

No Place Like Home for Mattson's Dream Job

As half of the Superdome in New Orleans went dark early in the third quarter of Super Bowl XLVII on Feb. 3, Autumn Mattson had this thought go through her mind: things can even happen during events of that magnitude.

"I thought, 'I guess some burnt popcorn setting off the smoke alarm at a basketball game isn't the worst thing that can happen,'" said the 7th-year athletic director at Cedar Springs High School.

On this day in early February, it's the OK Conference Competitive Cheer Meet scheduled for that night which occupies much of her focus, another event in the winter sports season that can make the Red Hawks' gym feel like her home.

Coordination events like this one – and attempting to prepare for the unexpected – is one of the components to her job to which she had previously not given much thought.

"There were bound to be some oddities of being an athletic director that I never thought about," said Mattson. "But the amount of work that goes into the actual setup for events is something I didn't fully realize. From who's taking tickets, to the cash box, concessions, locker rooms; it's a lot to prepare for."

In a position that calls for organizational skills and a high-energy personality, accessibility also helped her become a successful administrator in a short time.

"I've learned to become a very good listener. Heading into this job, I didn't realize how essential it is to listen to people," Mattson said. "I've gained a lot of perspective on the different passions people have and why they do things. And many times it just helps to know their voice will be heard."

Mattson can also talk, particularly when it comes to her favorite subject: Red Hawks athletics, and the town of Cedar Springs in general. She belongs to the sixth generation of family in Cedar Springs, and says the city and its schools have always had a close-knit relationship.

That much is evident driving through the streets near the high school, all painted Cedar Springs red. How many other towns across the state have residential street signs painted in school colors (the school long ago adopting the color of its "Red Flannel" heritage)?

"We've always been a close-knit community with so many good people looking out for each other, and so many groups pulling for each other here," Mattson said. "I always dreamed of coming back here, it just happened sooner than I thought. When I got the job, I had to pinch myself."

A 1997 Cedar Springs grad, Mattson just missed playing in the Red Hawk's current facilities, as she was part of the last graduating class in the old building. Her prep career led to a basketball scholarship at Lake Superior State University,

where she played from 1997-2001. When she returned, she had a new role in a new building, but made herself right at home.

In her initial position as athletic department secretary, Mattson had the good fortune of working for Pete Bush, now principal at Coopersville HS.

"He was a fabulous mentor who showed me the passion and desire it took to be an athletic director," Mattson said. "He didn't label me as a secretary, and sought my feedback and advice. Looking back, that was so instrumental; I probably wouldn't have this job if he hadn't told the administration to give me a chance."

Mattson also served as the Red Hawks' girls basketball coach until four years ago, another role that helped her prepare for administration.

"I sometimes struggled to understand why kids might not have the same passion that I did. I learned that some played for the competition, and some did it just to be part of a team."

She now gets her fix of student interaction through the school's Athletic Leadership Council, a group Mattson started in 2010 to unite students, staff and community members (see story on page 26). It's a



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unique representation of the entire athletic student body, which represents roughly half of the 950 students enrolled when multiple-sport athletes are counted. In many respects, Mattson feels like a coach – or mentor – to all of them.

"These kids all become part of the Red Hawk athletic family, and it's overwhelming the amount of joy this job brings. I get goosebumps when I see kids have that 'Aha' moment when they get that payoff and I know how much hard work they've put in," she said.

A big factor in the success of any athletic director is having the support of one's own family. Team Mattson – husband Scott, a former college tennis player and coach, along with sons Drew (9) and Evan (6) – is behind her 100 percent.

"We eat dinner in the office a lot," said Mattson. "I am truly blessed to have a flexible family. We also try to keep a balance with the boys; we don't force athletics down their throats. We take them to band concerts, plays, and all of the different sports. They've grown up around a lot of awesome young adults. The kids are true Red Hawk fans."

A seventh generation of Mattson's family appears set for the land of red street signs.

— Rob Kaminski
benchmarks Editor