



# Sports

Saturday, July 29, 2023

CHIPPEWA.COM

SECTION C

**Brewers:**  
Christian Yelich  
resurgence  
driving division-  
title race



PAGE C3



**Badgers:**  
Braelon Allen  
does not  
regret playing  
running back

PAGE C4

## HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL | CHI-HI CARDINALS

# RAYKOVICH *at* 50

Passion, energy strong as ever  
for Raykovich entering 50th  
year as football coach



BRANDON BERG, CHIPPEWA HERALD

Chi-Hi football coach Chuck Raykovich is all smiles as he prepares to begin his 50th season as a coach on the gridiron next week. Raykovich is a Wisconsin Football Coaches Association at UW-Superior Hall of Famer and ranks among the best in state history in several coaching marks.

**BRANDON BERG**  
brandon.berg@lee.net

**C**huck Raykovich has always been around the sport of football.

Whether it's growing up with a hall of fame father as a coach or becoming a Hall of Famer himself, Raykovich can't envision doing anything else in the fall than coaching football.

Next week the longtime Chi-Hi coach starts his 50th year as a football coach and is showing no signs of winding down.

"I don't even feel like I've been alive that long to be honest with you," Raykovich said. "It seems like when I look at how old I am I'm like, Oh my god, where did it go?"

### Getting to Chippewa

The son of Violet and Joe Raykovich, a 1992 Wisconsin Football Coaches Association Hall of Fame inductee, Chuck has spent his life around football.

"I grew up with the game," Chuck said for a Chippewa Herald story in 1986. "There hasn't

been a fall in my life that I haven't been involved with football. I scrubbed jerseys in the first grade for my dad. I played in junior high, high school and college and then went right into coaching."

Joe led the Trojans from 1954-66 with a career record of 51-37-5, four conference titles and one unbeaten season with Joe's teams fortunes documented in the WIAA Bulletin in the mid 1960s. Joe moved to Bloomer High School in 1966 to serve as guidance counselor and high school principal until retiring in 1985.

His son Chuck followed in his footsteps in football and education, going on to college at UW-Superior in 1970 and graduating in 1974. Chuck didn't have to wait long to become a coach, being named the head coach at Crandon right after graduation. He coached there from 1974-81 and from 1984-85. Chuck posted a 59-26 record there, winning two Northern Lakes Conference titles and finishing second six times. His 1980 and 1984 teams were undefeated with the 1984 squad qualifying for the Division 5 playoffs.

## Chuck Raykovich

**Coaching History:** Head coach at Crandon (1974-81, 1984-85), Assistant coach at UW-Stout (1982-83), Head coach at Chi-Hi (1986-Present)

**Career Record:** 263-185

**Highlights:** Guided teams to 10 total conference titles including Chi-Hi to eight Big Rivers Conference championships starting with the program's first-ever title in 1987...Has 21 total playoff appearances including 20 with Chi-Hi, taking the Cardinals to the Division 2 semifinals in 2015...Wisconsin Football Coaches Association Hall of Fame inductee in 2010...WFCM Marge and Dick Rundle Positive Influence in Coaching Award winner in 2019...UW-Superior's Mertz Mortorelli Coaching Achievement Award in 2019.

**Before Coaching:** Raykovich played multiple sports in high school at New Auburn and Bloomer, helping the Trojans and Blackhawks football teams win conference championships before going on to play football at UW-Superior.

Please see RAYKO, Page C2





BRANDON BERG PHOTOS, CHIPPEWA HERALD

Chi-Hi football coach Chuck Raykovich talks to the team prior to the start of the first practice of the season last August at Dorais Field.

## Rayko

From C1

Between his two tenures in Crandon, Raykovich spent two years as an assistant coach at UW-Stout. But the chance to coach in Chippewa Falls was always on his mind. It was a dream job for Raykovich dating back to when he played in high school. Raykovich was chosen from more than 50 candidates as the replacement for Dave Wilson in the spring of 1986.

Raykovich felt fortunate to be hired for the job and to this day still considers himself lucky to have it.

"I just feel very fortunate, very lucky and I hope I have and will treat the job and everything with great respect," Raykovich said.

### Principles

When Raykovich took over the Chi-Hi program, he brought with a commitment to weight training and a passion for running the football.

The early days of the Chi-Hi run game featured the Wishbone — a result of Raykovich's close connections at the time to the University of Oklahoma staff and head coach Barry Switzer. To run the ball effectively it takes strength and Raykovich also noticed the school's weight training facilities could use work. As the years have passed, Raykovich has tweaked his offensive philosophy, adding more of a passing element while still staying true to the ground as he's become synonymous with the double wing offense.

"People say all he does is run the ball," Raykovich said. "Well, first off you can't be successful if you can't run the ball. Look at everybody at every level and if you go back to when Jon Erickson was the quarterback here a long time ago we started throwing the ball with him before basically anybody else did in the league. We've adjusted and adapt and will continue to do that but our basis will always fall back (on) we better be able to run the ball."

Chi-Hi earned a 25-12 victory over Wausau East in the 1986 season opener and finished the season with a 5-4 record. The next year the program took a big step forward, winning a share of the program's first-ever Big Rivers Conference title and qualifying for the playoffs for the first time. Chi-Hi followed up with a second

straight league title in 1988 with an unbeaten record in Big Rivers play. Dave Czech was a key player on those back-to-back title teams and said what separates Raykovich from others isn't just his success on the football field, but how he sets up his players to succeed off it.

"Everything he does with that program is about building people from the ground up, not just football players," Czech said.

### Service

Success isn't just measured in wins and losses.

Raykovich has placed a premium on helping others through the program.

More than 20 years ago, Raykovich and Gordy Schafer helped create the Chi-Hi Extravaganza, a yearly event that serves as the primary fundraiser for the Chi-Hi Booster Club. An event Raykovich has called "The Biggest Ticket in Town", the extravaganza helps cover the cost of additional items for the school's teams as well as keeping participation fees affordable for families. To date the event has raised more than \$1.4 million for Cardinal athletics including \$170,000 this past year.

In more recent years Raykovich's football program has created and built its annual Veterans Appreciation Night. The event serves as a way to thank local veterans for their service while also hosting a warm clothing drive and fundraiser for homeless veterans. The team runs its events in conjunction with The Hands Foundation which is run by Scott Merrier, a college roommate of Raykovich's.

Raykovich established a captain's program for his team with any senior that wishes to be a team captain needing to put together a project that reaches beyond the football field, helping others in the school and the community.

"It's more than just football," Czech said. "At the high school level you are going to have some years where you're going to struggle and if your community is all wins and losses and that's the only thing I think it would be particularly hard for a coach to survive if that's all they had to fall back on. But I think so many people that went through the program can vouch for the fact that he knows what he's doing."

"There's going to be some tough years we live through but in the end the course that he has got the program on in terms of what

it does for young men in general going through that program is on the right path."

### Loyalty

Take one look at the coaching staff alongside Raykovich and chances are you'll see no shortage of familiar faces.

Most of the assistant coaches on the team played for Raykovich at Chi-Hi and have returned, excited for the chance to coach with him. Current defensive coordinator Chad Burger calls Raykovich an "incredible person" and said it's an honor to have the chance to share the sideline with the coach.

"His success is measured by his players' success and I think that is the true outstanding thing about being able to coach for him and being able to play with him," Burger said. "He cares for you as a person, he cares about your personal success more than your football success. It's truly remarkable and it shows in his actions."

Burger credited Raykovich for his youthful approach and his ability to adapt to changes as the years have gone by.

Ed Watkins was an assistant coach on Raykovich's staffs for 24 years filling a variety of roles and said the energy Raykovich continues to show as he reaches year 50 is remarkable.

"It's tough coaching football. It's tough coaching sports in high school," Watkins said. "But to be up every August and be ready to go at it for 3-4 months is absolutely incredible. The stamina he has is remarkable and I think in the last 5-6 years it's gotten higher."

During Watkins' tenure with the Cardinals he was ready to step down from his position in order to have time to watch his son Mitch play for Eau Claire North. Instead Raykovich and Watkins worked out a way to do both. Watkins coached with Chi-Hi from Sunday through Thursday and on Friday nights was open to watch his son play for the Huskies. While watching Eau Claire North games, Watkins would have a portable radio in his ear listening to the Chi-Hi game to keep track of both teams.

"That was a big deal," Watkins said of the agreement. "(It's) a big-hearted man that does that."

Watkins called Raykovich a 'great, great human being' and was grateful Raykovich said Watkins would always have a job on his staff.

Nick Bohl played for Raykovich, later returned to the staff as an assistant coach and is now leading his own program in Oconto Falls. Bohl called Raykovich a role model and special person with many of Bohl's former classmates and teammates asking how their former coach and teacher is doing.

"I think the biggest thing with Coach Rayko is he allows you to make mistakes and he'll coach you and fix those mistakes," Bohl said. "As a player you see that through practice you'll make mistakes and he'll get on you and hold you accountable so you don't make those mistakes. Then as a young coach he really let me cut my teeth and try things my way and say 'Hey, this is the better way to do it!'"

"He allows you to be yourself and be who you are and grow into a great human with the influence that he always has."



Chi-Hi coach Chuck Raykovich and the Cardinals head out to the field for warmups prior to a game against River Falls on Sept. 30, 2022 at Dorais Field.

Bohl will get the chance to lead his team on his old field when Dorais Field plays host to a neutral-site game between Oconto Falls and Grantsburg on Thursday, Aug. 31.

"Usually it's always a story or an interesting nugget or whatever it is he says," Bohl said of Raykovich. "He's been around the block and you've just got to listen to people like that and those are the guys that you learn from and become a better person because of it."

It's a level of loyalty Raykovich has never taken for granted.

"I think this word family is really overused. You hear kids (and) even NFL and college guys (say) it feels like family but this really has been," Raykovich said. "(My wife) Roxie and I don't have any kids and I'm looking at all from my freshman coaches on up, all but one or two have played for me. It's good to have those guys come back. They know me, they know what I expect and they agree to it and they do a heck of a job."

"I look around at other coaches that are struggling to find assistants and I got good ones, I'm telling you. I've got the best!"

### Longevity

Fifty years is a long time do anything and during Raykovich's 50 years as a coach, he's worked with people in a variety of ways.

Chi-Hi activities director Mike Thompson played for Raykovich in the mid 1990s before coaching on his staff and now working with the coach in an administrative role. Thompson describes Raykovich as a passionate teacher and person who cares about kids and their development.

"No matter the age, he connects with kids," Thompson said of Raykovich. "He's done such an excellent job of leading young men and women over the years and he's just got that infectious personality."

This fall Thompson will start a full circle experience many others have felt as Thompson's son enters the program his dad played for, under the same head coach.

"He's done such an excellent job of rooting himself in people and experiences," Thompson said.

The longevity has helped Raykovich move into an elite class of coach in the state of Wisconsin.

Raykovich starts the fall tied with West De Pere's Bill Turnquist for sixth in state history in games coached (448) according to state records from WisSports.net. He's 19th in total wins (263) and with at least three this season would

move up to 16th in state history. His win total is also sixth in the state among active coaches. Under Raykovich's leadership the Cardinals have won eight Big Rivers Conference championships and the coach is recognized in a several hall of fames as a WFCA Hall of Fame honoree in 2010 and at his alma mater college as UW-Superior's Mertz Mortorelli Coaching Achievement Award in 2019.

All 20 of Chi-Hi's playoff berths have come under Raykovich with the deepest trip being in 2015 to the Division 2 semifinals.

"You could ask somebody from the 80s, the 90s, the 2000s, today and they're going to run through a wall for coach," Thompson said.

### Future

For some people, the start of the high school football season is the first day of fall practice. For others, it's the first game of the regular season.

But for Raykovich it's around the Fourth of July when the family pontoon is essentially put away for the year and his thoughts fully turn to the gridiron.

"I just worry have we done enough, have I done enough and that all started July 3rd and it won't get better until the first helmets go on and we get on the field and then it's like OK," Raykovich said.

Other opportunities have come over the years to coach elsewhere, but for someone born and raised in the area Chippewa Falls has always remained the perfect fit.

"I really never wanted to go south," Raykovich said. "I'm an up north type guy and this is it right here?"

Sleep is in short supply for Raykovich at this time of year as he prepares for Tuesday's start of year 50 as a coach on the gridiron.

"It wasn't a goal to reach 50," Raykovich said. "Who knows? Maybe I'll make 80. Who knows? Maybe I won't make 51. Who knows?"

The effort and energy the hall of fame coach shows says there's no sign of slowing down.

"He's amazing," Bohl said of Raykovich. "Fifty years and I hope there's another 50 more with that."

Regardless of how many more years there are, Raykovich will still do all he can to lead the program he loves with the same energy he had when he first saw football being played at the Chippewa Fairgrounds back when he was in high school.

"I can't believe that I've got this job," Raykovich said.



Chuck Raykovich celebrates with his Chi-Hi coaching staff after defeating Menomonie in the third round of the Division 2 playoffs on Nov. 6, 2015 at Dorais Field.