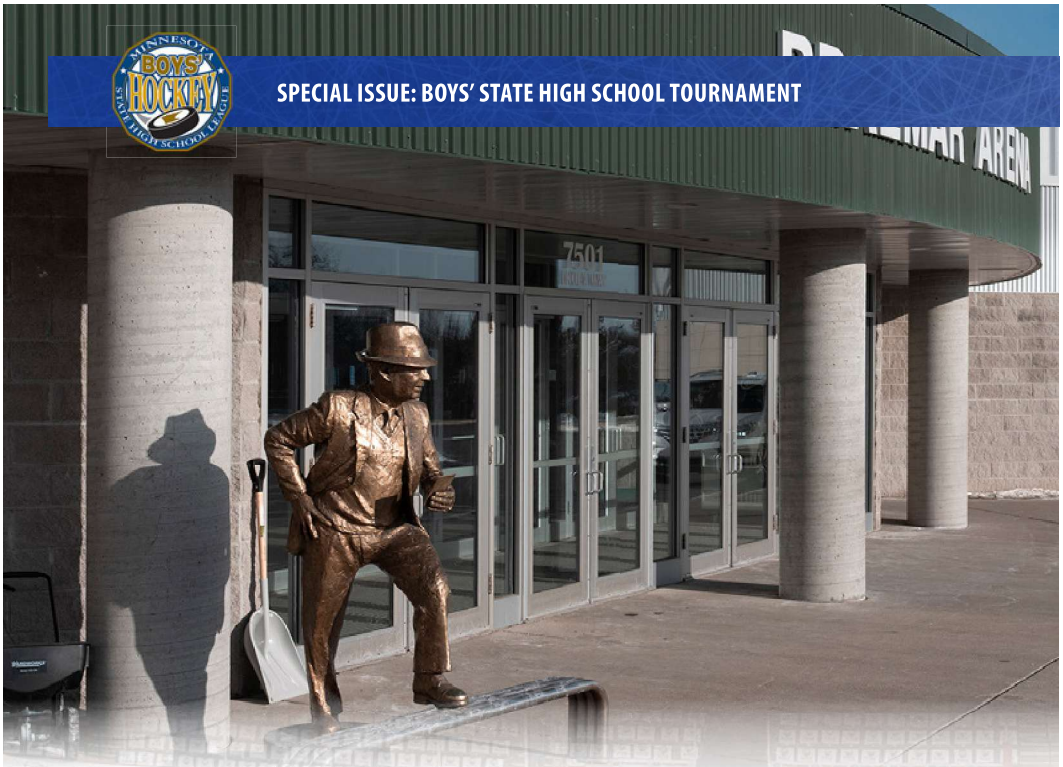

The Willard Ikola statue outside Braemar Arena in Edina.
Rick Olson / MHM

WILLARD IKOLA: HUMBLE GIANT

FROM EVELETH TO EDINA, THE LEGENDARY PLAYER AND COACH LEFT HIS MARK

By Heather Rule

Willard Ikola was a hockey legend in Minnesota. As the coach of the Edina boys' hockey team, he was also the last one on the team bus.

"Then before the bus driver could leave, he'd always say, 'got your blades, got your mouthpiece, here we go,'" said **Mike Terwilliger**, a 1989 Edina graduate who played for Coach Ikola. "People always still imitate that. Teammates still say that to each other.

"That was one of his little trademarks. He was a superstitious guy."

Ikola was also a hall-of-fame caliber hockey player, coach and person. Ikola, or "Ike" as he was known, died on Jan. 20, 2025, at age 92.

He won three state tournaments as a goalie for Eveleth before leaving his mark as a coach in Edina, winning a record eight state championships behind the bench during his 33-year career from 1958-91. He coached Edina to 616 wins and a state record 19 state tournament appearances.

It cannot be overstated how much Ikola meant to the Edina community, Edina hockey

and Minnesota high school hockey. **Bart Larson** and current Edina coach **Curt Giles** have done well carrying to torch after him, but Edina hockey isn't where it is today without Ikola, Terwilliger said.

"He set the standard, and in my opinion, I think he's the greatest high school coach in the history of the state," Terwilliger said. "The best coach you'll ever see."

The hockey success he had even before settling in Edina was also important to what he built with the Hornets.

"He had such a good reputation even before he got to Edina that I think it just followed him right there," said **Tom Saterdalen**, former longtime coach of Bloomington Jefferson boys' hockey and friend of Ikola's.

TRADITION OF HARD WORK, WINNING

Ikola was born in Eveleth and was a freshman goaltender for the Eveleth Golden Bears in 1947 when the team lost to Roseau in the semifinals. But Ikola and Eveleth never lost again over the next three seasons, going undefeated with a three-peat of state championships in 1948, 1949 and 1950.

Ikola kept winning in college, backstopping Michigan to a pair of NCAA championships. He also won a silver medal with the U.S. Olympic team in 1956. He was on the 1957 and 1958 U.S. national teams before taking over as Edina's hockey coach. His first Hornets team went 4-9-5, which turned out to be the only losing season for Ike in Edina.

Saterdalen, Bloomington Jefferson's coach from 1973-2002, coached against Ikola in the Lake Conference for many years. While the two were competitors on opposite benches, they also struck up a long friendship. One of the reasons they got along so well was because they believed in the same thing as coaches: "The players are going to listen, and they're going to do what they're told," Saterdalen said.

The Jefferson vs. Edina games usually consisted of fast, good clean hockey, he added.

"We'd play a game, and there'd maybe be one or two penalties because that's the way we wanted to play," Saterdalen said. "That was always my philosophy."

The two coaching friends didn't face each other a lot in state tournaments; Saterdalen recalled Edina kept getting upset during seasons when Jefferson made the tournament. But they faced each other in the 1982 semifinals, with Edina winning 3-2 in overtime on the way to another state championship.

> **"He set the standard, and in my opinion, I think he's the greatest high school coach in the history of the state."**
>
> **— Mike Terwilliger**

With such similar morals, ideals and goals, the coaching pair remained close and spent a lot of time together even years after they both stopped coaching. Their wives became friends, too, and the four of them met for dinners during seasons and took Hawaiian vacations together in retirement. They also sat together watching high school hockey games at Braemar Arena.

Even with so many hockey accolades to his name, Ikola remained humble. He was also more than a hockey coach or player. "Ike would tell anyone his greatest accomplishment was his family," according to his obituary. He built a life with his wife of

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70 years, Laurie, and had four children, seven grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

"I know coaches that have achieved a lot less that will go out of their way to talk about themselves when they played and maybe not at that high of a level to brag about their accomplishments," Terwilliger said. "And here Ike had this amazing resume, and he hardly ever talked about it."

Terwilliger just finished his third season as Eden Prairie boys' head coach. He's also coached at Bloomington Jefferson, as an assistant at Edina and New Prague, and then previously served as the junior varsity coach at Eden Prairie. He was a defenseman on what turned out to be Ikola's final state championship team in 1988.

Like any hockey season, the Hornets had their ups and downs during 1987-88, including a midseason slump. They also lost their top player, **Tom Nevers**, to a broken wrist with about four games left on the calendar. Ikola decided to roll four lines, three sets of defensemen and go with a balanced approach.

Edina won its final 10 games of the season, ending with a 5-3 victory over Hill-Murray in the state title game. Terwilliger remembers how happy Ikola was after that victory. The coach "wouldn't stop smiling" and even let his guard down in the locker room a little bit, with a few more hugs than usual, Terwilliger said.

"I think to a lot of people we came out of nowhere," Terwilliger said. "We had a good team… we got hot at the right time and had great goaltending, and all the different lines and players chipped in. So, it was a real team effort. Just like Ike, I think, always coached his teams to be part of it."

A DREAM TO PLAY FOR IKE

Growing up in Edina, Terwilliger watched plenty of Hornets hockey as a kid. His older cousins played for Ikola, and Terwilliger "dreamed of playing for him," too. Ikola had a "mystique and aura about him," Terwilliger added.

Once players reached Ikola's team, hard work and unselfish hockey were the expectations. Ikola was good at getting teams to play that way and peak at the right times, Terwilliger said. Learning the value of hard work – from the coaches on down – to help make up a successful team was one lesson Terwilliger carried into his coaching career.

Saterdalen also knew how methodical Ikola was running practices.

"Those players would just out-execute you because they practice them so much," Saterdalen said. "It was like a football practice where you went here and that's where you were going to go and that's what you did. They just out-execute you."

Ikola also preached that the team is bigger than any one person. He didn't let his Hornets squads get too wrapped up in what other teams did. The focus was more on Edina playing its own game.

"Which is a good lesson, too, because I don't think you can get wrapped up too much in what the other teams are doing," Terwilliger said.

That sentiment has continued even decades past Ikola's tenure at Edina. After the Hornets' state quarterfinal victory over Elk River/Zimmerman last season, a question was asked during the postgame press conference about other teams dying their hair or doing special celebrations at the state tournament. While that's their prerogative to do that, Edina chooses to do things a bit differently, Giles said.

"All we want to do is control what we do and how we do it," Giles said, during the postgame press conference. "Our expectations are, they've been the same for a number of years.

"We want to make sure we do things right, treat the game right. Treat our opponents right, with respect. Treat the game with respect. So that's all we ask. We don't worry about what other teams do."

While staying focused on his own team, Ikola showed kindness to his players, too. As a sophomore starter on junior varsity, Terwilliger worked his way up to varsity just after New Year's. He recalls being nervous before his first game, but coach Ikola came up to him and simplified the situation.

"'Twig, going in what we want you to do, we want you to break the puck out and make a good first pass. If you can do that, you'll help us,'" Terwilliger said, recalling his coach's words.

Terwilliger thought he could do that, and Ikola's words made the game simple. All with "just a quick bit of advice that kind of calmed my nerves," he said.

Along with Ikola's tradition of 'got your blades, got your mouthpiece, here we go' to the bus driver, he was also known for his trademark houndstooth hat. He saved that for game days. It was something Saterdalen asked him about right away when he first started coaching. Why the hat?

"His old coach wore a hat, so he said, 'the first thing I've got to do is buy a hat,'" Saterdalen said. "That's what he did."

But Ikola wore a baseball cap to practices, Terwilliger recalls, when they took the bus from the high school to the rink.

"He'd put his skates on in the locker room at the high school and put skate guards on, and he'd walk out to the bus with his skates on and the skate guards and his baseball hat," Terwilliger said.

Playing for Ikola was a dream come true for many of his players, Terwilliger added. Kids watched hockey growing up and dreamed of playing for Ikola in the state tournament at the Civic Center with its clear boards.

"I think most guys I know, they didn't dream of playing pro or college," Terwilliger said.

"They just dreamed about playing for Edina and Ike and in the state tournament first. That's a tribute to him and how he ran it."

Steve Ikola and Willard Ikola (right) during the Edina East days.

Kyle Oen / Vintage Minnesota Hockey