

Patrick Reusse: Augsburg owes debt to Nelson

After surviving captivity during World War II, Edor Nelson returned to Minneapolis and made a name for himself as a coach at Augsburg College.

By PATRICK REUSSE, Star Tribune
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The United States instituted a peacetime military draft for the first time in September 1940. Edor Nelson was teaching and coaching in the bustling burg of Lambert, Minn.

"My hometown was Dawson and you had to register in that county," Nelson said. "You received a number when you registered and mine was 58. And when they drew for the draft, the first number was 58.

"That made me the first guy drafted in Lac qui Parle County."

Nelson was inducted in August 1941, around his 27th birthday and also shortly after his marriage to Dorothy, the young lady he had been dating since high school.

"It didn't happen until Pearl Harbor, but we knew there was a war coming," Nelson said. "There was a song then about GIs with the line, 'I'll be back in a year.' It didn't turn out that way."

When the war started, he went through training and arrived in Europe a couple of days after D-Day as a member of the 43rd Reconnaissance Cavalry. He was assigned to Gen. George Patton's Third Army.

"On Oct. 22, there were seven of us trying to find a place to cross the Moselle River in France," he said. "The Germans came on us very fast ... like they knew we were coming."

Five of the seven Yanks were killed. Nelson, a major, and another officer he called Col. Cross were captured.

"We wound up in the POW camp in Szubin, Poland," he said. "Harold Van Avery was also in that camp. I knew he was there, but I never was able to find him for a conversation."

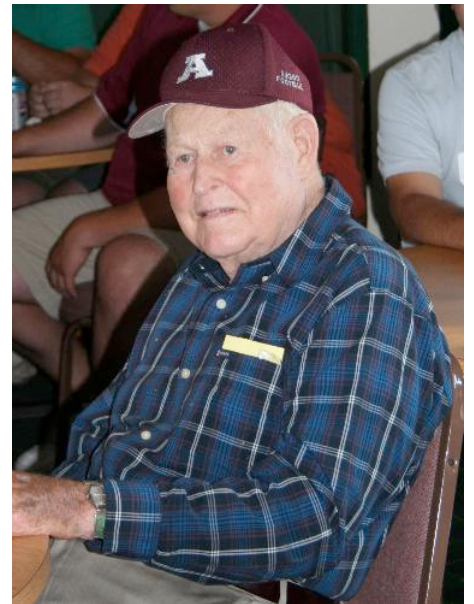
Van Avery was a Gophers backfield star for Bernie Bierman from 1937 through 1939.

"I escaped with four other guys [in April 1945], although it was more a case of just walking away," Nelson said.

Edor and his group spent the next three months making their way through Poland, into Russia and across the Black Sea.

"We spent a lot of time in boxcars and stowed away on boats," he said. "By then, we were trying to avoid the Russians more than the Germans. We wound up at Port Said in Egypt, then across the sea to a military camp in Naples."

That was the first time that Dorothy received confirmation that her husband had survived.



Edor came home and found a job as an instructor and coach at Augsburg. The Nelsons bought a home in south Minneapolis in 1946, raised two boys and still live there.

Last week, the Nelson family celebrated Dorothy's 93rd birthday, which fell on the same day as the 64th anniversary of Edor's capture.

"I don't celebrate that one," he said.

Nelson, 94, coached football for 23 seasons (1947-1969) and coached baseball for 34 seasons (1946-1979) at Augsburg. And that wasn't all:

He was the first coach of the Augsburg wrestling program from 1949 through 1963 -- a sport in which the Auggies still are a dominant force in NCAA Division III. And he brought back hockey as the coach in the winter of 1956-57.

The MIAC schedule was generally a struggle for the Auggies in the '50s and the '60s, and for good reason:

The competition included legendary coaches Lloyd Hollingsworth at Gustavus, Jake Christiansen at Concordia, Jim Malosky at Minnesota-Duluth and John Gagliardi at St. John's.

"Holly and I were very good friends," Nelson said. "I never did get close to John."

Edor permitted himself a small laugh and said: "I don't know if Gagliardi still does as much coaching, but he's still there. I remember when he came into the league [1953], there were a few of us coaches saying, 'We'll show that young whippersnapper.'"

Nelson was able to get to a couple of Augsburg home games earlier this fall -- at Edor Nelson Field. He's also connected to the MIAC by his grand-nephew, Jesse Nelson, the Concordia quarterback.

Frank Haege, the Augsburg coach, comes out of the Arena Football League. The Auggies are basically the MIAC version of Texas Tech -- throw, throw some more and see what happens.

"I started off coaching the single wing, then the split-T and then the wing-T," Nelson said. "We thought the wing-T was wide-open stuff.

"The way they play now ... I guess that spread offense is fine, if the weather's nice. I still think you need a running game this time of year in Minnesota."

Patrick Reusse can be heard weekdays on AM-1500 KSTP at 6:45 and 7:45 a.m. and 4:40 p.m. • preusse@startribune.com

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