

# U.P. Football All-Star Game History

## 2008-2023

Melvin "Matt" Syrja played in the 1949 All-Star Game as a newly graduated Negaunee High School student (#1 in the 1949 All-Star team picture). Matt received his BS degree in Secondary Education from Northern Michigan University and his MS from the University of Michigan. He taught mathematics and science at Gwinn High School for 27 years. Matt served in many different roles within the school and community, including being the math department head and coaching many different sports and extracurricular activities. Matt married Elaine Larson, from Suomi, and had 5 children, Steve, Jim, David, Dennis and Jodi. Matt passed away in 1998, but his daughter, Jodi, would make the connection which would lead to the all-star game being started again, 59 years after he played in one of the last.

Jodi attended Northern Michigan University for both undergraduate and graduate school, and was living in Madison, WI when she met her future husband, Todd Goldbeck, a native of Madison. Todd attended UW-LaCrosse, where he played football and graduated with a Doctor of Physical Therapy degree. Todd started Xcel Sports Training, a company that was training athletes and performing events called Recruiting Combines. Todd learned of Matt's involvement in the 1949 All-Star Game and that was the initial motivation for creating what would become the modern U.P. Football All-Star Game.

Xcel was performing a Combine at the Superior Dome in 2006, when the idea of having an All-Star Game just for U.P. players was suggested. A U.P. exclusive all-star game would provide many more U.P. players the opportunity to take part in the event each year. It was talked about briefly with some parents and athletes, but only as wishful thinking. At the 2007 Superior Dome Combine, the idea was again raised, but this time, it was met with an excitement not matched by the year before. Todd decided at that time that he would take on the task of organizing the game for the following year.

The game pitted East vs. West, for the first 7 years (2008-2014). In 2015, the game switched to a North vs South format to create new player and coach combinations. In 2017, for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the players were selected by the coaches using a "fantasy-style" draft, and that selection method has continued since, with the Black Team playing against the Red Team. The 2020 game had to be cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but the game came back in 2021. Todd decided that 2023 would be his last as organizer of the event, so he could spend more time training and following his son, Tanner, through all of his own sports activities.

