



WALT AND JANICE OWENS PARK



Huskies

HUSKIE FAMILY. NIU EDUCATION.
CAMPAIGN TO SUSTAIN
NIU TRADITION. HUSKIE PRIDE.

WALT “COACH O” OWENS

Walt Owens has been a constant fixture at NIU and NIU sporting events for over four decades. As a show of appreciation for all the lives he has helped over the years, NIU Athletics would like to announce an integral fundraising campaign that will resurface the infield at Ralph McKinzie Field with synthetic grass turf. Upon the completion of the campaign, the home of NIU Baseball will always hold coach’s legacy, as it will be named Ralph McKinzie Field at Walt & Janice Owens Park.



WALT “COACH O” OWENS

Coach Walt Owens, known to many as “Coach O”, has exemplified what it means to be a man of service, through his teaching, coaching and mentoring. Perhaps his most enduring characteristic is that of inspiration. The impact Owens has had extends far beyond wins and losses. For 34 years, he influenced the lives of students and student-athletes alike at Northern Illinois University. He did the same in the city of Detroit for 19 years prior.

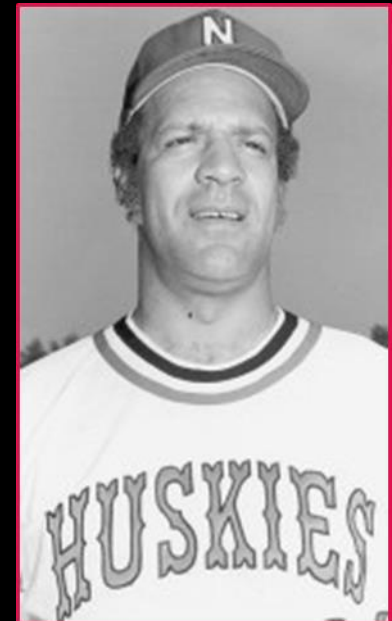
Owens’ success started early. He coached three high school baseball championship teams, four National Amateur baseball championship teams and won a record-breaking 1955 MAC Championship on the 880-yard relay team for Western Michigan University.

Walt Owens played for the Detroit Stars of the Negro League from 1953-1955 and was later inducted into the Negro Baseball League Hall of Fame in 2000. He integrated baseball in the city of Detroit in 1957. In June 2008, Major League Baseball conducted a special Negro Leagues Player Draft. With the fifth pick in the first round, the Chicago Cubs selected Walt Owens.

When his decorated playing career ended, he began impacting students at NIU as a professor and assistant basketball coach under Emory Luck beginning in 1973. After a three-year stint on the hardwood, Coach Owens served as NIU’s Head Baseball Coach from 1976 to 1982.

An emeritus professor at NIU, in 2011, Owens received the E.B. Henderson Award at the National Association for Health & Fitness. The award acknowledges those who made outstanding contributions to the improvement and development of their community. Owens received this honor for his leadership in fighting racial discrimination in both his profession and society.

His leadership extended to several boards, including the National Congress of Black Faculty, the Illinois Committee on Black Concerns in Higher Education as well as his role as chair of the Presidential Commission on the Status of Minorities and task force member on Racial Discrimination and Sexual Harassment.



A HALL OF FAME PERSPECTIVE

Walt Owens had the magic touch. He always had the ability to turn boys into men. He taught me about history, fine dining, proper attire, jazz music, cooking, and was full of wonderful stories about his adventures in life that inspired me and anyone else around. I remember when I got a call from the Chicago Bulls inviting me to their pre season practices. I had just sold my car and had no transportation. He threw me the keys to his son Mel's Camaro and said keep it until you're done. That's how generous he was.

I loved his storytelling ability. No one does it better. Those Negro league experiences about Cool Papa Bell hitting the light switch and getting under the sheets before the lights went out was told in such a way that to this day I still believe it.

Coach O had so much class, grace under pressure, and that cool attitude. Wearing those fancy suits, suede shoes, perfectly pressed shirts, sweet smelling cologne. We all wanted to be like him. We had to keep our grades above 3.0 GPA as education was very important to him. Lastly, I attended a basketball game and was invited to the Nelson suite. A young black man was at the entrance and was so clean-cut, polite, and articulate I knew Coach O had mentored him. Sure enough he stated that Coach O taught him how to be successful in life.

Walt Owens is a true legend in sports and life.

Huskie Hall of Famer, Matt Hicks, Jr. 1974-77



A FRIENDLY NARRATIVE

As a close and dear friend, I have known Walt "Coach O" for the past 40 years. He is and has been a major difference maker at NIU for 50 years. The students loved him as a Professor, Coach, Mentor, Father Figure and great friend. As a Leader at NIU, faculty, students, and staff gave him numerous awards. He personally was responsible for recruiting, developing and graduating hundreds of NIU students.

Walt Owens is one of Detroit, Michigan's most celebrated and honored citizens as an athlete, coach, and educator. He is a great leader of both women and men across America.

Dr. Larry D. Bolles



The impact Coach Owens has made on the lives of so many individuals (baseball and non baseball players) over the years, speaks volumes of his character and work ethic as a teacher, coach, mentor and role model. I couldn't think of a more deserving man to honor for his life work to help others and for his commitment to NIU and the greater DeKalb community and beyond. He is truly a walking legend for all that he has accomplished on and off of the field. It's a privilege hearing his great stories on the baseball field, I cherish the shared memories I've made with him and it's an honor to be considered his friend.

Wheeler Coleman
Former Chair, NIU Board of Trustees



TURFING THE INFIELD

Phase One of the Walt & Janice Owens Park will allow the NIU Baseball program to install artificial turf to the infield at Ralph McKinzie Field. Initial plans are to have new cutting edge artificial turf installed for the start of the 2021 baseball season and will be ready to go as Head Coach Mike Kunigonis leads the Huskies onto the diamond.



CAMPAIGN PHASES



Northern Illinois University - Baseball Field Layout
COLOR RENDERING IF FOR REFERENCE ONLY - NOT TO SCALE


Updated 4/30/19



PHASE 3 – New Grandstands



IMPACT: A COACH'S PERSPECTIVE

I want to share how much pride it would give me and the NIU Baseball program to honor Coach Owens by naming the ballpark the Walt & Janice Owens Park. College baseball has grown so much over the years and how it has emerged as one of the big fish in the world of NCAA Athletics, just behind Football and Men's Basketball. I say this because if you were like most sports fans and tuned in to the College World Series final game you were one of over 2 million viewers that day. The viewership eclipsed all MLB single game viewership's to date including the Red Sox vs Yankee Series on Sunday night baseball early in June.

The sports growing popularity over the years has led to an explosion of investments into college baseball programs across the country. Programs we compete against every day in recruiting and on the field of play have made very recent investments into their baseball facilities and programs. NIU has made that investment to the Huskieball program and is ready to make that investment into the Huskieball facilities – but we need your help. Turf fields are a necessity in the Midwest and northern states today. This upgrade will allow our players more opportunities to develop on the field during the harsh winter and spring months in DeKalb and allow the team to play more home games during the season.

We are seeing college baseball grow, not only in the traditional southern states, but the Midwest Region and our own Mid-American Conference. Michigan's run in the CWS proved to baseball fans across the country that the south isn't the only place that college baseball flourishes. The Midwest has produced some of the best players and teams the game has seen in recent history. I can think of no better way of honoring the legacy of the person and accomplishments of "Coach O" with an incredible facility that will allow NIU baseball to thrive for the foreseeable future.

Our semi-final extra inning loss in the MAC tournament proved that NIU Baseball is ready to make the jump into the MAC's baseball elite. Coming up one game short of the MAC title game has given this program a taste of what winning a MAC title could be like. We are ready to take it one step further in 2020 and compete for that MAC title. With your help we will be able to sustain that level of play for years to come!



Mike Kunigonis
Head Baseball Coach



IMPACT: A PLAYER'S PERSPECTIVE

It is an exciting time to be a part of this program with our newly renovated locker room, dugouts and now the stadium and turf project. As a player, it is great to see and feel the support from our administration making baseball a priority. The idea of having turf for our team would mean the world in more ways than one. It will first allow us to be able to play more home games in front of you and all our fans. Playing more games at home will save on travel expenses allowing the program to reinvest that money on other resources and equipment to further our development. Being in the Midwest, the weather is always a challenge with us playing on a natural surface. Putting in turf would allow our team to utilize the field no matter what weather conditions we faced. This would allow for less time spent on field maintenance and allow for more time spent on developing our individual skills with our coaching staff or working with my teammates on our own throughout the day.

I would like to thank you again for your consideration toward this project and all that you have done and continue to do to make every Huskie student-athlete's experience a great one!



Kam Smith
Redshirt Junior



WALT AND JANICE OWENS PARK CAMPAIGN



If you would like more information regarding this campaign or to make a donation in support of the Walt and Janice Owens Park, please contact:

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**all donations for the Walt and Janice Owens Park Campaign are tax deductible through the NIU Foundation*





THANK YOU FROM NIU ATHLETICS!