville, Virginia, at age 85. Welsh was a standout player at Navy who returned to his alma mater as head coach and achieved great success.



By **Bill Wagner**
bwagner@capgaznews.com

JANUARY 4, 2019, 12:45 PM

George Welsh, one of the most legendary figures in Navy football history, died Wednesday in Charlottesville, Virginia, at age 85. His death was announced on Friday morning by the University of Virginia athletic department with a press release stating he “passed peacefully in the presence of his family.”

Welsh was a standout player at Navy who returned to his alma mater as head coach and achieved great success.

A native of Coaldale, Pennsylvania, Welsh was a three-year letterman as a quarterback for Navy from 1953-55. He was starting quarterback for the 1954 contingent that was famously known as the “Team Named Desire.”

That squad, led by renowned head coach Eddie Erdelatz, compiled an 8-2 record and upset Southeastern Conference champion Mississippi in the Sugar Bowl. Welsh was named first team All-American and finished third in voting for [the Heisman Trophy](#) as a senior after leading the country in passing and total offense.

In two seasons as the starting quarterback at Navy, Welsh passed for 2,411 yards and 20 touchdowns while directing teams that compiled an overall record of 18-7-3. The 162-pound field general set eight school records as a senior with teammates calling him the “heart and soul” of the Midshipmen in 1954 and '55.

After graduating from the Naval Academy in 1956, Welsh served eight years on active duty and reached the rank of lieutenant. He was an assistant at Navy under head coach Wayne Hardin in 1960 and 1961 while an officer in the Navy.

Welsh transitioned into a career as a college football coach as an assistant at Penn State under Rip Engle and Joe Paterno from 1963-1972. He was brought back to Navy by Athletic Director James “Bo” Coppedge to revive a program that had fallen on tough times.

Coppedge had considered Welsh as a candidate in 1969 before hiring Rick Forzano as head coach instead. He would not make the same mistake again after Forzano left to become an assistant with the Detroit Lions.

Navy had managed only two winning seasons since going 9-3 under the direction of Wayne Hardin when future Adm. Tom Lynch was captain in 1963. There were six straight losing seasons during the tenures of Forzano and predecessor Bill Elias as the emergence of professional football and the ongoing Vietnam War made it very difficult to recruit.

After going 4-7 in his first year, Welsh directed a dramatic turnaround that produced a 7-4 record in 1975 when future College Football Hall of Famer Chet Moeller was the defensive captain. Alumni and fans were ecstatic about the sudden change in fortunes, but there would be two more losing seasons before Welsh really got things going.

Navy broke through in 1978, finishing 9-3 and earning a berth in the Holiday Bowl. It was the first postseason appearance since 1964 for Navy, which beat Brigham Young behind the play of offensive captain Phil McConkey.

“It took five years to get my head above water,” Welsh told William Gildea of *The Washington Post* during a 1989 interview for a retrospective story to commemorate his 100th career coaching victory.

The Midshipmen went 33-15-1 with three bowl berths during the final four years of the Welsh era. Naturally, administrators around the college football world took note of what Welsh had done to restore Navy to national prominence.

Welsh was ultimately lured away from his alma mater by the opportunity to coach in the Atlantic Coast Conference for Virginia, which fielded one of the least successful programs in Division I at the time. The Cavaliers had compiled a 33-121-11 record within the ACC and never been to a bowl when Athletic Director George Schultz decided to address the sad situation.

Virginia hired Welsh in December 1981 and he informed the Navy players he would be leaving during a meeting in Ricketts Hall at a time when the team was preparing for the upcoming [Liberty Bowl](#).

Welsh’s 55 victories surpassed Erdelatz’s 50 as the most in Navy football history at the time. He has since been overtaken by Ken Niumatalolo, who owns an 87-58 record in 11 seasons at the helm.

“Our thoughts and prayers go out to the Welsh family during this difficult time,” Niumatalolo said in a statement. “George Welsh is a legend in the coaching profession for what he was able to accomplish at two of the top academic institutions in the country. To become the all-time winningest coach at two different schools is simply amazing and should be remembered as one of the great achievements in the history of college football.”

Welsh wound up transforming Virginia football from obscurity into a perennial powerhouse, culminating with the program being ranked No. 1 nationally in 1990. He compiled a 134-86-3 record in 19 seasons at Virginia, retiring as the winningest coach in ACC history.

Welsh maintained an office at Virginia’s University Hall after his retirement and remained a resident of Charlottesville. Despite having fallen into poor health in recent years, he still made regular visits and phone calls to the athletic department.

“I am saddened to hear that Coach Welsh passed away this week,” current Virginia head coach Bronco Mendenhall tweeted Friday morning. “My condolences go out to his family. He was a true pioneer for UVA football and provided the model of success we are working hard to replicate. We will miss his frequent visits to the football offices.”

Welsh received the prestigious Bobby Dodd Award as the national Coach of the Year in 1991. He was named ACC Coach of the Year four times — 1983, 1984, 1991 and 1995.

Welsh's 28-year record as a head coach was 189-132-4 and included 15 bowl appearances. That career win total ranked 24th in Division I history at the time of his retirement.

Welsh was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame as a head coach in 2004. He is survived by four children — sons Duffy, Matt and Adam and daughter Kate.

twitter.com/BWagner_CapGaz

Copyright © 2019, Capital Gazette, a Baltimore Sun Media Group publication | [Privacy Policy](#)

This 'attr(data-c-typename)' is related to: [Football](#), [Obituaries](#)

Missing comments? We've turned off comments across Capital Gazette while we review our commenting platform and consider ways to improve the system. If you purchased points through the Solid Opinion platform and would like a refund, please let us know at circsupport@tronc.com.