

Heart attack on 1st day of practice claims Lions' coach

By ED WRIGHT
STAFF WRITER

Ron Bradley's passion for coaching youth football was never more evident than it was on a cold, rainy October night last fall.

Ron had just walked in the door following a two-hour practice on a miserable night," Bradley's wife, Debby, said. "He was drenched and covered from head to toe in mud. But he looked at me, smiled, threw up his arms and shouted, 'Man, I love football!'"

Bradley, a popular veteran coach for the Canton Lions Junior Football Club for 17 years, collapsed and died Monday afternoon of heart failure, just 15 minutes into his team's season-opening practice at Heritage Park. He was 51.

"He was a sick man, but he was so excited about coaching this season," Debby Bradley said. "It gives me some peace of mind knowing he died on the football field, doing something he loved."

"I also have peace of mind knowing that everything possible was done to save him. His heart just gave out."

Within seconds of Bradley's collapse, the Lions' team trainer administered CPR. However, Bradley's heart, which had been weakened in recent months by a virus, did not respond.

Lions' assistant coach Doug Prater said Bradley's strong rapport with his players was built on the coach's even-keeled approach.

"Ron earned his players' respect by talking to them in a level voice, not by

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yelling or acting like a tyrant," said Prater, who will take over the head coaching duties for the 2001 season.

"I learned more about coaching young men from Ron in a year and a half than I did from all the coaching clinics I've attended."

"The thing I'll remember most about Ron was his demeanor. Last year was my first with the Lions. We only had 18 or 19 kids out for the team, and only six of them were returning players."

"I was a little nervous about the upcoming season, but Ron calmly told me, 'We have a challenge ahead of us, but we're going to work together and get

the most we can out of this team.' Well, we ended up going 6-3 and falling just one game short of the Super Bowl. He was a great coach, a great man."

Jim Singleton, who served as a unit director for the Lions' club for over 10 years, said Bradley was a successful coach because "he treated every one of his players like they were his own son."

"You will never meet a coach who was more well-liked than Ron Bradley," Singleton said. "I never heard him say a harsh word to a player in all the years I worked with him. He was probably the best coach the Lions have ever had, too. He got the most out of his teams."

Singleton said Bradley proved his love for the game when he continued to coach even after his sons, Justin and

Adam, left the Lions' program when they moved on to high school football.

"When I was unit director, I had a lot of dads approach me and say they wanted to coach," Singleton said. "I told them, 'As long as Ron wants to coach, he's the coach.'"

"He wanted to win more than any body, but the most important thing to Ron was teaching the kids the right way and the safe way to play football."

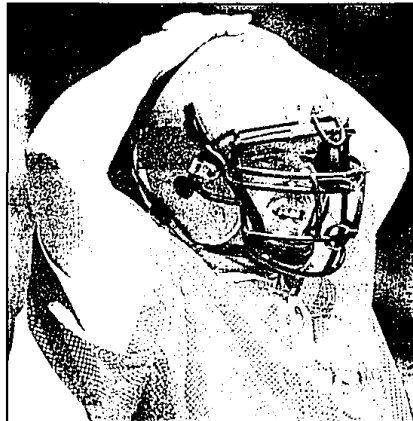
Prior to Tuesday's practice, two professional counselors and a paramedic talked to the Lions' players and their parents about the tragedy that unfolded before their eyes Monday afternoon.

Along with his wife and two sons, Bradley is survived by a daughter, Mandy.

Trojan Pride: Tim Shaw (from left to right), Adam Carpenter and Steve Meadows lead the final lap on the first day of football practice for Clarenceville High School, which won the Metro Conference crown last year and qualified again for the state play-offs.



STAFF PHOTO BY TOM HAWLEY



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Pre-workout preparation: Bill Nesbitt loosens up before a Clarenceville practice, although it didn't take much effort to break a sweat on the first day of practice.

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(because of the heat.)"

"We didn't do that much different, except they didn't have helmets on today," said Plymouth Canton coach Tim Baechler. "We have regularly-scheduled drink breaks and make sure the all the kids get enough to drink."

Players practiced only in shorts, T-shirts and helmets from Monday through yesterday, as mandated by Michigan High School Athletic Association rules. Full pads and full contact

were allowed today for the first time and, mercifully, the weather is supposed to start breaking too, with a cold front moving in and temperatures dropping.

"We'll see what kind of toll it takes as the week goes on if there's no relief," said North Farmington coach Rich Burrell, "especially when we put the pads on Thursday."

But the weather didn't do the players any favors for the first part of the week, so it was up to

the coaches and trainers to do what they could.

"(Monday) was one of the hotter days, but there was a breeze and it was not as bad," said Clarenceville coach Greg Hudkins. "We take water every 15 minutes or anytime we finish an individual or group drill."

Carter's squad adjusted its sprints and grouped the players according to weight, because "it doesn't make sense to have big kids running with smaller and faster guys." Several coaches gave breaks at least every 15 minutes, if not sooner.

"We had two kids who were winded; we got them in the shade right away and got water to them," said Burrell. "We told the kids 'don't be a hero. If you need some water it's no big deal. The coaches aren't going to say anything to you.'"

St. Agatha coach Bernie McMahon scheduled a 2½-hour practice on Monday and "of that, 40 minutes were scheduled for water breaks." On the team's first break to head to the three Gatorade coolers, there was a problem. They had plenty of cool water, but the cups were left inside the school - a mistake quickly rectified.

Several school used coolers for the water, while others - such as Catholic Central and Redford Union - had hoses running for players to use. Nearly every coach had an assistant go with the players to make sure they drank.

"We got the hottest and the coolest part of the day, but we've got lots of water," said Franklin coach Chris Kolbert. "The kids who couldn't practice (Monday) served as waterboys. They were

going around the field and giving water to anybody who needed it."

Franklin will also monitor its players before and after practice to make sure no one has a dramatic weight loss and gains back most of the water weight lost.

"We don't need kids dropping from the heat," said Garden City coach Mike Salter. "Water doesn't hurt; if we need to schedule more, we schedule more."

Parental concern has also increased.

"I can't tell you how many phone calls I've had from parents this week worrying about this," said Garden City trainer Cindy Brandau. "They want to be sure we're doing enough."

While giving players plenty of water breaks is a wise thing to do, the wiser thing is to make sure they start early.

"It isn't so much what they

drink now," said Baechler. "We give them drinks whenever they want it. But if a kid is feeling sick, it will be too late to hydrate himself. I wouldn't ever want to coach anymore if someone dropped over and died on us."

Burrell sent his seniors a subtle message Sunday when they were guests at his house.

"We didn't have any pop," he said. "We just had water, lemonade and Gatorade. We're trying to set a good example."

"What they do when they go home is more important. They need to rest in a cool environment instead of going out and playing basketball in the heat."

"They need to get in the habit of drinking more water than they're used to. They can't do it the day of competition. It starts the day before that and the day before that."

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