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MARQUETTE - Steve Mariucci spoke of keeping football fun, the power of parents and his love of the huddle at a reception honoring participants of the first Upper Peninsula Football All-Star Game since 1951.

The former Detroit Lions head coach and Green Bay Packers quarterbacks coach was the keynote speaker Thursday for the reception, held at Northern Michigan University's Great Lakes Rooms in the University Center.

In an interview before the speech, Mariucci said the All-Star Game is a great idea and he hopes it continues, noting the last one was held before he was even born.

"I think it's great for the kids," Mariucci said. "I think it's great for the high schools and for the coaches that coach in it. I think it's good for football interest in general. I think it's good for Northern Michigan University to have all these families and players and people on campus for the week.

"I'm glad Todd Goldbeck has started this thing. It's been a long time coming. Every state has got this thing, it's time that we do too."

Mariucci noted early in his keynote speech, "We're here to celebrate U.P. football," before asking members of the Division 5 State Champion Menominee Maroons and Division 8 State Champion Forest Park Trojans to stand up to be recognized, and showing off a tie clip in the shape of the U.P. given to him by then-NMU athletic director Gil Canale.

He spoke of his father - Upper Peninsula sports legend Ray Mariucci - sitting with him in his dorm room at West Hall at NMU, when within days of his arriving to play football for the Wildcats, Steve Mariucci decided he had enough and football was no longer fun.

It only took a few minutes of his father reminding him how much he loved football and a quick chat with the coaches to keep Mariucci at NMU.

The end result was the quarterback later earning All-America status and guiding the team to the university's only football national championship, before he rose to the helm of a National Football League team. He is now an analyst for the NFL Network.

He said he'd like to think he'd be a success at whatever he tried: "I don't know, maybe putting tips on shoelaces," he quipped.

And he reminded "Bill" - Forest Park and West team head coach Bill Santilli - and "Jeff" - Ishpeming and East team head coach Jeff Olson - that a small compliment or pat on the back could go a long way with a player.

Mariucci then turned to his key point for the night.

The huddle, "11 guys bunched together," Mariucci said, is his favorite thing about football.

"There's white guys, there's black guys, there's Hispanic guys, everybody's in there," he said. "Guys from the city, guys from the farmland, guys with three-car garages, guys from the ghetto, guys from the north, the south, the U.P. ...

"There's a brief discussion, but mostly they listen and take instructions from the leader, the quarterback or a linebacker.

"They break with enthusiasm, and get to the line of scrimmage with one common purpose - to win the down.

"Sometimes you succeed, sometimes you don't, but you get back up and huddle again."

He paused for a moment to let that sink in before delivering his point:

"Wouldn't it be neat if families would huddle up together more often?"

Mariucci received a standing ovation following his speech.

The U.P. Football All-Star Game is scheduled for 3 p.m. Saturday at the Superior Dome. Tickets are available at the door for \$5.

Proceeds go to the U.P. Sports Hall of Fame and the Beacon House, a charity that gives patients' families a place to stay while they undergo medical treatment in Marquette.



Steve Mariucci speaks at a banquet honoring members of the Upper Peninsula Football All-Star Game's East and West teams Thursday at Northern Michigan University's Bottom University Center's Great Lakes Rooms. Mariucci told the players to make sure to play the game for fun, and he described his love of the huddle. (Journal photo by Kurt Mensching)