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Red Wave remembers Jim Sweeney, 'father of Bulldog Stadium'

Like many Saturday afternoons in the last 30 years at Fresno State, Bulldog Stadium was bathed in sunshine today – what gridiron fans like to call “perfect football weather.” It wasn’t for a football

game — but to honor a football coach — that a solid contingent of the storied Red Wave assembled to celebrate the life of Jim Sweeney.

More than 1,500 people came to remember his dedication and service to the university. A dedication that led to the building of the stadium on Cedar and Barstow Avenues and more importantly, as multiple speakers recounted on Saturday, to the building of countless young men's lives.

James Joseph "Jim" Sweeney was memorialized on the field that bears his name: just beyond the north end zone is stenciled in bold white letters: JIM SWEENEY FIELD.

Coach Sweeney died Feb. 8 in Fresno at the age of 83.

He coached the 'Dogs twice totaling 19 years with a 143-75-3 record that included eight league titles and five bowl wins, including one over USC in the 1992 Freedom Bowl that Red Wavers still love to brag about today. In fact, the scoreboard on the south end of the stadium on Saturday memorialized that score: Bulldogs-24; USC-7.

The 143 victories make Coach Sweeney Fresno State's all-time wins leader. In his 32 seasons as a head coach he finished with 200 wins.

The Sweeney family, with the aid of the university, welcomed the public to the celebration that included numerous former players and coaches from across the nation in the stadium seats.

Twelve speakers – including many who Coach Sweeney guided in their college days, such as son Kevin Sweeney, Super Bowl quarterback Trent Dilfer and NFL star Lorenzo Neal – took the stage to voice their accolades for him. Coach Sweeney, they said, was "a chance-taker" who gave young men second and third chances, a "truth-teller," and a "motivator" whose fondness for citing inspiring quotes helped turn boys into men.

They executed eulogies that equaled game-winning touchdown drives or goal-line stands that many of them pulled off on that very field so many Saturday afternoons and evenings past under Coach Sweeney's stewardship.

"It is so appropriate to celebrate Coach Sweeney's life on this field," said Dilfer, who led the Baltimore Ravens to the 2001 Super Bowl title and is now an ESPN analyst. He called Sweeney a truth teller

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saying, "it wasn't always fuzzy and warm" as he took "broken boys and turned them into men."

"His quotes helped us through dark moments," Dilfer said. "He taught us that failure was just a temporary setback."

Jethro Franklin, former Bulldog player who is now a USC coach, hailed the occasion as "truly a day of celebration" and also cited the values Sweeney instilled in players and coaches.

"I live by his quotes every day," Franklin said. "I raised my brothers and sisters – some older than me – on those quotes. I raised my children on those quotes. This week I used them to motivate a young man to do something he didn't want to do."

Neal said Sweeney will never be forgotten.

"We're here today not because of football but because he impacted our lives," said the former running back who starred in the NFL.

Fresno State Athletic Director Thomas Boeh welcomed the Red Wave to a "distinct opportunity to honor, celebrate and enjoy the extraordinary life of Coach Jim Sweeney with "a unique combination of photographs, videos and personal recollections and thoughts from family, friends and protégés."

Fresno State President John D. Welty praised Sweeney for dreaming and achieving the impossible and "making a difference, your way."

Other speakers included Tim DeRuyter, Fresno State's current head football coach; Jan Stenerud, former player and NFL Hall of Famer; Joe Tiller, former player and former Purdue head coach; Sam Jankovich, former coach, athletic director and NFL executive; and Bill Moos, former player and current Washington State athletics director.

Mr. Sweeney's daughter, Peg, and son, Kevin, also a former Bulldogs player and NFL quarterback, recalled the life they lived as a coach's children, including inspiring him to pen an early Bulldog fight song or the reality of sharing their dad with hundreds of other youngsters.

Fresno Pastor Brad Bell, who played for Sweeney from 1990-93, served as master of ceremonies today and closed the ceremony by citing the coach's popular Red Wave mantra, "Bulldog born,

Bulldog bred, gonna be a Bulldog till the day I'm dead."

Leaving the stadium, longtime Bulldog booster Elmer "Bud" Richter, who was instrumental in helping raise funds for the stadium, said: "Today's memorial showed that the Bulldog Spirit will live long in Central California and anywhere Fresno State fans, players and coaches go, thanks to Coach Sweeney."

Mr. Sweeney coached the Bulldogs twice – first in 1976-77, when the team played its home games at Fresno City College's Radcliffe Stadium. He left for two years for the NFL and coached with the St. Louis Cardinals and Oakland Raiders. He returned to Fresno State in 1980 as Bulldog Stadium neared completion and coached the Dogs' first game there, a 21-14 win over Montana State to close that season. He retired following the 1996 season.

Two signature wins for Sweeney are the California Bowl II on Dec. 12, 1982 – a thrilling 28-27 comeback win over Bowling Green that injected the Valley with "Red Wave Fever" that has not wavered since – and the Freedom Bowl victory over USC 10 years later that helped cement that fervor.

Sweeney started his coaching career as an assistant at the high school he attended in Butte, Montana, before also coaching at Butte Central, Montana State and Washington State.

He married his high school sweetheart, Lucille "Cile" Carollo and they raised a family of six girls, Katherine "Peg," Sheila, Mary Lou, Carol, Patty and Coleen; and three boys, Jim, Dan and Kevin. Coleen died at 20 months and Patty Negrete died of cancer in 2002.

Lucille Sweeney passed away in 1988. Jim married June Cross in 1989. Retirement was spent traveling, playing golf and watching grandchildren excel athletically at Clovis West.

Kevin Sweeney, the youngest of the clan, presented a football "Ball of Life" to June Sweeney near the end of the ceremony.

Coach Sweeney is survived by his wife, June; and in addition to his children, June's three children, Kevin Morrow, Krista Starnes and Kim Klohs; 16 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

Donations may be made in his honor to the [Bulldog Foundation](#) or [Saint Agnes Hospice Care](#).

Photo by University Communications student-intern James Ramirez

By [Tom Uribes](#) | February 16th, 2013 | Categories: [PRESS RELEASES](#) | Tags: [bulldogs](#), [community](#), [in memory](#), [memorial](#) | [2 Comments](#)

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