

# 'He loved to make people feel important and special'

**Downers Grove high schools remember Jim Mizener, voice of athletics for 41 years**

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Jim Mizener was a voice for all seasons.

The lifelong Downers Grove resident provided the soundtrack to the sporting lives of two generations of student-athletes as the longtime public address announcer for Downers Grove South and Downers Grove North.

Mizener announced football, basketball, volleyball, soccer and track at the two schools over the past 41 years.

His radio-quality voice will be heard no more.

Mizener passed away Nov. 14 from COVID-19. He was 78.

"I can't believe it," Downers Grove North athletic director Denise Kavanaugh said. "We are literally in shock.

"When I got word, I sat here for two hours texting our players. He mattered that much where even the players had relationships with him. It's extremely sad."

Mizener attended Downers North and Lisle high schools. He began a 29-year teaching career at Downers South in 1965 in the industrial technology department and taught architecture at College of DuPage until recently.

Mizener's wife, Diane, also was hospitalized with COVID-19 but has since been released. Their daughters, Becky and Laurie, were star runners at Downers South. Becky finished 15th at the state cross country meet in 1987 and Laurie competed in the 1996 U.S. Olympic marathon trials.

Jim Mizener was proud of all the students in District 99. His love for them shined through in his announcing, which he began doing in 1979, and the tremendous amount of time he spent designing and curating the athletic display cases at North and South.

"He spent so much time making kids and people in the building feel special," Downers South boys soccer coach Jon Stapleton said. "The community sees him or hears his voice at a football or basketball game because he does such a wonderful job there, but they don't realize in the building all those display cases, those are things he did on his own time.

"He often wasn't paid for that stuff. He did it because he loved the school and loved to make people feel important and special.

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Photo provided by Downers Grove South High School  
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**Jon Stapleton, Downers Grove South boys soccer coach**

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Mizener's announcing résumé is impressive. He called the Prairie State Games from 1986-2002 and the Illinois High School Association girls basketball finals from 1994-1998. He was inducted into the Downers South Hall of Fame in 2005 and the Illinois Basketball Coaches Association Hall of Fame in 2012 in the Friends of the Game category.

The individual accolades humbled the selfless Mizener, who was always quick to greet reporters, coaches, students and alumni with a smile and a firm handshake. His joy came not from personal honors but in honoring the young men and women of his community, whether their efforts resulted in athletic or academic success – or they merely made the most of whatever talent they had.

Stapleton, whose father, Jon, taught alongside Mizener in the same department, saw that up close from a young age, first as a child and later as a player and coach at South.

One memory stands out.

"When I coached basketball, I

would coach the JV games at 9:30 on a Saturday morning," Stapleton said. "Mr. Mizener would be in the building doing display cases and he'd wander down to the gym and discover the game in the second quarter.

"He would set up all his equipment and just impromptu announce the second half of the game. He knew those kids wanted to hear their name over the PA. That to me symbolizes what the school meant to him."

Mizener meant a lot to the schools, and not just the students. George Davis has been a PA announcer at Downers North since 1992, starting with girls basketball games. He immediately called Mizener.

"He was kind of my mentor when I started because I didn't know anything about announcing basketball," Davis said. "I asked him all kinds of questions."

Like Stapleton, Kavanaugh attended and later coached at Downers South, where she guided the girls volleyball team to three state championships. When she became athletic director at North in 2003, one of her first

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decisions was to ask Mizener to start announcing North games.

"I said, 'Jim, I need you over here,' and he'd work with George," Kavanaugh said. "We would call him the 'Mouth of South,' but when I went to Downers North, he became our school district guy."

At North, Mizener and Davis shared announcing duties at football games. Mizener called the sophomore game while Davis served as his spotter and the two reversed roles for the varsity game. They also worked the annual Ritter Invitational track meet.

"I learned from him and we had a lot of nice times," Davis said. "I was always amazed that he was able to pull up information out of the blue sometimes. He'd sit there and say, 'The temperature at game time is so-and-so.'"

While every announcer has their own style, Mizener was unique because of his thoroughness and the delightful way he included people in the festivities. At South, he would frequently introduce the choir member who was singing the national anthem with the same enthusiasm he would the starting lineup.

"He would announce where coaches went to school," Kavanaugh said. "Nobody does that type of stuff anymore. He made it special."

Mizener has been affiliated with South since shortly after the school opened in 1964, so it's almost like he is a part of the building.

The silence will be deafening.

"When I walk in the building next week, it's going to be hard because you walk by the display cases, which were all done by him, and he's gone," Stapleton said. "It's going to be a sad moment. He meant so much to so many."

It is a cruel twist of fate that the virus that has left playing fields empty also has silenced the legendary voice that amplified the accomplishments of those who competed on them.

Kavanaugh said District 99 intends to celebrate Mizener's life with a ceremony of some kind once the pandemic ends.

In the meantime, those who knew him mourn his passing.

"It's a huge loss for our community," Kavanaugh said. "This man is the nicest man in the world. He has a special place in my heart."