



Royall's Joe Vitcenda sits in one of his usual spots at home field in Elroy. Vitcenda's coaching career began in 1968. In 2022, it is still going strong. Photo by Nate Beier/GX3 Media.

Over half a century of baseball

Royall's Vitcenda adds another chapter to impactful career in 54th season with Panthers

On a spring or summer day in Elroy, Wisconsin, odds are you can find Joe Vitcenda at the local baseball diamond.

For the last 54 years, Vitcenda has served as the head varsity baseball coach at Royall High School in Elroy, where he has helped guide the Panthers to 19 conference championships, nine regional titles and the 1998 Division 3 state championship.

Along the way, Vitcenda — affectionately referred to simply as “Vit” by many — has accumulated 635 career victories, making him the all-time wins leader in the history of Wisconsin high school spring baseball. Back in early

May, he became just the third person in state spring ball history to coach 1,000 career games.

His list of accolades is lengthy and includes a spot in the Wisconsin Baseball Coaches Hall of Fame (class of 2001) and winning the University of Wisconsin-Superior's Mertz Mortorelli Coaching Achievement Award in 2011.

But that barely scratches the surface when it comes to Vitcenda's influence on baseball in the community. He has long been involved in every level of the sport in Elroy — from tee ball and little league all the way up through high school and legion baseball.

“I spend a lot of time out here on this diamond,” Vitcenda said from a familiar

seat in the third-base dugout at the ballfield adjacent to Royall High School. “Marie, my wife, one time came down here and saw me sitting here and said, ‘well let's see, if you had a hot plate there and a TV there, you could stay here.’”

Despite turning 80 back on May 16 of this year — which he naturally spent coaching the Panthers to a 16-6 home win over the New Lisbon Rockets — Vitcenda has shown no desire to step away.

He continues to remain involved in all levels of the sport that has been his lifelong passion — one that has allowed him to impact numerous generations in his community and made his name synonymous with baseball in Elroy for over a half-century.

▶ 'VITCENDA' cont. on pg. 8

Vitcenda's road to Royall, and rise to the top

Vitcenda was born and raised in Exeland, a small village of about 200 people located in Sawyer County in northern Wisconsin. From a young age, he fell in love with baseball, thanks in part to a diehard Yankees fan uncle from New York who would visit his family each summer.

That uncle nicknamed him "Scooter" after Hall of Fame shortstop Phil Rizzuto, who played 13 seasons for the Yankees in the 1940s and 1950s and later spent 40 years as a broadcaster with the franchise.

Those visits helped spark his interest in baseball and made him a bit of a Yankees fan, though he gravitated toward the Milwaukee Braves when they moved to Wisconsin from Boston in 1953. Vitcenda idolized Milwaukee's Hall of Fame third baseman Eddie Mathews and would listen to Braves games on AM radio.

When he couldn't listen to the Braves, he would tune in to Harry Caray calling St. Louis Cardinals games on KMOX out of St. Louis.

Though there were no opportunities to play organized baseball for Vitcenda until he turned 16, he played sandlot games with friends and spent many evenings catching fly balls from his older brother David.

Vitcenda was a freshman starter for the Bruce High School baseball team — a fact he credits to those many sessions with his brother — where he played the outfield and then mainly became a catcher.

Vitcenda went on to play baseball at the University of Wisconsin-Superior and briefly

thought he might be able to at least give pro ball a try following a breakout sophomore season, but soon realized it wasn't in the cards for him.

"Eventually, you hit the wall. Eventually, you get against kids that are really good, hard throwers and people that know how to maneuver and how to adjust fastballs and curves," Vitcenda said. "All of a sudden, I found out that I wasn't as good as I thought I was or as good as lot of other people thought I was. So, that bubble kinda burst."

After four years at UW-Superior, Vitcenda didn't have a degree and decided to take a year off to make some money because his dad had only agreed to pay for four years of college. However, he would soon be drafted into the United States Army during the Vietnam War.

Vitcenda was never sent to Vietnam, instead working as a clerk typist in Albuquerque, New Mexico. After his two-year stint in the Army, he returned to UW-Superior and completed his secondary education degree in 1968 with the intent to both teach and coach.

"Somewhere along the line, I realized if I couldn't play baseball, I'll coach it," Vitcenda said. "Then I wound up here in good ol' Elroy, Wisconsin at Royall High School and I've been here for 54 years."

Vitcenda's first job interview was at Janesville Parker, though he balked at it due to its distance from Exeland and the lack of a sure

opportunity to coach baseball right away. He then interviewed at Royall High School in July 1968 and learned that the school's varsity baseball coach at the time didn't want the gig any longer. So, Vitcenda accepted the job when offered and took over as the head baseball coach soon after.

"I called him, and I think before he answered the phone he said, 'take it.'" Vitcenda joked of his predecessor as Royall's head baseball coach.

Not long after he accepted the Royall teaching job, he got a call from Rib Lake gauging his interest in teaching eighth grade and coaching baseball there. The Rib Lake opening checked all the boxes while also only being about 75 miles from his hometown, but his dad convinced him to remain good on his verbal commitment to teach in Elroy.

Vitcenda later sent letters to schools in the cities of Augusta and Mellen closer to his hometown letting them know he'd be interested if they ever had any

teaching openings, though never heard back. His wife also had a potential job opportunity in Arcadia, but after being settled into Elroy for over a decade, they decided to stay put.

"This as a good a place as anywhere else," said Vitcenda, who taught geography and mathematics at Royall until his retirement in 2001. "It's as good a

small-town environment as there is. We certainly have our issues, but this is as good as anything there is."

REACHING THE TOP

With over 50 years of coaching under his belt, there are naturally a whole host of fond baseball-related memories for Vitcenda.

Chief among them was the opportunity to coach his son Tony, who graduated from Royall High School in 1996. Tony played junior varsity as a freshman and then became a standout third baseman for the varsity team in his final three seasons. He'd later go on to play college baseball at both Riverland Community College in Austin, Minnesota and the University of Wisconsin-Stout.

"He was more nurturing than anything. I think I pushed myself and started to get more involved in athletics as I hit the high school age," Tony said. "He was definitely a motivator. He wouldn't settle for anything other than my best."

Two years after Tony graduated, however, came the absolute peak of both Vitcenda's coaching career and for Royall

High School athletics in general: the 1998 Division 3 state baseball championship.

The Panthers consistently had excellent teams throughout the 1990s and entered 1998 with a senior-laden group that had the potential of being their best yet.

After having been stuck playing in the Division 2 playoffs previously as one of the smallest schools in that field, Vitcenda learned at a meeting of conference coaches in New Lisbon in the fall of 1997 that they would be part of the Division 3 playoff field in 1998.

"One of the guys said to us, 'you had a pretty good team last year, but it's tough to compete in Division 2.' He says, 'well congratulations, this year you're Division 3,'" Vitcenda said. "I looked at Rick and I said, 'we can win this.'"

That Royall team featured seven senior starters. One of the only non-senior starters on that team — junior first baseman Chad Brieske — remembers his personal early-season struggles and how Vitcenda helped him fight through it.

"I think I was hitting like .162 or something like that to start the year and I remember Vit calling me into his room and giving me some really positive guidance in terms of saying how much he believed in me and instilling that confidence," Brieske said. "I think that's a small story of how I think Vit's belief in his players always helps us believe that we can do things that, if we were left to our own selves, we wouldn't necessarily envision."

The Panthers dominated throughout the spring and eventually made it to the program's first-ever appearance at the state tournament, which was held at

— JOE VITCENDA
Royall Baseball Head Coach

▶ VITCENDA' cont. on pg. 10

TRIPLE: 18, 12 and 3

Vitcenda is most famous for his 54 (and counting) years as Royall's head varsity baseball coach, but his coaching career has touched other sports too. He previously spent 18 years coaching freshman football, 12 years as an assistant wrestling coach and three years coaching cross country.

DOUBLE: The Vitcenda-Steffen dynamic duo

Royall alum Rick Steffen joined his former coach's staff as an assistant in 1980 and has remained with the Panther baseball program since. Steffen even pulled something of a switcheroo on his mentor when he became Royall's head football coach in 2009, convincing Vitcenda to take over as the junior high football coach.

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SINGLE: +15

The Panthers went 15-8 during the 2022 season, bringing Vitcenda's career win total to 635 — a Wisconsin state record among high school spring baseball coaches. The two closest trailers are Pecatonica's Jim Strommen (622) and Fond du Lac's Marty Paulsen (611), the latter of whom retired at the end of this season.

HOME RUN: 1,000

This past season, Vitcenda hit a major milestone in his coaching career by becoming the third man in Wisconsin high school spring baseball history to reach 1,000 games coached during a May 5th home doubleheader vs. Bangor. Eleven days later, Vitcenda coached Royall to a win at home over New Lisbon on his 80th birthday.

Steffen is reliable right-hand man

Right from the start of his tenure, Royall baseball found success under Vitcenda.

They won a conference title in 1969 (his first season at the helm) and again in 1972 in a sign of things to come for the program. Though there was also some early heartbreak too.

Despite it being over 50 years later, Vitcenda can still vividly recall coming up one win short of another conference championship in 1970, the crucial loss coming late in the season when Royall let a one-run lead slip away in the bottom of the seventh on a throwing error.

But Royall baseball as fans now know it didn't really come to fruition until Rick Steffen came aboard as an assistant coach in 1980. Steffen had played at Royall in the early years of Vitcenda's tenure, graduating from the high school in 1973.

"He was able to relate to us as kids and treated us like human beings. It wasn't a 'you're going to do it this way or else' kind of thing," Steffen said of his early impressions of Vitcenda. "He related to kids now and he still relates to the kids. I guess that's what his success is."

Steffen graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire and eventually wound up back in Elroy, where he remained friends with his former coach.

Vitcenda had some difficulties keeping a consistent assistant coach in the first decade of his tenure,



Rick Steffen

even stretched into other sports. Steffen coached the Royall High School varsity football team from 2009 to 2014, though not before making sure Vitcenda would be alongside helping him.

"The program was not doing well, and they were talking about even dropping the program," Steffen said. "I was asked to take it over and I said I would do it under a couple of circumstances. One of the circumstances was that the high school would take over the junior high program. And I said I think we can take over the junior high program if Joe is named the junior high coach."

"It was a deal where I wasn't going to do something unless I got him involved helping me out on that."

Their friendship established through baseball has seen them go to coaching clinics, attend games at Milwaukee County Stadium together during the Brewers' run to the World Series in 1982 and continues strong to this day.

"I can say 'Rick, I've got to do something, take over.' It's that simple and he does it," Vitcenda said. "I've had an awful good relationship with him."

"I keep (coaching) because he keeps doing it," Steffen said. "I've often said when he quits, I'll quit."

As a result, they've established a successful chemistry that sees Steffen as the pitching coach and Vitcenda as the hitting coach. It's a relationship that's





Royall's Joe Vitcenda, circa 2009. Photo by Nate Beier/GX3 Media

► Fox Cities Stadium in Grand Chute just outside of Appleton for the first time in 1998 after previously being held in Wausau since 1973.

At state, Royall rallied late to defeat Florence in 7-5 in the semifinals and then beat Wisconsin Heights 3-2 in the title game to finish the season 24-1 and as Division 3 state champions.

"I give credit to the kids. They were focused on having a goal, and the goal was to get to state," Steffen said. "And once they got there, they wanted to win it."

Despite some close calls in the years since then with some stellar squads, Royall hasn't gotten back to state. The passage of time has only emphasized just how special it was for the 1998 team to get to state and fully seize on their opportunity once there.

"Darn near every day I think about it, especially during the baseball season," Vitcenda said.

Brieske, who helped Vitcenda out with the summer rec program throughout high school, continues to spread the Vitcenda legacy through a coaching career of his own.

After graduating from Royall in 1999, Brieske attended the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. As a freshman, he joined the Bangor baseball coaching staff. He then became Bangor's head coach at the age of just 20 — something he said wouldn't have been possible without Vitcenda's endorsement to Bangor school administrators — and served in that position from 2002 to 2006.

Brieske is now the head boys' basketball coach at Eau Claire Memorial, where he guided the Old Abes to their first sectional final appearance since 2003 this past winter. Despite now coaching a different sport, he still called up Vitcenda during that sectional run to get advice from him.

Vitcenda's influence on him remains strong, and those years coaching baseball against his mentor will always be a treasured memory.

"One of the pinnacles of my coaching career is still remembering when, in my first year as head coach, we beat Royall at Bangor," Brieske said. "It was a pretty big moment because you beat this legendary coach who you see as like a father figure, and Vit gave me a huge hug at home plate and said how much he was proud of me. That's always stuck with me."

ESTABLISHING A CULTURE ON THE BASEBALL DIAMOND AND BEYOND

At a high school as small as Royall, the success of a sports program can be largely dependent on class sizes and the makeup of a given class. Yet, the Panthers manage to field consistently successful baseball teams almost every year.

A key component to that sustained success is Vitcenda's influence on all levels of baseball and the establishment of a strong baseball culture in Elroy.

"You've got an aura, you've got a consistency, you've got a great summer program, legion program — leads right to the development of a good high school program too," said Mark Gruen, who played baseball at Royall in the 1980s and later served as the school district's superintendent from 2010 to 2022. "You go into the Royall school gym, and you look at the banners — it's no secret what our most successful program has been. It's the banner that's the most full, and it's baseball."

From a young age, Vitcenda wants fundamentals taught a certain way — whether it's pivots, cutoffs, fielding double plays or first-base coverage.

But at the same time, he finds it important to be flexible and change the way he does things over time as needed.

"Do I change things? Yeah, quite a bit," Vitcenda said. "I'll say, 'new philosophy out there, guys. I'm not as smart as I think I am. Here's what we're going to do.'"

When it comes to his overall coaching philosophy, Vitcenda sums it all up with a short phrase: simple repetition of complex fundamentals.

"You have to teach every aspect of the game, and you have to convey it to the kids and the kids have to buy into it," Vitcenda said. "The kids have to respect what you're saying and believe you know what you're talking about, and they have to do it. If you can get them to that point, the rest is up to luck and God."

Vitcenda's community involvement extends beyond the baseball diamond and includes work with the local VFW and as a leader in his church, along with coaching in other sports throughout his career. He coached freshman football for nearly 20 years, was an assistant for over a decade in the early days of the Royall wrestling program and even coached cross country for a few years.

However, it's affecting people through baseball where Vitcenda's had his greatest impact.

"I think we all have a niche in life, and he was very fortunate to find his at an early age. And that was to influence people through the game of baseball," Tony said. "That was God's calling for him and he definitely took that to its fullest."

"He's passionate about baseball, but even more passionate about kids being successful, and he'll do anything for anybody," Gruen added. "There's a lot, a lot of small stories within the program where Joe's went out of his way to help a kid be successful after baseball. A lot of those aren't even public, but there's a ton of them."

"I think he's terrific. I hope we get 20 more (years) out of him."

As far as retirement goes, Vitcenda is content to take things one season at a time and will continue to coach as long as his health allows. It's something his son is thrilled to see him continue to do.

"You just don't know how long that's going to last," said the younger Vitcenda, who currently teaches at the Robert Kupper Learning Center in Tomah. "He's talked to me about it numerous times about 'when is enough, enough?' And what I keep telling him is 'you like the game, you're healthy enough to do it, why in the world wouldn't you keep doing it as long as you have insights and things to offer?'"

For as long as he can, Joe Vitcenda will remain a guiding light for baseball in his community, continuing to influence new generations of kids in Elroy just like he has for over five decades.

"I can't envision what a baseball field would look like in the summer in Elroy, Wisconsin if Joe Vitcenda wasn't putting in the time to get it ready for the next practice," Brieske said. "Whether it's a tee ball practice or a senior league practice."

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**- MARK GRUEN
Former Royall School
District Superintendent**