

CLAYTON N. KELLEY, 1932-2014

Teacher founded Bedford High's wrestling program

By **MARK ZABORNEY**
BLADE STAFF WRITER

TEMPERANCE — Clayton N. Kelley, a teacher and retired guidance counselor who retained the devotion of student-athletes he led decades ago as founding coach of Bedford High School's acclaimed wrestling program, died Wednesday in St. Joseph Mercy Ann Arbor in Ypsilanti, Mich. He was 81.



Kelley

Mr. Kelley of Westland, Mich., developed complications during heart bypass surgery, said Bill Colver, his son-in-law.

In 2011, he was inducted into the Bedford High School Alumni Association's hall of fame.

In 1958, he'd just graduated from Bowling Green State University when Bedford hired him, in part because of his willingness to start a wrestling program, he told The Blade in 2004. He taught science and math and taught himself a sport he knew little about. He was able to stay at least a week ahead of the wrestling team.

"It was like teaching a new subject and reading and doing the lessons just ahead of the class," Mr. Kelley told The Blade. "I just learned it from books and from sending the kids out there and wrestling."

Another early challenge was scheduling meets. Bedford had the only active wrestling team in Monroe County and its first season went 1-1, beating Rossford, but losing to Adrian.

"It was very tough to start. We always went against the toughest teams and learned as we went. We lost a lot, but we sure learned. And we had fun," Mr. Kelley said in 2004.

By his departure in 1965, Mr. Kelley had overseen nine conference champions, nine state qualifiers, and a state placer. Bedford High has become known since for its state championship wrestling teams and championship wrestlers.

"That's the biggest thing: He got it going. He got it started," said Bill Regnier, who wrestled against him as a Whitmer High School student and who, as a fresh BGSU grad, succeeded

him as Bedford's coach.

"He was a good person, and he was good to compete against too," said Mr. Regnier, the wrestling coach for 30 years, who retired about four years ago as Bedford athletic director.

In 1964, Tom Miller was an 85-pound freshman.

"When you're 85 pounds, you can't go out for football and basketball. He took me under his wing and gave me confidence," Mr. Miller said. "He changed my life, Coach Kelley.

"He was honest and taught us hard work. He took farm boys and turned us into winners," said Mr. Miller, a conference champion wrestler. "That's the main thing about Coach Kelley. We just loved him and didn't let him down."

Wrestlers stayed in touch with him through the years, and he attended team reunions.

He left Bedford for Garden City, Mich., where he taught physical education, science, and math in the high school and coached high school track and middle school football.

After receiving a master's degree from Eastern Michigan University, he closed his career as a guidance counselor at Garden City High, retiring at age 60.

He was born Nov. 21, 1932, to Clara and Clayton Kelley and was a graduate of Napoleon High School. He started his college career at Valparaiso University before service in the Marines. He was stationed in Japan.

He attended and volunteered at St. Matthew Lutheran Church in Westland.

"That's how he brought us up, going to church," his daughter Jane said.

Surviving are his wife, Ruth Kelley, whom he married in June, 1956; daughters Jane Colver and Diane Kelley, and two grandchildren.

Services will be at 11 a.m. today in St. Matthew Lutheran Church, Westland, where the body will be after 10 a.m. Arrangements are by the Vermeulen-Sajewski Funeral Home, Westland. The family suggests tributes to the church.

Contact Mark Zaborney at:
mzaborney@theblade.com
or 419-724-6182.