

Legendary Rice teacher, baseball coach Mike Pearo dies

Alex Abrami, Burlington Free Press Published 1:25 p.m. ET Jan. 30, 2020 | Updated 6:09 p.m. ET Jan. 30, 2020

CONNECT TWEET LINKEDIN COMMENT EMAIL MORE



Buy Photo

Rice coach Mike Pearo in 2005. (Photo: Free Press file)

SOUTH BURLINGTON - Michael Pearo, one of the state's winningest baseball coaches and a history teacher for five decades at Rice Memorial High School who traveled the world and orchestrated European summer trips for hundreds of his students, died on Tuesday morning. He was 79.

"It's starting to sink in that he's no longer with us. He leaves a lasting memory," retired Rice teacher and coach John Varricchione said. "It's something he said near the end, maybe in the last two weeks ... 'It's amazing, I influenced some people in this world.'"

"He's going to be missed. He's a big part of this school," Rice athletic director Neil Brodeur said. "He is one of the Rice legends."

Funeral services for Pearo will take place at Christ the King Church in Burlington on Saturday, Feb. 15 at noon. Immediately following the service, a reception will be held at Rice, Varricchione said.



Mike Pearo poses for a picture in his classroom at Rice Memorial High School. (Photo: Courtesy of Rice Memorial High School)

Born on Nov. 3, 1940 in St. Albans, Pearo was a three-sport standout at Cathedral, Rice's predecessor, and played football and baseball at the University of Vermont before graduating in 1962.

He then was hired at Rice later that year — the dawn of a fulfilling and enriching coaching and teaching career that spanned more than 50 years and lasted until his retirement in 2013.

Pearo, who taught courses in world history, contemporary history and religions of the world, was a coach at the JV and varsity levels in baseball, basketball and football at the South Burlington school. He also introduced the field hockey program at Rice sometime in the 1970s.

"Even though I never had him as a teacher, he still taught me so much," Rice teacher Mari Goodridge Miller said. "He let me coach baseball with him for three years. Somebody coming from his generation, you wouldn't have thought he'd be in favor of that, but he was all about that.

"He wanted to have anybody who loved the sport to bring them on board and embrace them in what he had to share."

Pearo was a charter member of Rice's athletic hall of fame in 1993 and was inducted into the Vermont Principals' Association HOF in 2009. He was also the third baseball coach in Vermont history to reach 400 career wins, a feat he accomplished in his 42nd and final season in 2007.



Buy Photo

Players surround Mike Pearo after the Rice coach captured the 400th win of his career in 2007. (Photo: Free Press file)

A six-time coach of the year, Pearo guided Rice baseball to the Division I championship game twice, in 1978 and in 1999, losing both times to Brattleboro. The baseball field at Rice is named in his honor.

Brodeur and Brent Tremblay both played for Pearo in the 1980s and cited his coaching style as demanding but fair.

"He loved the game, loved the chess part of the game. He loved all the different idiosyncrasies of the game of baseball and how you can affect it with not only your talent but with your mind," said Tremblay, a teacher at Mater Christi who spent 14 seasons on Pearo's staff. "He was able to put his heart and mind into it as much as he was trying to get the best out of us as young men playing baseball."

Said Brodeur: "The thing about Mike, he was by the book and he was by the book with everybody. He didn't care if you were the best pitcher in the league, if you were the best hitter in the league — everybody was on the same standard with him.

"He dedicated his life to a lot of people. He loved to teach," Brodeur added.



[Buy Photo](#)

Rice coach Mike Pearo in 2005. (Photo: Free Press file)

Pearo also helped the basketball program at Rice, succeeding the great Bernie Cieplicki, Sr., in 1979 and led the "Little Indians," the school's nickname then, to the 1980 state crown and runner-up honors over a three-year run.

"My heart is broken, I've lost a lifelong friend," said Lloyd Hulburd, a retired Rice teacher who was hired by Pearo in 1977 and served as an assistant coach on the 1980 basketball championship team. "He was my mentor first and then became my colleague and in those late 70s and early 80s years, we became brothers."

Hulburd and Pearo would arrive at Rice at 6:30 every morning and wouldn't leave the school until 7 at night, grabbing a late dinner at Lum's Restaurant on Williston Road.

"We would sit and talk history, politics, basketball. We were very close in those early years," Hulburd said. "He was a renaissance man. People in the greater community will remember him as a coach, but he was a brilliant intellect and teacher."

"Seniors would flock to his contemporary history class, which was not a required course, just because of the power of his reputation in the building."



Buy Photo

Rice coach Mike Pearo and pitcher Jamie Merchant, right, talk during a 1998 high school baseball game. (Photo: Free Press file)

Retired Rice teacher and coach Robert "R.J." Noonan described Pearo as "an extremely hard worker who was very well-read."

"His philosophy was this: If you are a great teacher, your students will eventually know more than you do about the subject," Noonan said.

Varricchione was one of Pearo's first students in the early 60s. Pearo was Varricchione's football and baseball coach and the two became friends and colleagues when Varricchione launched his own long teaching and coaching career at Rice.

"He was a very good man who thought of giving more to others, he helped so many people, just a remarkable facet of his life," Varricchione said.

Pearo established the popular European Comparative Cultures program, a three-week, education-based trip in the summer for Rice students. Pearo later extended it as an outreach to Peru, Chile, Venezuela and Russia.

When Pearo stepped away from coaching basketball after the 1981 season, he told the Free Press he wanted to put more focus into his classroom.

His words to the Free Press in the March 24, 1981 edition were prescient:

"I don't think I've had enough time to do the things I'd like to with my students. I think I'm a good teacher now. I'd like to be a great teacher," Pearo said.