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RACT to present "Stepsisters" this weekend, p. 12



Green Lake Co. fair brings fun for all ages, p. 15

# Potential development eyed for K-Mart

Rogers will seek permit for mixed-use development at former K-Mart site

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Ripon's former K-Mart building could see new life. The property at 1200 West Fond du Lac St. was purchased last week by Tom and Debbie Rogers, who applied for a conditional use permit from the city Monday for a mixed-use development. The Ripon Plan Commission will hold a public hearing Wednesday, Aug. 17 at 7 p.m. to discuss the proposal. Tom Rogers is seeking a conditional use permit to transform the site for commercial storefronts, a church or other religious institution and commercial storage/warehousing, according to a public notice for the hearing. Tom Rogers confirmed that he and Debbie purchased the former K-Mart last week Friday, as well as the information listed on the notice, but declined to provide additional information about the proposed development. City Administrator Adam Sonntag noted the concept presented in preliminary talks to the city includes up to five storefronts

RIPON'S TOM ROGERS has purchased the former K-Mart property and will seek a conditional use permit from the city for a mixed-use development. *Joe Schulz photo*

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# One last hurrah!

Ernst announces he will step down at end of season after 32-year career at Ripon College

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In 1991, a young Ron Ernst noticed a head coaching vacancy for football at Wartburg College in Iowa. He called Wartburg about the position, but was told that while he looks great on paper, the school already has somebody in mind in a guy who used to coach there and who's currently coaching at another college. It was then that a light bulb went on for Ernst that if that coach was at another job and going to be leaving, another position would be opening up. That position just happened to be Ripon College. Ernst took over for Bob Nielson, who left for Wartburg College, in 1991 and the rest is history as Ernst has gone on to record the most victories (184) in Ripon College and Midwest Conference history. Now, entering his 32nd year at the helm, Ernst announced this season will be his final season. He made that decision official Wednesday, after informing the returning players this past January and newcomers and parents Tuesday. Ernst will be succeeded as head coach by former player Jake Marshall '10, who has been on the coaching staff since December 2016 and currently serves as the associate head coach and offensive coordinator. He was hired with the intent of eventually taking over when

Ernst decided it was time to retire. "It was a very hard decision," Ernst said of his decision to step away. "It's something that has weighed on my mind since the end of last season. Why now? I can't tell you. I don't know why. It just feels like this is the right time. . . . I'm going to leave the program a hell of a lot better than what it was when I found it." During his head coaching career at Ripon, Ernst led the Red Hawks to a record of 184-113 (.641 winning percentage). His teams finished .500 or better in 26 of his seasons and captured three Midwest Conference North Division titles (1995, 1996 and 1997) and two Midwest Conference Championships (1996 and 2001). He was named Midwest Conference Coach of the Year in 1996, when he led the team to a school-record nine-win season. He also has been named the NCAA Division III Region 5 Coach of the Year (1995) and the Wisconsin Football Private College Coach of the Year on three occasions (2001, 2008 and 2010). In 2006, Ernst was inducted into the Ripon College Hall of Fame and in March 2009, he earned a spot in the Wisconsin Football Coaches Association Hall of Fame.

### Ernst's early beginnings

Ernst grew up in Hastings, Neb. He gradu-

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RON ERNST HOISTS the Doehling-Heselton Memorial Trophy after defeating Lawrence in 2017.

*Jonathan Bailey photo*





# HURRAH/Ernst is proud of the program's growth *continued from page 1*

ated with a bachelor's degree in social science and physical education in 1980 from Nebraska Wesleyan and earned his master's degree in physical education and athletic administration in 1990 from the University of Northern Colorado.

While attending Nebraska Wesleyan, Ernst was a four-year letterman in football, a three-year letterman in track and earned a letter in baseball.

He spent his first eight years coaching at the high school level in Nebraska and Colorado, turning around teams that had struggled. In 1989, he became a defensive line coach at the University of Northern Colorado, where he was finishing up his master's degree, and helped the Golden Bears qualify for the NCAA Division II Playoffs.

Upon obtaining his degree in 1990, Ernst applied for a job in Ohio and was disappointed he didn't get it. He then saw the Wartburg College opening in 1991, which turned into the Ripon College vacancy, and he pounced on it.

"As soon as I found out that he [Bill Nielson] was leaving Ripon [to go to Wartburg College], I looked on the map because I had never heard of Ripon before, and I saw it was in Wisconsin and I saw how close it was to Green Bay," Ernst said. "Well, I've always been a Packers fan ... so I thought that close to Green Bay, this is fate."

He immediately looked up to see who was the Ripon College athletic director and assistant athletic director at the time. They were Chuck Larson and Bob Gillespie. He called Larson to talk about the job, but he wasn't there so he instead struck up a conversation with Gillespie and found out that Gillespie knew his college baseball coach.

That connection helped Ernst get an interview at Ripon College. Ernst noted that he was told that there were 75 applicants for the position and that he "had the longest interview in the history of mankind" as it spanned five days.

"I called up Doug Northrop, who was the dean at the time, and I said, 'Mr. Northrop, I can come for a day or two, but it's going to be really expensive for the plane ticket, but if I spend the weekend, it will be cheaper,'" Ernst recalled. "He said to get the cheaper ticket, so I think I literally came in on a Thursday and left on a Tuesday."

He noted that it was a great experience, except for the part where the college lost his luggage and he was forced to wear a three-piece suit to a 95-degree baseball game in the spring, with people looking at him like he was nuts.

## Building a winning program at Ripon

Ernst's first four years at Ripon College weren't easy as his teams



**RON ERNST TALKS** to his players during practice. *RCP file photo*

went a combined 19-17, with the best record being a 5-4 season in each of his first three years. It wasn't until the 1995 season where his team broke through.

The Red Hawks finished 8-2 that year, beginning a stretch of three-straight years of winning the Midwest Conference North Division. That included them going 9-1 in 1996 to win the first of two Midwest Conference championships.

Ernst noted it was really gratifying to see all the hard work and what Ripon believed in starting to work. From then on, he said that Ripon has had one of the top programs in the conference and despite some ups and downs throughout the way in terms of budgets, recruiting and facilities, it has always seemed to make it work.

The Red Hawks have had just three losing seasons since 1994, with all three of them coming in the past eight years. They also have finished 7-3 twice in the last eight years and posted a record of 6-3 a season ago.

"Even though we may not have won a conference championship [since 2001], we've always been in the hunt and we've always been a team that's competed at a very high level," Ripon's winningest head coach said.

As a result of that success, Ernst noted that Ripon developed a reputation around the state as "a very good program for kids to play in" and that this wasn't the case for a lot of the years in the 1980s. In addition, Ripon has made a name for itself in a lot of pockets around the country, which Ernst believes has been "a really positive thing."

Ripon has players from 18 different states on its roster entering this year, which range from New York to California.

The roster also has grown for the Red Hawks since Ernst came to Ripon, from him being lucky to get 60 players when he started in 1991 to having between 95 to 100 players this season after being right at 100 a season ago.

To go along with the growth of the roster, Ernst also has been able to expand the coaching staff as it has grown from six coaches in 1991 to nine this year. Some years, Ripon will have even more with student-assistant coaches.

"That's really significant be-

cause to be a head coach and a coordinator is really overwhelming at times," he said.

Three of his assistant coaches — Marshall, Jon Petkoff and Mike Hepp — are former players, which he takes pride in that they wanted to come back and be part of the program. He also has three coaches on his staff — Rick Coles, Dan Lueck and Mike Schmitt — who have been with him for 15 years or more, with Lueck entering his 25th year.

Two other coaches — Mike Yoder and Mark Madigan — joined in the last seven years after leading high school programs.

Ernst attributed the longevity of his assistants to the way he treats them, noting he welcomes others' opinions. He also believes that approach helps the staff, which has at least four former head coaches, co-exist with one another.

"This is not a dictatorship where ... everyone else is going to do what I say," he said. "I welcome new ideas ... and sometimes I'll take it and sometimes I won't. But I think every guy feels like they have an opportunity to contribute."

## Favorite memories

While winning the Midwest Conference Championships in 1996 and 2001 are among the highlights of Ernst's time at Ripon College, he also cherishes the relationships he built with his players throughout the past three-plus decades.

"The records, the championships, all those things are great and I have fond memories of them, but ... the biggest thing is just the relationships that I have with a lot of these kids," Ernst said, noting some are good and some are not. "... As the head coach, you've got to make decisions that I think are best for the team, best for each individual. I made some decisions for some kids that when they left, they didn't like me very much. But, maybe 10 years later, I would get a letter from them saying, 'Ah, now it makes sense. Now, I understand what you were doing.'"

He added there were some ups and downs, but he did it with the idea that he's trying to take the young men who are between the ages of 18 and 22 and get them ready for the real world, noting he was "old school on a lot of stuff."

Ernst also noted he had years where Ripon was 5-5 and he had as much fun in those years as he did when Ripon went 9-1 and won a conference championship because the kids were fun to be around and worked hard.

In addition, he enjoyed watching former players be inducted into the Ripon College Hall of Fame, as well as producing three Private College Players of the Year: Bill Schultz '97, Troy DeVoe '02 and Josh Kramer '09.

Another highlight during his time at Ripon College was being able to coach two of his sons as both



**RON ERNST EMBRACES** granddaughter Emma Ernst after notching his Midwest Conference-record 160th win in 2015. He plans to spend more time with his grandkids. *Jonathan Bailey photo*

Tim and John played under him. His other son, Bryan, was more of a track and field and cross country runner and spent a semester at Coe College and a semester at Ripon College before joining the Marines and serving three tours in Iraq.

Ernst noted he was happy that his family made the right decision to stay in Ripon, despite him getting three offers to coach elsewhere during his time at the helm of the Red Hawks — one of which was at the Division II level.

"It was great to raise our kids in the same community basically their entire lives," he said, noting Tim, the oldest, was 8 years old when they moved to Ripon. "... They're all three extremely successful in their careers ... Part of that is because we weren't picking up and moving every two, three, four years like a lot of college head coaches do. My wife [Janet] and I talked about it at great length and we really felt stability for our family was the most important thing."

Ernst added that all three of his sons married their high school sweethearts, which was "a neat thing."

As he prepares to step away after this season, Ernst has few regrets about his tenure at Ripon College.

"Do I wish I would have made a different call here or a different call there? Yes. Do I wish I would have made this decision or that decision? That's just human nature," Ernst said. "But in terms of just the grand scheme of things, I really don't. ... I do not regret having stayed here. I don't regret 99% of what I've done here or decided to do here."

## Decision to step down and final season

The decision to step down after this season was a hard one for Ernst, and one that did not come easily.

"There are days right now where I wake up and I think maybe I retired too early; I can probably do this for two, three, four more years," Ernst said. "And then there are days where I wake up and I'm thinking I made the right decision. And I think when you feel like that it's probably time to hang up the cleats and go do something different."

He added he still feels like he's 18, but his body doesn't let him do those things. Regardless, he noted "it's certainly been a great run here" and that he doesn't know where the time has gone, wishing he would have savored it more.

While Ernst officially announced his plans Wednesday to retire at the end of this upcoming season, he informed his returning players of his decision back in January. According to him, it was probably one of the

hardest things he's done and that there were some tears involved, as well as plenty of players who were shocked in the room.

After he told the newcomers and their parents Tuesday about his decision to step away after this season, Ernst plans to turn all of his attention to preparing for this season and hoping to make it as good of a season as possible.

He is looking forward to playing Lawrence again to end the regular season after the last two match-ups were canceled due to COVID-19. Ripon has won the last 20 matchups with the Vikings in the battle for the Doehling-Heselton Memorial Trophy. To make the Nov. 12 game even more special for Ernst is that it will be played in Ripon.

"I want my last regular season game to be a home game; I didn't want to finish it on somebody else's campus," he said.

## Life after coaching

While Ernst has confidence in Marshall taking over the program after this season, he noted it will be tough to step away.

"What's going to be hard — and this is something I've got to work on — is I've got to stay away," Ernst said. "I've got to let them do their thing. Jake has to make this program his own now; he doesn't need me looking over his shoulder every practice saying, 'Hey, why don't you guys do this' or 'Why don't you do that or we used to do this' or 'We used to do that.'"

He added that he may come to practices to just watch after this season, but is going to "keep my mouth shut."

Ernst also plans on attending Red Hawk home games to prevent himself from going stir crazy, which he experienced a bit in 2020 when the season was canceled due to COVID-19. He also intends to watch more college football on TV.

"It's going to feel really weird ... to not [be coaching football]. I know how I felt during COVID. At 1 p.m. on a Saturday, my wife said, 'Get out of the house; just leave,' because I was a bear; I was not a nice person to be around at 1 p.m. during COVID years and I'm going to work real hard to be a very nice person at 1 p.m. in 2023 on a game day Saturday."

Outside of football, he is looking forward to watching his grandkids play sports as the oldest is entering high school. Ernst also would like to travel more with his wife, which includes visiting some of his former stomping grounds in Nebraska and Colorado, as well as check items off his bucket list that he was unable to do because he was busy on Saturdays.



**JAKE MARSHALL, MIDDLE**, celebrates with Rosendale native Cormac Madigan after a touchdown as Ron Ernst stands behind him. Marshall will take over as head coach in 2023. *Jonathan Bailey photo*