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AIA FEATURE STORY By: Don Ketchum

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## FOOTBALL COACHING LEGEND BILL SAUNDERS TO BE HONORED AT MEMORIAL

PHOENIX, AZ (January 10, 2008) – Bill Saunders was an Arizonan, through and through.

He loved the state, loved his family and loved football.

He was a star quarterback at Phoenix Union High, played at Arizona State and later returned to his high school alma mater as head coach. He earned 117 career victories at Coolidge, Phoenix Union and Phoenix Camelback before retiring in 1985, and drew respect from his colleagues across the state.

Saunders died on Dec. 30 at the age of 83, and will be remembered at a service at 11 a.m. on Saturday, Jan. 17, at the Northridge Community Church in Cave Creek, 6363 E. Dynamite.

Saunders is survived by his wife, Porkie, two daughters, a son and eight grandchildren.

One of Saunders' daughters, Lynne Petrucci, is the principal at Scottsdale Christian Academy (high school) in northeast Phoenix. It was because of his strong influence that she entered the education field.

"I knew from a very young age that I wanted to be just like my dad," said Petrucci, who also was a coach for a time.

"I saw how much the kids loved him, how he treated people and the response he got back. He had a real passion for what he was doing. I think he had a huge impact on them. He wanted to work with them on a positive note, give them something that they could take with them forever."

She said she enjoyed going to Phoenix Union games and telling people, "I'm Coach Saunders' daughter."

The common thread throughout Saunders' career was Xs and Os.

Petrucci recalled her father dissecting game films in her brother's bedroom because it did not have windows and he could see more clearly.

Saunders' Xs and Os had an influence on a young protégé named Jesse Parker, who joined Saunders at Phoenix Union in 1968 as the junior-varsity coach. Parker later became the head coach at Phoenix Camelback, taking Saunders with him as an assistant. And when Parker became head coach at a new school in Mesa, Mountain View, Saunders succeeded him as Camelback's head coach.

"He was a real Xs and Os guy," said Parker, who stepped down as Gilbert High head coach after the 2008 season and has 309 career victories. "He really had a knack for understanding the game from a strategy standpoint. He kept Xs and Os in notebooks, making sure to draw perfect circles."

Also in the 1960s, Saunders took a liking to a sports reporter, Sam Payne, who joined the Phoenix Gazette staff. Though Payne came from his native Texas, a football hotbed, Saunders taught him a thing or two.

“He was one of the most honest, decent people I ever knew, a good friend,” Payne said. “On Fridays, even though he would have a game later in the day, we often would have lunch. He taught me quite a few things about Xs and Os.”

Saunders coached NFL players Fred Carr and Larry Gordon at Phoenix Union, as well as a halfback-turned basketball player, Rudy White, who went on to play in the NBA. They helped him earn induction into the National Football Foundation Hall of Fame.

“He taught me a great deal,” Parker said. “He said that football is like a chess game. The other guy makes a move and then you counter it.

“We were a good combination. I was a younger guy, more of a rock ‘em, sock ‘em guy, provided discipline, and he was a strategy guy. He supported me. He was very loyal. He was low-key, but had a very good sense of humor.”

Saunders even would help Parker on occasion at a Mountain View summer football camp in northern Arizona, near Holbrook.

“He was in mid-50s by then, but he was out there working with the quarterbacks, throwing the ball,” Parker said. “But he also knew how to punt. He was a good punter, a left-footer. Punting is not easy, but he was out there showing the kids what to do.”

Parker admittedly is intense and takes losing hard, but says Saunders helped him strike more of a balance.

“He helped me in the sense of how to deal with ups and downs, helped put winning and losing in a better perspective,” Parker said. “He also taught me about calling plays from the sideline, taking advantage of defenses. My teams will likely come right at you, but he also taught me that sometimes you need to do a little “finessing” to have a chance to win.”

After he retired, Saunders maintained his home in Phoenix but spent a lot of time in the Bradshaw Mountains, the Groom Creek area near Prescott.

“As much as he loved football, he was a family guy. It meant more to him than anything,” Petrucci said. “Like those Xs and Os, he would plan out everything with vacations. He was great with the grandkids. Grandpa was their hero, and he made all of our lives so rich.”

### **Have a Story Idea:**

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