

**THE GENESIS AND MEANING OF THE  
CAMP WAUPACA  
CAMPER OF THE YEAR AWARD**

by  
Dave Weiner

“Dave Weiner, you’re Dave Weiner? We all thought you were dead.”

That was the greeting I received from at least a dozen former Camp Waupaca campers when I returned for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary reunion in August, 2001.

It turned out, unknown to me, that my name had continued to be used on the Camper of the Year award for many years after my association with the camp ended in 1953. When I was asked by some of those who thought I was dead how the award began, I replied with some flippant answers, thinking at the time that it was all pretty amusing.

But then late in the day, I participated in a baseball game and watched how all these former Waupaca campers and counselors treated the children who were playing. The boy who stood at the plate for what seemed an interminable time watching one good pitch pass after another was not treated derisively, but with encouragement and respect. The boy whose bat seemed to outweigh him was given every consideration. No one was blamed for errors in the field. Everyone was given a chance to bat, even though it appeared we had fifteen to a side. At the end of the game, cheers were delivered for both the winners and the losers.

As I walked away from the game, the meaning of the Camper of the Year award and the mentoring and nurturing of campers of every personality type, which was the objective of the earliest Camp Waupaca experience began to come back to me. Since that time, I began to reconstruct in my mind how the award came to be and why my father, Harry, continued to endow the award long after I had left the camp.

The story actually begins in 1943, when at the age of 11, I first met Skipper Kuklin, who had been named director of camp Briar Lodge, near Oconomowoc, WI. He came to our family apartment on the south side of Chicago, presented his story and made a great impression on my parents and me and so I was allowed to go. I spent three years at Briar Lodge and was much influenced by Skipper’s teachings of sportsmanship and the personal example he set. In those years, Skipper called the Camper of the Year award, the Sportsmanship Award and it was much coveted. The first year I wasn’t in the running. The second year I was the runner-up and the third year I did win the award, a tall trophy. I can still remember seeing it sit over a mantle in our living room. The winners were allowed to keep the trophy over the winter, returning it at the beginning of the next camping season. My father, I recall, was very proud of me and very interested in the concept of the award because he was among the greatest sports I’ve ever known. Win or lose in whatever endeavor, he was always cheerful, positive and full of good humor. He understood like Skipper that the experience was the thing,

the thrill of competing and trying as hard as you can, but that the outcome was never life or death.

After the third year at Briar Lodge, I took a hiatus of two years from summer camp life. Then, in 1947, I think it was, I received a call from Skipper inviting me to be a Counselor-in-Training (CIT) at a new camp he was hired to direct, Camp Arrowhead near Rice Lake, WI. I accepted the offer and spent three years at the camp, one as a CIT and two as a junior counselor. It was here, I believe, that Skipper first met Joe Rosen, who directed the waterfront activities.

All of the activities that were used at Briar Lodge were initiated at Camp Arrowhead, including the Braves and the mysterious starting of the campfire, Gold Rush Days, the Blue and White wars, the Super-Duper Relay and the Sportsmanship Award trophy. Once again, Skipper inculcated into the demeanor of the camp the need to mentor the campers, to stop any form of bullying, to cater to the support needs of the individual campers and to teach campers the importance of trying hard in competitive events, but infusing those events with the concept of fairness, honesty, good humor and sportsmanship, which meant in essence, encouraging rather than belittling others when they made mistakes, congratulating opponents when they won and leaving the field with your head held high, whatever the outcome and however you or your teammates performed. My parents visited each of the years I worked at Arrowhead and again my father paid close attention to the Sportsmanship Award and the concept underlying it.

In 1950, now a freshman at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, I received a call from Skipper that he had gone into business with Joe Rosen and intended to open Camp Waupaca during the summer of 1951. He invited me to be a senior counselor at the camp. Once again the activities initiated at Briar Lodge, and which were transferred to Camp Arrowhead were instituted at Camp Waupaca, including the Sportsmanship Award. But now Skipper and Joe had their own camp, where they were now the directors as well as the owners, dividing the responsibilities almost as they did at Camp Arrowhead, but now the business responsibilities as well.

I recall that I was captain of the camp's first White team, throwing down the gauntlet in the dining hall with a fellow counselor named Wally Gambica, the first captain of the Blue team, with the traditional argument in the dining hall after dinner. Once again, sportsmanship was the hallmark of all activities. By example, Skipper, who ran the land activities, continued to display the characteristics of humility, modesty, fairness, decency, grace and good humor. Even though I was a counselor, my parents continued to visit the two full years I spent at Waupaca and my father again enjoyed the specter of sportsmanship and good will that appeared now to permeate the entire camp.

The third year, 1953, I was required to attend a six-week ROTC summer camp in Fort Eustice, VA, as part of a military obligation. The Korean War was just winding down, and because this camp started three weeks before Waupaca, I still was able to attend

camp for the final four weeks, in plenty of time to again take up the mantle of White team captain.

Because I was a member of the Haresfoot Club, a musical comedy group at the University of Wisconsin, that traveled the country during spring vacation putting on an original musical comedy, similar to the Hasty Pudding at Harvard, Skipper and Joe had asked me if I could write a special musical show for the campers. By the time I got to camp, I had the short musical play written and we were able to get it produced in time for parent's day, when we staged it in the rec hall, complete with stage curtain, props, piano, dance routines, the whole ball of wax. The plot of the play was that Skipper and Joe had run out of money, the camp had to close down, but it was finally saved because we were able to sell cheese fondue, made deliciously by Opal, the head cook at the time, to the outside world. And so the play ended happily with the song, Cheese Fondue is Good for You, It Saved Our Camp. My cousin, Dick Garb, informed me later that the song was sung for a few years afterwards. I still have the original words and music somewhere.

That was my last year at Camp Waupaca. The next summer I needed to report for duty in the army. However, my father agreed to endow the Sportsmanship Award under my name for years afterward. He passed away in the late 1970s, and I am not sure whether the endowment continued, but in any event, my name continued to be used on the award, now renamed Camper of the Year.