

HECK HEADS TO HODAG HALL OF FAME

By Jeremy Mayo of The Northwoods River News

He never made it to the top step of the podium in Madison but set the stage for several others, including his younger brother, to reach the pinnacle of swimming in the state. Now, Ken Heck has joined those champions as a member of the Rhinelander Athletic Booster Club's Hodag Hall of Fame.

Heck was inducted during a banquet Wednesday night at Holiday Acres Resort.

"I'm just very happy to be inducted," a gracious Heck said during his speech. "This is an awesome organization. You give so much back to the community. We really appreciate it. I appreciate it and it's a great honor to be inducted."

A 1986 RHS graduate, Heck qualified for the WIAA state meet his sophomore, junior and senior years. He anchored the Hodags' 400-yard freestyle relay to a fifth-place finish at state in 1986. He also placed eighth in the 200 freestyle and ninth in the 100 freestyle at state that year.

"His accomplishments as a part of the Rhinelander swim team put him among the elite swimmers in our school," said Dan Jesse, Heck's swim coach and fellow Hodag Hall of Famer. "Even still his times would hold as one of our top swimmers ever and place him well in the state meet even today."

"I was not a great swimmer, I was good," Heck said. "I finished eighth and ninth (at state) and we had a great relay, but there was also only one division back then and there were some awesome swimmers at that time, but I was proud of what I was able to accomplish at Rhinelander."

Jesse said Heck made an impact on the team immediately as a freshman and helped set the stage for a number of state championships by Hodag swimmers in the late 80s and early 1990s.



Ken Heck, left, listens to Dan Jesse speak during the Rhinelander Athletic Booster Club banquet Wednesday, June 7 at Holiday Acres Resort. Heck was inducted in the ABC's Hodag Hall of Fame Wednesday. Jesse, Heck's high school swim coach, gave the induction speech. (Bob Mainhardt for the River News)

"He moved our program up huge strides and got us thinking about state competition, rather than conference and local meets," Jesse said. "As a young coach, that was outstanding. He had that drive. He didn't want to settle for second."

"He passed that on to (those that followed), that competitive drive and that instinct to not settle for second place. You can talk to his brother, Dave, coach Lindsay (Byrka), Justin Thoms, Alan Kroll and all of them will say Ken's one of the big reasons they did as well as they did and cite him as a major influence in their success."

The four swimmers Jesse mentioned all went on to win WIAA state championships and were later inducted into the Hodag Hall of Fame.

Heck walked on at the University of Indiana and became a four-year letterwinner at the Big Ten school. He said the

four teams he was a part of - Rhinelander Swim Club, Rhinelander High School, Schroeder Swim Club and Indiana - were all family to him. Heck still gives back as a coach with the Rhinelander Swim Club.

"I think swimming and sports and activities in Rhinelander helped shaped me to be the guy that I am today. Also I was very fortunate to have a good foundation in my faith, my family, my friends and in training," he said. "A lot in life, I look back at what I did in training and I think a lot of younger students and athletes will do that as well. When things get hard you go back to your training and think, 'What do I need to do to accomplish this? I've done this before.' It might be in business, it might be in life, but you've accomplished so much that you should go back to those life lessons that you learn. I continue to do that today."

Heck thanked a number of people during his speech, including Jesse, who Heck said once lit a fire under him when he was giving less than full effort at practice.

"He pulled me out, and I knew I was slacking, but he pulled me out and pulled me aside - not in front of the whole team - but he told me, not so much calmly at that point that I could do better," Heck explained. "I still remember that. I still remember exactly where he did it, too. Thank you for pushing me."

Heck also thanked his parents, Bob and June, along with his younger brother, Dave, a former state champ in the 50 and 100 freestyle.

"It was awesome swimming with my brother Dave on the team," Heck said. "We had a great thing with the team. We were always very competitive. He always pushed me to be my best but, on the relays, he always went third and I always went fourth. I said, 'You get me close or even, and I will not lose.' And every time he did, we won."

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