

This photo of the 1939 Norton Community High School football team is on display at the Norton County Museum but without identification. A number of Norton residents spent their time helping identify the different players and coach. If you wish to fill in the blanks or correct a name, notify Dick Boyd at the Telegram. Pictured are from left, front row: Jack Ward, Edward "Bus" Sanderson, Ben Donovan, Bob Gor-

don, unidentified, Lowell Bryant, Kenneth Grabast; second row: Richard McNeilley, Leon Stevenson, Iril Colip, Gene Perdue, Lowell Ward, Don Lunney, Forrest Roeder, unidentified, Bill Hixon, Chick Hixon; back row: Dewey Craig, Jack Schulze, Wayne Gallentine, unidentified, unidentified, Gaylord Jones, Don Bortz, Don Beaty, unidentified, Seth Antrim, Ward Smiley, Coach Dudley Graham.

# Norton man brings back memories of former Blue Jay football coaches

By Jack Ward  
class of 1942

While listening to one of the Norton football games this season, I thought of all the Blue Jay coaches since 1930 to the present time, a span of nearly 75 years.

Norton has a rich, winning tradition in high school football and has had some outstanding coaches.

My thoughts began with Carl Peterson, an All-American center at Nebraska, who was the Blue Jay mentor in the early 30s. He lived at my uncle Joe Ward's home so my cousin, Bruce Ward, and I got to be the water boys.

Norton had some great teams under Coach Peterson.

The most notable Blue Jay gridder to play for Coach Peterson was Harold Brill. He went on to play football at Wichita State and then for the Detroit Lions and Los Angeles Rams in the National Football League.

Harold was elected to the Wichita State Sports Hall of Fame. After his playing days, he returned to Wichita and umpired state and national semi-pro baseball tournaments. He worked for Cessna for years.

Another outstanding Norton football player was Swede Nordstrom, who played in the mid-30s. He was a three-year starter at center for Kansas State and was also Big 6 golf champion three times while at K-State. Later, he was chief executive officer of General Mills in Minneapolis, Minn. After retirement he was a

Florida state golf seniors champion.

Following Coach Peterson, Joe Toman was the head coach in Norton. He was a football letterman at Nebraska and NCAA wrestler. Coach Crawford followed him as coach of the Blue Jays.

Floyd Stephens, a graduate of Fort Hay State College, took over the football reins in the late 30s. A football letterman and outstanding track sprinter in college, he was a great motivator. He also coached wrestling and track. Under his guidance, Norton won league and regional titles in track in 1940, 1941 and 1942.

Stephens served as an officer in the Army Artillery in World War II. After the war, he coached at Phillipsburg. Later, he moved to Selma, Calif., where he was a school administrator. He was married to Dorothy Sproul, a niece of the late Alice Foley. He died in 1997.

Dudley Graham took over football coaching duties from Coach Stephens. He was a graduate of Kearney State in Nebraska. His brother Dode Graham coached at Phillipsburg at the same time. The rivalry was intense. After the war, Dudley returned to Hastings and operated the family gasoline and oil equipment business.

Cecil Dryer came to Norton to coach in the fall of 1941. Norton won the Northwest Kansas League football title his first year. Cecil had been an outstanding full-back at Emporia State and a three-

time shot put champion in the Kansas College Conference. The legendary Steve Owens flew to Emporia to sign Cecil to play for the New York Giants but, he chose a career in coaching and teaching instead.

Mr. Gerald Travis took over the coaching duties during the war years. He was assisted by Leonard Bird. The 1945 Norton football team had an undefeated season.

After the war, Coach Dryer returned to Norton. Later, he retired as athletic director and principal of the Great Bend schools. When Coach Dryer returned to Norton, he was assisted by Oran Burns.

Burns was a member of the 1934 Kansas State Big 6 football championship team. Later, he coached basketball at Norton and the Blue Jays won the state championship in 1951. Norton won 92 percent of their games while he was coaching basketball.

Coach Burns returned to military service during the Korean War. He retired from the military as a colonel and died while living in Michigan.

Harold "Lefty" Van Pelt followed Coach Dryer and led the 1949 and 1950 Blue Jays. He was a graduate of Oberlin High School and was a three-sport letterman at Kansas Wesleyan.

He assisted Coach Burns when Norton won the state basketball championship in 1951. Lefty played basketball under Gene Johnson, the inventor of the full court zone press and the Blue Jays became adept at this defense.

Later, Lefty was a coach in the Wellington school system. He also played baseball for the Norton Red Sox.

Don Ewen, a graduate of Nebraska Wesleyan, followed Coach Van Pelt and coached the Blue Jays to an 8-1 record and Northwest Kansas League championship in his only season. He then returned as head coach of his alma mater.

Jim Barger, a graduate of Oklahoma State, followed Coach Ewen. A football and heavyweight wrestler letterman at O-State, Barger returned to his high school alma mater Wichita East after just one year at Norton. He later coached in the Colorado Springs area and his team won a state football championship there.

Kansas State graduate Warren Smith followed Coach Barger as the Norton head football coach. He coached football for four seasons and also coached basketball and track. He became a school administrator and retired in Wisconsin.

Coach Dick Johnson came to Norton in 1957. He had won 12 athletic letters at Kansas State. He coached three years here and compiled a 14-12 record. Later, he moved to Florida.

A graduate of Kearney State, J.J. "Jep" Byrum was hired as head football coach in 1960. In the 12 years, Byrum coached the Blue Jays, they compiled a 72-27-6 record, winning 69 percent.

Under Coach Byrum, the Blue Jays won the Northwest Kansas League championship in 1970 and tied for the league title in 1967.

Byrum also coached track, cross country and golf and assisted in basketball. He coached a state championship Norton golf team.

Coach Byrum, 57, died in December 1983. His widow, Alberta Byrum Slaby, still lives in Norton and is an avid Blue Jay fan.

Gary Gates, a former star football player for Sterling College, followed Byrum. He coached in 1972 and 1973 and compiled a 10-8 record. He later returned to coach football at Sterling.

Ted Stein, a graduate of Kansas Wesleyan in Salina, was coach from 1974 through 1981.

In his eight years, the teams had 50 wins and just 22 losses for a 69 percent winning record. In 1976, the Blue Jays had a perfect 9-0 record and were league champions.

Later, Coach Stein coached football at Salina Central and rebuilt their program into a winner. He lives in Salina where he is national supervisor claims adjuster for a crop insurance company.

Coach Neil Melillo, a native of Newark, N.J., followed Coach Stein. Under Coach Melillo, Norton won 94 games and lost 19 in 10 years for an 83 percent winning mark.

With Coach Melillo at the helm, Norton won state championships in 1985 and 1986. Under his guidance Norton was Mid-Continent League champion in 1982, 1985, 1990 and 1991.

The 1985 state championship team had a perfect 13-0 record and

the 1986 state championship team went 12-1. The 1982 league champions were 11-1 and the 1990 league champions were 8-1.

He is now offensive coordinator for a large high school in Texas.

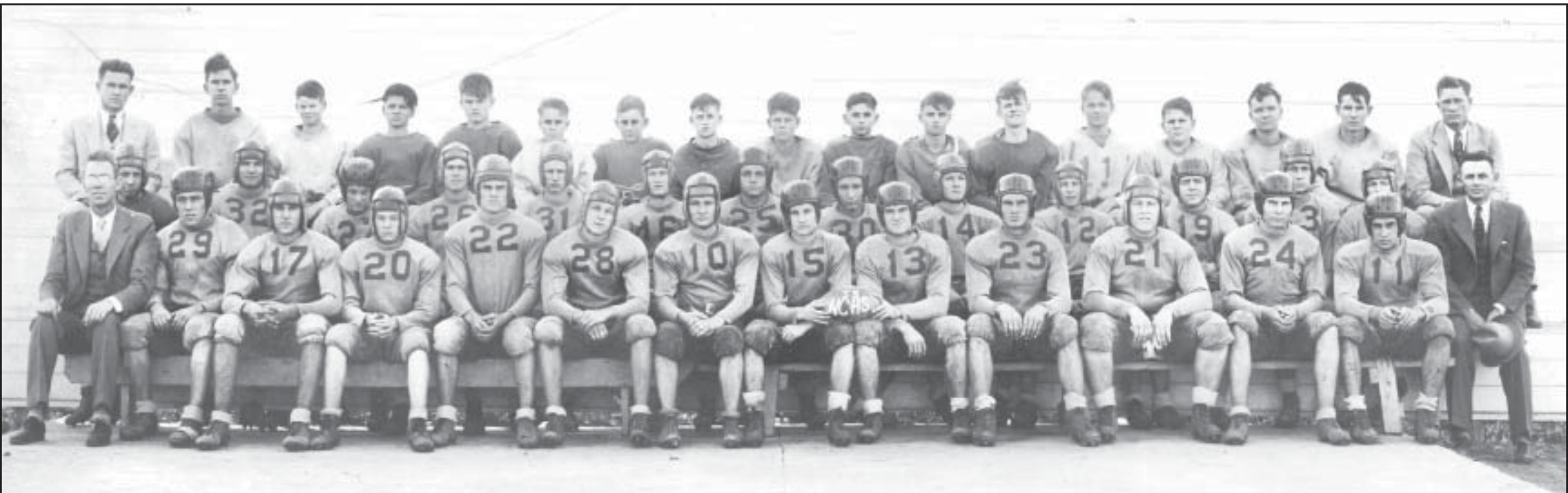
Dwight Jensen came to Norton from Mayville, N.D. He was head coach from 1992 through 1994 and his Blue Jays had a 14-14 record. He now coaches in Minnesota.

Coach Bruce Graber, a graduate of Pittsburg State and former player for the Gorillas, took over 10 seasons ago in 1995. He was a football and track letterman.

Coach Graber is carrying on the football tradition of winning. His Norton football teams are 82-19 for 81 percent wins.

Graber has also coached track for 30 years. The coach of Norton boys and girls track, he is considered to be one of the premier track coaches in Kansas and Missouri.

In closing, let us not forget our junior high football coaches and longtime high school assistant coaches including Jake Durham, Carl Neff, Kevin Jilka, Doug Reusink, the late Roger Brown, Roger Wahlmeier, Ford Farber, Keith Chandler, Dick Leger, Jim Cale, Roger Schmidt, Al Salazar, Mac Thompson, Kirk Pope, Lary Stull, Greg Schultz, Johnnie Craig, Dale Engelbert, Lucas Melvin, David Stover, Todd Fulton, Ken Mulch, Floyd Conry, Lyman Rowh, Wilbur Scheitel, Bob Allison, Arden Cronn, and Jason Jones. I hope I have not missed too many.



This photo of the 1933 Norton Community High School football team is on display at the Norton County Museum and is listed as an undefeated and untied Blue Jay grid squad. Pictured are, from left, front row: Head Coach Carl Peterson, Ernest McCormack, Leland Dixon, Grayson Murphy, Max McCormack, John Lathrop, Edsel Cook, Cy Lemond, Harold Brill, Roy Witt, Denton Garton, Lyman Van Der Wege, Johnny Hoover, Principal W.C. Nystrom; second row: Alvin Porter, Veryl Van Der

Wege, Frank Brill, Francis Sloan, Marion Robbins, Ancil Witt, Kenneth Nordstrom, Gerald Walker, Todd Spickerman, Marion King, Ned Alley, Durward Whitford; back row: Assistant Coach Bill Crawford, Bob Seeley, Jack Brooks, Tom Muir, David Taylor, Bill Vandiver, Dale Darling, Bernard Bower, Gerald Sloan, Vale Page, Gerald Page, Leo Moody, Bobby Wray, Porky Garton, Bill Muir, Don Ward, Assistant Coach Gerald Travis. - Photo donated to museum by Gerald Travis