

High School Hockey: Grosso, 'a teacher by trade,' ready to retire

Posted: Friday, November 13, 2015 10:47 am | Updated: 11:58 am, Fri Nov 13, 2015.

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For the past few years Joni Grosso had some serious advice for her husband, Lorne.

"She always says 'when one of your players tells you that you coached his grandpa, it's time to retire,'" Lorne said with a laugh. "I haven't had that happen yet, but it's probably not too far off."

Grosso isn't taking any chances. He's getting out of the coaching business after 50 seasons and before he coaches his first third-generation Rochester Mayo hockey player.

Grosso, 73, made it official today: He's retiring as Mayo's head coach at the end of this season, to spend more time with Joni, as well as their seven grandchildren and six (soon to be seven) great-grandchildren.

"This has been coming the last few years," he said. "I still feel good on the ice. I still love to teach. I still love the strategy of the game, but I can only last so long."

When Grosso came to the brand-new Rochester Mayo High School in 1966, its boys hockey team practiced outdoors. He would take a shovel to the rink each day before practice to rid it of loose snow.

Times have changed but Grosso hasn't.

He'll retire with the most coaching victories ever by a high school hockey coach in Minnesota. He enters his final season with a 61.6 winning percentage and a career record of [693-435-28](#). Mayo activities director Jeff Whitney said the search for a new coach will begin after the season. "Lorne and I have joked about him retiring for a few years," said Whitney, who played for Grosso and later coached with him. "He'd say 'I'm going to retire ... in another 10 years.'"

"He has hinted a little more seriously over the past three or four years. I knew it would happen sooner or later. When someone has coached for 50 years, you can't be surprised when they retire."

Mayo's seventh victory this season will make Grosso the first coach in the state to reach 700. But he has never been as concerned with wins and losses as he has been with helping his players improve on and off the ice.

"Every kid who's come through ... I've coached with him when he's had Division-I kids and he treats everyone the same way," Whitney said. "He connects the same way with the star player as he does with the student managers. He treats them all with respect; everyone learns the same lessons from him."

A family tradition

Hockey has been part of Grosso's makeup since he was born. He grew up in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, where he would spend four or five hours a day on the rink after school, more on the weekends.

Grosso's dad played hockey. His uncle Don played for the NHL's Detroit Red Wings. Lorne looked up to former NHL stars Phil and Tony Esposito, both of whom grew up in Sault Ste. Marie. And one of Grosso's cousins is Lou Nanne, the Minnesota hockey icon who played five seasons for the Rochester Mustangs (1962-67) and 11 seasons for the North Stars. They grew up just a block away from one another.

"Lorne was a couple years (younger than) me, but we played a lot of street hockey together," Nanne said. "He was a terrific hockey player. No matter the level he was playing at, he was never out of place.

"He was a good student, too. And coaching for 50 years ... he has the personality that people like and are attracted to. They know he's genuine."

Nanne helped legendary coach John Mariucci recruit Grosso to play for the University of Minnesota, where Grosso skated on a line with current Albert Lea coach Roy Nystrom.

Grosso came to Rochester at age 24 to start the Mayo program, while also playing for the Mustangs. He and Joni already had two children, their oldest daughter, Laura, and a son, Jim. Their youngest daughter, Marisa, joined the family a couple years later.

'I'm a teacher'

Grosso didn't set out to coach for 50 years — minus a one-season sabbatical to Italy in 1987-88 — in one place.

"Not even close," he said, "but every year you learn something new and teach something different.

"John Wooden used to say 'if you don't change, there's no progress.' I love practice more than I love the games. I'm a teacher."

Though he retired from teaching in 1999, Grosso continued to coach both tennis (retiring from that job in 2004 after 15 seasons as head coach) and hockey at Mayo because he's a teacher at heart. Hockey — much like the Italian and Latin classes he taught at Mayo and later at Rochester Lourdes — is just a vehicle that allows him to help his players learn and grow as athletes and as people.

That he coached two Olympians, dozens of Division I and Division III college players, and plenty who went on to play professionally, is an added bonus.

"He's a teacher by trade," Nanne said of his cousin. "He always wanted to be a teacher. Everybody likes Lorne and flocks to him because of his personality. I knew he'd be a success no matter what he decided to do."

Grosso coached seven teams to the state tournament, the first in 1982 and the other six between 1992 and 2000. The 1995 Spartans team came closest to reaching a state title game. Mayo beat White Bear Lake 5-4 in the state quarterfinals that year before losing 5-4 in double-overtime to Moorhead. Edina then beat Mayo in the third-place game.

While Grosso has never defined his career by wins and losses, perhaps the most remarkable stat that sums up the consistency in the Mayo program is this: In 49 seasons, Mayo has finished with a sub-.500 record just eight times.

And, like always, regardless of wins and losses, Grosso is determined to enjoy this season, knowing that he won't be back on the Graham Arena ice next November.

"I'll miss the strategy, the tactics, working with the kids," he said. "I'll miss watching the younger kids to see who's coming up.

"Being around teenagers keeps you young. You have to have the energy and a sense of humor to connect with them. I'll miss it. This is what I've done for years. It's been a big part of my life."

Boys hockey: Mayo's Grosso a math-ter teacher and coach

Posted: Wednesday, November 25, 2015 3:24 pm | Updated: 7:33 pm, Thu Dec 3, 2015.

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Jerry Olson

Lorne Grosso - Mayo boys hockey

Lorne Grosso retired from teaching at Rochester Mayo High School at the end of the 1998-99 school year.

He'll retire from coaching the Mayo boys hockey team at the end of this season, his 50th with the program. But the teacher in him hasn't gone away, likely never will.

Grosso engaged students for nearly 35 years in his Latin and Italian classes. After his retirement from teaching, he kept teaching. It began with one section of Latin at Lourdes High School that ultimately turned into three or four sections, simply because so many students wanted to take his classes.

After retiring *again* from teaching, he continued to teach. This time as a substitute and occasionally to help out a colleague.

With his ability to relate to teenagers, Grosso was a natural teacher of Latin and Italian and health. You name the subject, he would teach it.

"I've always been impressed with his passion for coaching and teaching," Mayo High School math teacher/boys basketball coach Shaun Lang said. "He and I talked a lot about what it's like to be a coach and about wanting to make a difference in kids lives."

Lang reached out to Grosso last school year, seeking some new avenues to get students interested in math lessons.

Grosso had the answer immediately.

"He had told me about a competition he'd do in his classes to engage students," Lang said. "He'd put them in teams, make up trivia questions and have fun with it."

Lang made up the question, then Grosso came to his classroom and ran the contest for the first time.

"In 45 minutes, not only did the kids learn some math, but it was the most engaged I had ever seen them," Lang said. "They were laughing the whole time. It was the most fun they had ever had in class.

"When the class was done, Lorne turned to me and said 'You can do that, too.' I said, 'No, coach, I can never do what you just did.' But that's what it means to him to be a coach and teacher, to truly make an impact on kids' lives."

In February or March, when Mayo's hockey season comes to a close, Grosso will leave as the state's all-time wins leader, likely with more than 700. He has 694 now, 78 more than one of his coaching mentors, legendary Edina coach Willard Ikola.

When Grosso started Mayo's program from scratch in 1966, he didn't set out to surpass Ikola's record of 616 coaching victories. He didn't think he and his wife, Joni, would spend 50 years in Rochester.

But Grosso has become synonymous with Mayo hockey.

"It boggles my mind and blows me away that he can be the winningest coach in the state, one of the winningest in the United States, that he can have that record and still be so humble," Lang said.

"I'm sure he's the same guy today he was 50 years ago."

(see next page for another article)

Boys hockey: Grosso has impacted many lives in five decades at Mayo

Posted: Wednesday, November 25, 2015 10:14 pm | Updated: 2:21 am, Thu Nov 26, 2015.

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One Minnesota hockey icon recruited Lorne Grosso to the University of Minnesota. Another coached him there.

"He was a terrific hockey player," said former U.S. Olympian, Minnesota North Star and Rochester Mustang Lou Nanne, who did the recruiting. "No matter the level he was playing at, he was never out of place."

Nanne was a senior with the Gophers when he recruited Grosso, his cousin, from their hometown of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, to come to Minnesota to play for legendary head coach John Mariucci. Grosso said he had to grab a map to figure out how to get to Minneapolis, but playing for Mariucci only cemented what he already knew: He was born to be a teacher and a coach.

Now, nearly 50 years after Grosso moved to Rochester to play for the Mustangs and start the Mayo High School hockey program, he has decided the time has come for the Spartans to have their second permanent head coach in program history.

Two years ago, Grosso received the Mariucci Award from the American Hockey Coaches Association. The award is given to a secondary school coach who best exemplifies the spirit, dedication and enthusiasm of Mariucci. Nanne said Mariucci, who died in 1987, would have taken a lot of pride in Grosso's success.

"First and foremost, (Mariucci) would have said how proud he is," Nanne said. "Then he would have said something like, 'Lorne's still coaching? He had to coach because he couldn't play!'"

"John always treated us guys like family."

A hockey heritage

Grosso's path to Rochester started 73 years ago in "The Soo," a city of more than 75,000 on the St. Marys River in northern Ontario.

Hockey was a way of life there. His family lived a block away from Nanne's and if they weren't skating on a backyard rink, they were in the street playing boot hockey.

"Not too many people didn't play hockey," Grosso said. "We would spend four or five hours a day after school playing hockey. Louie would yell at us to make sure we collected his (equipment) as his mother was dragging him inside (for supper)."

Grosso's father played. His uncle, Don, won a Stanley Cup with the Detroit Red Wings in 1943. Grosso grew up with future NHL stars and Hockey Hall of Fame inductees Phil and Tony Esposito, both of whom played more than 15 seasons in the NHL.

Grosso went into the Brazilian Order for Priests for six months after he finished high school. But his heart brought him back to hockey.

Eventually, Nanne convinced Mariucci to bring Grosso to Minneapolis. Mariucci had never seen Grosso play and Grosso had never seen the Gophers play when he accepted the scholarship offer. Grosso played in 73 games for Minnesota, scoring 36 goals and 90 points, or 16 more points in eight less games than Nanne had produced for the maroon-and-gold.

"Lornie was not a very big guy, not a really physical player, but he was tough," said Albert Lea head boys hockey coach Roy Nystrom, Grosso's linemate with the Gophers. "He was a good playmaker, set us up well and as a result we scored a lot of goals. He was an unselfish player. That's the way our line was, we were unselfish players."

Grosso and Nystrom were joined on a line by Craig Falkman. Together, the trio accounted for 272 career points.

"I don't remember how or why, but we all ended up on a line together and became fast friends," Nystrom said. "We had a lot of chemistry together right away."

Arriving in Rochester

Perhaps the only thing Grosso has been committed to longer than the Mayo hockey program is his marriage. He and his wife, Joni, celebrated their 51st wedding anniversary in September.

When Lorne took the teaching and coaching job at Mayo High School as a fresh-faced 24-year-old, their oldest daughter Laura had already been born, as had their only son, Jim. Their youngest daughter, Marisa, joined the family two years later.

"It was a shock to me to see he got the head coaching job. He was 24 and looked 18 or maybe 16," Joni said with a laugh. "Back then, the whole team, coaches and players, would wear blazers on

game days. They would get off the bus and the other team would say 'where is your coach?' and Lorne would laugh and say 'I'm the coach.' ... They wouldn't believe him sometimes."

It took close to a decade for Mayo to begin having consistent success. The Spartans had six losing records in their first 10 seasons. They have had just six losing records in the subsequent 39 seasons.

Grosso built up the program by digging in at the youth level. He would conduct skating camps in the summer with Gene Sack, the legendary head coach of Mayo's cross-town rival Rochester John Marshall.

"I worked a lot of those summer and fall hockey schools with Lorne and Gene, the three of us," said Neil McCormack, who, like Grosso, arrived as a coach at Mayo when the school opened. McCormack coached nearly every sport at Mayo at some point in his tenure. He retired as the boys golf coach in February. "I always made sure that when those two were together, that I was on the ice with them.

"It was a laugh a minute with those two. Lorne was the only person who could one-up Gene, leave him laughing and speechless. I thought that was kind of cool. Here were two guys who were really intense when they were coaching, but when they were doing camps, when they were teaching, they had a blast."

More than hockey

When Grosso was hired at Mayo, he said school board members "made it very clear I was hired as a teacher first, a coach second."

They needn't have worried.

"We get letters from guys all over the country who he coached or taught way back when," said Joni Grosso, who was a preschool teacher at Aldrich Memorial Nursery School until her retirement. "They always say 'yes, you taught me Latin or hockey, but most important is you taught me character, how to treat people and what's most important in life, how to be a good person.' Those letters are so meaningful to me."

Whether it was Latin (which he later taught at Lourdes High School after retiring from his teaching job at Mayo), Italian, health or another subject, Grosso's approach was more about connecting with the students than about the material. If he could connect with the students, he could teach them the material, he said.

That's the same philosophy he brings to the ice, and brought to the Mayo boys tennis team in his 15 seasons as its head coach.

"If you're not teaching as a coach, then you're not coaching," he said. "I try to teach so much more than hockey. We teach values and respect — respect your opponent, the officials, your teammates — and carry yourself with class."

Tennis time

Grosso took over as Mayo's boys tennis coach in 1991. The Spartans' current head coach, Jeff Demaray, served as Grosso's assistant during his entire tenure, which ended with his resigning as tennis coach in 2004.

Together, they coached five teams to state tournaments, in 1996, '97, '99, 2003 and '04. The Spartans were the state runners-up in 1996, losing to Bloomington Jefferson in the state championship match. Coincidentally, Jefferson had ended at least one of the best seasons the Mayo hockey program had, in the 1980 Region 1 championship game.

But Mayo's best showing at a state tennis tournament under Grosso came, well, not under Grosso.

"He had a double-hernia operation the week of state and couldn't go up with us," Demaray said. "We had about 50 kids, and three coaches, in the program at the time, so it was up to me and our other coach, Kevin Allen."

Demaray said he still applies many lessons he learned from watching Grosso.

"Relating to players is what I learned most from him, getting them ready mentally for each and every match," he said. "He did such a terrific job of that. I knew the tennis skills portion well, I had a good handle on that aspect, but working with the players, getting them mentally prepared, which is so important in tennis or any sport, is what I learned the most about."

Good teams, tough losses

Grosso guided Mayo to the state hockey tournament seven times, with a fourth-place finish in 1995 the Spartans' best.

Six of those seven trips saw Mayo lose to the eventual state champion or state runner-up, including 1995, when Moorhead rallied with a deflected-shot goal in regulation and beat the Spartans 5-4 in double-overtime in the state semifinals. Future Minnesota Wild forward Matt Cullen scored the game winner in that game.

"I still can't stand Cullen," Grosso said before laughing and praising the former Moorhead star's ability.

The 1980 team, which lost to Jefferson in the region final, is one that still sticks in Grosso's memory to this day. That team featured one of the two Olympians he has coached, Jim Johannson. Eric Strobel, a member of the 1980 Miracle on Ice U.S. team, is the other. John Johannson was also on that 1980 Mayo team, as was current Mayo activities director Jeff Whitney.

"That team is one of the few times where a loss has really affected Lorne," Joni said. "That was one of the best teams he's had. He has said before that his biggest regret is not getting that team to state. A few little breakdowns changed the game in three minutes. He loves all of his teams — our son played on a team that went to state — but there was something very, very special about that team."

A coaching tree

Mayo first went to state in 1982. It went back six times between 1992 and 2000. With the way the hockey landscape has changed around the state, with the dominance of the Lakeville teams and the emergence of Farmington as a Section 1 power, Mayo will have an extremely tough road to get back to state one more time under Grosso.

But he knows his philosophies and his way of treating people will be carried on by many of his players, and by many coaches he interacts with. Just as dozens of his players went on to Division I and pro hockey, dozens went on to become coaches.

"He definitely passed on a desire to do coach," said Rochester Century science teacher Bruce Frutiger, who played for Grosso at Mayo and later coached against him as head coach at John Marshall and Century. "You don't coach unless you want to. There's something about the game you love and want to pass it on and have a positive impact on young people.

"Lorne loves the game and cares so much about his players that you can't help but have fun. I can't imagine hockey not being fun and when I think of that, I think of Lorne."

What's next?

High school coaches don't stick around for 50 years because of the pay. Grosso said it will be difficult for him to leave the game behind; it's been in his blood as long as he can remember.

But he and Joni will have more time to spend in Florida in the winter months and he'll make sure he's never far from a rink.

"I'm not tired, that's for sure," he said. "I still feel good. I look forward to having time to do some different things. I'll miss the strategy, the tactics, and more than anything, working with the kids. Teenagers keep you young. It's what I've done for years. It's my life."

As always, he looks at his retirement with his usual sense of humor, saying Joni might re-think her desire to have him retire once she realizes how much he's around the house.

"I really think he would coach for another 10 years," Joni said with a laugh. "He's 73, but doesn't act like it at all. He's with teenagers so much, he just loves working with them. Anytime he can teach kids of any age, he absolutely loves it.

"We both feel fortunate to have had jobs that we absolutely loved."

Grosso's record, year by year

Posted: Friday, November 27, 2015 7:20 am

Former Edina head coach Willard Ikola held the Minnesota high school record with 616 career hockey coaching victories until 2011. Ikola had a career record of [616-149-38](#) (80.5 pct.) in 33 seasons. Rochester Mayo's Lorne Grosso, who is in his 50th season of coaching (*not counting his sabbatical year*), passed Ike's record on Jan. 15, 2011, when Mayo defeated John Marshall 2-1. Grosso has a career record of [693-437-28](#) (61.3 pct.) two games into the 2015-16 season. He had coached in 1,156 games coming into this season.

Albert Lea's Roy Nystrom won his 616th game as a head coach on Dec. 2, 2010, and 617th on Dec. 7, 2010, but 94 of his victories came as head coach at Grand Forks (N.D.) Central. He had 683 victories going into the 2015-16 season; 589 of those at Albert Lea.

GROSSO, YEAR BY YEAR

1966-67: 8-9-1

1967-68: 8-7-1 (16-16-2)

1968-69: 14-7-0 (30-23-2)

1969-70: 6-15-0 (36-38-2)

1970-71: 4-17-0 (40-55-2)

1971-72: 6-15-0 (46-70-2)
1972-73: 10-10-2 (56-80-4)
1973-74: 9-10-0 (65-90-4)
1974-75: 12-10-0 (77-100-4)
1975-76: 15-7-0 (92-107-4)
1976-77: 12-10-0 (104-117-4)
1977-78: 15-6-0 (119-123-4)
1978-79: 15-5-2 (134-128-6)
1979-80: 21-3-0 (155-131-6)
1980-81: 13-8-1 (168-139-7)

1981-82: 18-7-1 (186-146-8) state tourney
1982-83: 10-13-1 (196-159-9)
1983-84: 14-8-0 (210-167-9)
1984-85: 17-6-0 (227-173-9)
1985-86: 17-6-0 (244-179-9)
1986-87: 12-9-0 (256-188-9)
1987-88: On sabbatical in Italy
1988-89: 17-8-0 (273-196-9)
1989-90: 17-8-0 (290-204-9)
1990-91: 17-6-1 ([307-210-10](#))

1991-92: 17-9-1 ([324-219-11](#)) state tourney
1992-93: 10-13-0 ([334-232-11](#))
1993-94: 14-12-1 ([348-244-12](#)) state tourney
1994-95: 20-8-0 ([368-252-12](#)) state tourney
1995-96: 18-6-0 ([386-258-12](#))
1996-97: 24-3-0 ([410-261-12](#)) state tourney
1997-98: 18-4-2 ([428-265-14](#))
1998-99: 21-5-2 ([449-270-16](#)) state tourney
1999-00: 24-4-0 ([473-274-16](#)) state tourney
2000-01: 16-6-2 ([489-280-18](#))

2001-02: 17-7-0 ([506-287-18](#))
2002-03: 9-16-1 ([515-303-19](#))
2003-04: 16-9-1 ([531-312-20](#))
2004-05: 12-14-1 ([543-326-21](#))
2005-06: 17-9-1 ([560-335-22](#))

2006-07: 13-14-0 ([573-349-22](#))

2007-08: 15-11-1 ([588-360-23](#))

2008-09: 17-9-1 ([605-369-24](#))

2009-10: 7-19-0 ([612-388-24](#))

2010-11: 12-12-2 ([624-400-26](#))

2011-12: 17-10-0 ([641-410-26](#))

2012-13: 21-6-0 ([662-416-26](#))

2013-14: 15-10-1 ([677-426-27](#))

2014-15: 16-9-1 ([693-435-28](#))

2015-16: 0-2-0 (693-437-28)

State Tournament History

- 1982: Lost to Edina 7-4 in the quarterfinal (Edina won the championship 6-0 over White Bear Lake Mariner) | Defeated East Grand Forks 5-4 in overtime | Lost to Cloquet 9-4 to finish sixth
- 1992: Lost to Moorhead 7-1 in the quarterfinal (Moorhead finished second) | Lost to Apple Valley 8-1 in the consolation semifinal
- 1994: Lost to South St. Paul 4-1 in the quarterfinal | Lost to White Bear Lake 4-1 in the consolation semifinal
- 1995: Defeated White Bear Lake 5-4 in the quarterfinal | Lost to Moorhead 5-4 in two overtimes in the semifinal (Moorhead finished 2nd) | Lost to Edina 6-2 to finish fourth
- 1997: Lost to Duluth East 3-2 in a very good quarterfinal game (Duluth East lost 1-0 to Edina in the championship game; Duluth East finished 26-1-1 on the season) | Mayo lost to Anoka 4-1 in the consolation semifinal
- 1999: Lost to Roseau 4-2 in the quarterfinal (Roseau was the 1999 State Champion defeating Academy of Holy Angels and Hastings in the semifinal and championship games) | Mayo lost to Eden Prairie 5-2 in the consolation semifinal
- 2000: Lost to Blaine 4-1 in the quarterfinal (Blaine defeated Duluth East 6-0 in the championship game) | defeated Bloomington Jefferson 3-1 in the consolation semifinal | Lost to Roseau 4-1 to finish sixth