

# **Walt Kowalczyk, “The Sprinting Blacksmith”**

By: Jim Sargent

Michigan State University's Walter Joseph Kowalczyk, a 6'0" 200-pound halfback who could sprint with any running back in the Big Ten Conference, prepped at Westfield High in Westfield, Massachusetts. As a senior in 1954, Kowalczyk received the Harry Agganis Award as the best high school athlete in New England. The talented redhead hoped to attend Notre Dame.

Instead, Kowalczyk chose Michigan State University, thanks in large part to the influence of his high school football coach Bill Jenkins and an MSU grad who knew Spartan head coach Hugh "Duffy" Daugherty. A mentor for Walt, Jenkins helped convince his protégé that Big Ten powerhouse Michigan State offered the best chance to achieve his academic and athletic dreams.

Kowalczyk started at right halfback for the Spartans for three years. He received honorable mention All-Big Ten as a sophomore and junior, and he was named first team All-Big Ten as a senior in 1957, the year he earned consensus All-American honors. In three varsity seasons, Walt enjoyed an impressive career, rushing for 1,257 yards on 225 carries, scoring 16 touchdowns, and catching 10 passes for 187 yards and another score.

The Massachusetts native became the top draft choice of the Philadelphia Eagles, and he played four seasons in the National Football League. Due to circumstances including timing and team personnel, Kowalczyk did not make it as a starter in the NFL. Retiring from the gridiron after four games with the Oakland Raiders in 1961, he returned to Michigan and began teaching.

Born in Westfield on April 17, 1935, Walt grew up as the only son in a Polish family. The husky youth played every sport he could join. Once the quiet redhead got to Westfield High, Coach Jenkins took him under his wing. An intense competitor, Kowalczyk was determined to overcome his humble beginnings.

Walt plugged time into his studies, but he also worked hard to save money for college. For example, one summer he carried steel in a bicycle plant, and once he worked in a sawmill. Later, during the summers at Michigan State, he worked on construction in order to keep in shape.

But Walt lived for sports. By the time he graduated from Westfield, he had earned four letters in football and baseball, three in basketball, and two in track. Friendly and likeable, he enjoyed a great senior year. Named All-State at halfback for the second straight season, "Red" played center in basketball and earned his team's MVP award. Winning All-State honors for the second time as an outfielder in baseball, he averaged .304. Capping his schoolboy career, he won the state 100-yard dash title for the second straight year.

"At the insistence of my high school football coach, Bill Jenkins, I ran track," Kowalczyk said in a 2003 interview. "That's where I learned how to come out of my three-point stance gradually, not straight up.

"I weighed 190 as a senior, and my best time was 9.9 seconds in the 100. They didn't keep records, but the coach clocked me and said my average time for the 100 was between 10.0 and 10.1. They also put me into the 220 yard dash, and if memory serves, my best time was 21.5."

Kowalczyk recalled Westfield as a small town with a population of about 10,000 in the 1950s. His high school had a double-A ranking and played all the local schools in sports:

"As a freshmen, I didn't know much about football. But Bill Jenkins came in my sophomore year. Coach Jenkins saw something in me that other people didn't see, and that I didn't know.

"He became my mentor. I come from a broken alcoholic family. My father only went through the fifth grade, and my mother the third grade. Coach Jenkins guided me through high school. If it wasn't for him, in all honesty I have no idea where I'd be today. I call him every year around the holidays and thank him again. Coach straightened me up more than once!"

Kowalczyk won the Agganis Award in 1954, traveled to East Lansing, moved into a dormitory, and made State's freshman team, but frosh were not eligible for varsity sports.

Having already achieved prominence in football, MSU began competition in the Big Ten Conference in 1953. Clarence "Biggie" Munn, serving his seventh season as head coach, led the 1953 Spartans to a 9-1 record.

## **THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 26, No. 4 (2004)**

---

State won the Big Ten title, losing only to Purdue, 6-0, and MSU defeated UCLA, 28-20, in the 1954 Rose Bowl. After the victory, Munn moved up to become athletic director and named his top assistant, Duffy Daugherty, as head coach.

Daugherty's squad finished with a 3-6 mark in 1954, when Kowalczyk played freshman ball:

"I was on the 'meat squad,'" Kowalczyk remembered in 2003. "They sent Dave Kaiser, Dan Currie, and myself up to scrimmage against the varsity on a regular basis. That gave us an opportunity to go to the training table and eat good food, rather than dormitory food. I got the stuffing knocked out of me most of the time, but I can't complain. We had a lot of fun."

By the fall of 1955, Kowalczyk had earned the starting position at right halfback. MSU began the season at Bloomington against Indiana University. MSU defeated Indiana, 20-13, and Walt gained 33 yards on eight carries. State then played Michigan in Ann Arbor. The Wolverines won a hard-fought contest, 14-7, and the Massachusetts native gained only 27 yards on 12 runs.

"Rough day isn't the word for my game against Michigan," Walt recollected in 2003. "We couldn't do anything properly. We couldn't run the ball. We couldn't hold on to the ball. Michigan outplayed us. We were over confident. We thought, 'We're Michigan State. We're going to walk in there and win.' But we learned the hard way. Those of us who were going to be around for a couple of years got together and decided we would never let this happen again."

The following week State hosted Stanford at Spartan Stadium, and MSU won decisively, 38-14. In that contest Kowalczyk gained 43 yards on eight rushes. One week later, also playing in East Lansing, the Green and White defeated archrival Notre Dame, 21-7. Kowalczyk broke loose for 91 yards on 10 carries against the Irish.

"I remember that game very vividly," Kowalczyk commented. "On Friday, the day before the game, we were on the stadium field going through our warm-ups. Then we left the field, and Notre Dame came in for their practice. Paul Hornung was their quarterback. Hornung made a comment like, 'Looks like we're going to have to show these guys how to play the game.' The older fellas heard this and didn't like it. I knew Hornung's name, but nothing more."

"On Saturday the game was no score for most of the first half. Just before the half ended, Paul Hornung threw a lame-duck pass that was just floating through the air, but their receiver caught it and Notre Dame went in for the score."

"Duffy went into the locker room at halftime, chewed us out, turned around, and walked out. We did the job in the second half, as you can see by the score, and beat them, 21-7."

"That was one of my first good days. After the game, Notre Dame's coach Terry Brennan came up to me, shook my hand, and apologized. He said, 'Good luck to you, and when it comes time to play us next year, break a leg!' He squeezed my hand, and I knew what he meant."

"As a high school senior, I wanted to go to Notre Dame, but they told me I was too small, too slow, and I just didn't fit into their football scheme. So I decided I wanted to go to a school where I could have an opportunity to play against Notre Dame, and hopefully, knock their socks off!"

Coach Jenkins and MSU alumni Ernie Dooley helped steer Kowalczyk toward MSU:

"Ernie was a manufacturer's rep. He and his wife were born and raised in Connecticut, and they moved out to Michigan. Ernie became close friends with Biggie Munn, Duffy Daugherty, and the athletic staff. He came to Westfield and told me about the university. I didn't make up my mind until I had the opportunity to go and visit Michigan State, and I liked what I saw."

"There were two of us on the visit. Tony Kolodziej, who was a great end, came from Northampton, Massachusetts. Tony and I flew out together and saw the Green and White spring game. After the game, we went out with a couple of the ballplayers. The next morning we had breakfast, and Sonny Grandelius, an assistant coach, and Duffy both came to breakfast."

"We talked to the coaches. Duffy had his methods of really communicating with you. When I walked out, I told Tony, 'This is where I'm going to school.' Tony already favored MSU."

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 26, No. 4 (2004)

---

At Spartan Stadium in the fifth game of the 1955 season, MSU beat Illinois, 21-7, and Kowalczyk scored his first touchdown on a 24-yard run. The following week the Spartans traveled to Wisconsin where the hard-running halfback enjoyed one of his greatest games, rushing for 172 yards and scoring two touchdowns as State blanked the Badgers, 27-0.

In 2003 Kowalczyk explained, "Duffy and the coaching staff always called the first three plays of the game. From there, the quarterback called the plays. Earl Morrall was our quarterback. Duffy called three plays, and third play where I scored was what they called 'belly left.' We're in a T-200 where halfback Clarence Peaks was up on the wing. Earl got the snap and 'rode' Jerry Planutis, our senior fullback, into the line. Then Earl pulled the ball out, gave it to me off-tackle, and I ran for 72 yards and a touchdown.

"The game before against Illinois, I had fumbled. After the game, Duffy came up to me and told me not to switch the ball from hand to hand. He said, 'You just don't do things like that. You're a big man. You *run over* those ballplayers!'

"In the Wisconsin game, when that belly-left play was called, I went through the line and switched the ball two or three times and straight-armed two or three tacklers, and that let me make the 72 yard touchdown run.

"Duffy made up a story about that. If I went with him to a get-together with friends or to a banquet, he would tell the story. Duffy would say if I hadn't switched the ball, I would have gained four yards. He'd smile and say, 'That goes to show what good coaching will do for you!'"

"Walt was very big, 200 pounds, and very strong," observed former end John "Thunder" Lewis in 2003. "Walt and Clarence Peaks both broke the 200-pound barrier, and they were fast. Before that, State had a 'pony backfield' with speedsters like Leroy Bolden and Billy Wells, fast but not big. Most of our linemen were backs in high school. I was a fullback. On our line, only tackle Norm Masters was well over 200. We made up for lack of size with speed and strength."

Michigan State rolled through the last three games with wins over Purdue, 27-0, Minnesota, 42-14, and Marquette, 33-0. MSU placed second in the conference to Ohio State. At that time the Big Ten champion qualified only for the Rose Bowl, but no team could make a repeat appearance. Since the Buckeyes played in the 1955 Rose Bowl (beating Southern California, 20-7), Michigan State got the bid.

On Monday, January 2, 1956, during a decade when the nation's top teams played in five major bowl games—the Gator on New Year's Eve and the Orange, Sugar, Cotton, and Rose Bowls on New Year's Day—Daugherty's first Rose Bowl squad played a strong game against UCLA, winning a thriller in the final seconds, 17-14.

A roaring crowd of 100,809 saw the Bruins capitalize on an early turnover. Fielding the kickoff in the end zone, Kowalczyk ran it back to the 12-yard line. But halfback Jim Decker intercepted Earl Morrall's first pass, returning it to the 16. In four plays the Bruins scored. The Spartan line stopped Jim Davenport's plunge over left guard from the two, but Davenport rolled to his right and fell into the end zone. With 3:12 played, Decker converted and UCLA led, 7-0.

Kowalczyk recalled, "Duffy called the first three plays. The first play was a belly-action to the right. They put me in the T-100 position, a wing man. I ran out, faked a block, and went downfield to the flat. Earl was supposed to fake it to Planutis, then to Peaks, and then drop back and throw me a pass. I was wide open.

"Earl underthrew the ball and it was intercepted. I could still be running if Earl got me the ball! That's how wide open I was. I tackled the guy who intercepted, but UCLA later scored."

Later in the first quarter, UCLA got another break when Morrall fumbled and the Bruins recovered on MSU's 36-yard line. A series of runs moved the pigskin to the 13, before the Spartan defense shoved the Bruins back to the 21. But Jim Decker missed a 37-yard field goal.

The Spartans then drove 80 yards to score. Early in the second quarter Kowalczyk went off tackle and sprinted for a 30-yard gain. Morrall, who completed four out of 15 passes and had two intercepted, connected for the first time to junior end Jim Hinesly. With 5:52 remaining, Morrall capped the drive with a 13-yard scoring pass to junior Clarence Peaks. Planutis kicked the extra point to make the score 7-7. When the half ended, the Spartans had the ball on their own 9.

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 26, No. 4 (2004)

---

Both teams slugged it out on the ground in the third quarter, but neither scored. With State's front line of tackles Norm Masters and Pat Burke, guards Buck Nystrom and Embry Robinson, and center Joe Badaczewski opening holes, the Spartans drove to the UCLA two, where UCLA stopped a third down run. Jerry Planutis tried a 15-yard field goal, but the kick missed.

The Bruins then sustained a drive to the Spartan 39-yard line, before MSU held. After a punt into the end zone, State started on the 20 and moved the ball to the 33-yard marker. Forty-nine seconds into the fourth quarter, Peaks, on a halfback option, ran nearly to the line before passing to senior end "Thunder" Lewis at the 50. The big end eluded Sam Brown's tackle, injuring his heel, but Lewis scored on a play covering 67 yards. Planutis converted to give MSU a 14-7 lead.

After an exchange of punts, Ronnie Knox entered the game at tailback for the injured Sam Brown. Coming off a leg injury, Knox ignited the Bruins by completing UCLA's first pass of the day to end Rommi Loudd. Knox, who connected on two of eight passes and had one intercepted, hit Jim Decker for a 47-yard gain, and Kowalczyk tackled Decker at State's 7-yard line. Knox gained short yardage on two plays, and second-string fullback Doug Peters scored from the one. With 6:07 remaining, Decker kicked the extra point to tie the score at 14-all.

On the ensuing drive the Spartans, with Kowalczyk and Planutis carrying most of the load, reached the UCLA 24-yard line. After the Bruins held on third down, Planutis tried a 30-yard field goal, to no avail.

Newspaper accounts conflict, but the essence of the game story follows. The Bruins started at their own 20, but MSU stopped two running plays for losses. Knox tried a pass from the end zone, but UCLA had an ineligible receiver downfield. The officials ruled it unsportsmanlike conduct and gave UCLA the ball at the one—instead of giving MSU a safety. Knox punted, and Peaks tried to fair-catch the ball at the 34-yard line. A Bruin defender brushed Peaks before he could make the catch, and following a penalty, State got the ball on the 19.

In one hectic minute, MSU ran a play, fumbled, and halfback Don Zysk recovered. On the next running play State was flagged for a 10-yard penalty. Morrall then completed a short pass. With the ball on UCLA's 21, Daugherty called for Dave Kaiser to try a field goal, sending in halfback Rudy Gaddini with a kicking tee. Morrall had already called the same play. Because of the substitution, MSU received a delay-of-game penalty that moved the ball back to the 26.

Kaiser, State's long kicker, had a strong leg. He missed two field goals early in the season, before injuring his leg in the Michigan game. But now his leg was healthy.

With seven seconds showing on the game clock, the 6'0" 200-pounder from Alpena, Michigan, booted his first-ever field goal—a 41-yarder. Kaiser recalls watching the slowly spinning pigskin carry a couple of yards inside the left upright to give State the 17-14 victory!

All-American guard Buck Nystrom, recalling State's exciting victory in 2003, said, "We were surprised when Duffy chose Kaiser for the play, but his kick must have been 10 or 15 yards above the crossbar. Kaiser hit the ball so well that he could have been kicking from the 40!"

Recounting events of the Rose Bowl, Kowalczyk said, "Michigan State played well. Duffy did a good job of play-calling, and Earl Morrall called some good plays. We played hard-nosed football all the way. I got the Helms Athletic Foundation MVP Award out of that game.

"I also got a broken nose in the first quarter, and in the last quarter I got a fractured rib. I went out long enough for [team physician] Doctor Feurig to pop my nose and put a couple of cotton plugs in and say, 'Breathe through your mouth.' In the fourth quarter, UCLA was running a play to the left, and someone caught me with a block from the right. He hit me underneath my arms in the ribs, and I could hear, 'crack, crack.' I stood up, held onto my breath, and walked off the field. Doc Feurig strapped me up. I stayed out for a few plays, and they sent me back.

"That night and Tuesday night Dave and I partied. Wherever we went, people brought us drinks and food. We had a school car, so we had to get back to the airport in time. We just made it! They held the plane up, we got on board, jumped into a seat, and took our ties and coats off.

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 26, No. 4 (2004)

---

"My wife-to-be Mary Lee DeBaene came onto the field after the game. I saw her for about a total of 20 minutes after we left Michigan. We were dating, and I saw her long enough to say 'Hi!' and give her a hug and a kiss. She and 4,500 students took six trains back to East Lansing."

In the post-game interview, UCLA coach Red Saunders, impressed with Kowalczyk's stellar effort, dubbed big number 14 the "Sprinting Blacksmith." That's when Walt discovered his Polish surname means "son of a blacksmith." The nickname stuck.

Speaking in 2003, Dave Kaiser said, "Walt was a real good halfback. He was fast. He had good football smarts. He was a good open-field runner, but he could get you those one or two tough yards, too. Walt was a very good offensive halfback, and a better-than-average defender."

Buck Nystrom, later a longtime college coach, observed, "Walt was a big, very strong, and very powerful back, and an extremely tough competitor. He was elusive in the open field, but his forté was speed and power. Walt was also a very good blocker, and you don't always see those good blocking skills from good running backs.

"Our 1955 Michigan State team had a bunch of real class guys. We had some stars, and we had a good supporting cast. But those guys were good players and good students. They had good personalities, and they had character. They were *good people*. We had great camaraderie, and we played well together. Later, all of us had successful careers. Walt was one of those good guys."

Kowalczyk had enjoyed a great sophomore season, making honorable mention All-Big Ten. But during fall practice in 1956, the junior suffered a serious ankle injury:

"Dick Barker tackled me after I caught a pass in the flat. I planted my foot to pivot, and when Dick tackled me, it twisted my body. I got a real bad sprain, and the doctor said I would have been better off if it was broken. I always had it taped. I took a shot of zylcaine one time in practice, but no more after that. They said it would break the adhesions, and it did. I worked out, I ran laps, and I ran stairs. I did everything I could, but I never got back to form in 1956."

As a sophomore, Kowalczyk had gained 584 yards and scored six touchdowns. But as a junior, he could only run flat-footed. Losing his edge in speed and power, Walt picked up 128 yards and scored twice. But as a senior, he became a consensus All-American.

With the Big Ten defenses stacked against him in 1957, Kowalczyk rushed for 545 yards (5.4 yards per carry), scored nine touchdowns, and caught seven passes for 128 more yards. His biggest game came against Michigan, when he ground out 113 yards and scored MSU's first touchdown in a 35-6 victory.

The Spartans began 1957 by crushing Indiana, 54-0. Kowalczyk rushed for 44 yards on six carries and scored MSU's first touchdown, but he didn't play in the second half.

Commenting about Spartan football recently, Walt said, "In games that were pretty much one-sided, Duffy and the coaching staff always gave everyone an opportunity to play. In Duffy's era and under his regime, Michigan State ran what they called a multiple offense. From that offense we ran different formations, but we ran a dozen plays out of eight or nine formations. Nobody was the main ball carrier. We all shared in carrying the ball.

"They didn't play college football like they do today, when one back carries 30 or 40 times in a game. We shared the glory. I never gained 600 yards in one year. You can have more fun than in today's power football."

The next week Purdue spoiled MSU's perfect season and shot at another Rose Bowl, beating the Spartans in East Lansing, 20-13:

"What happened is that I scored the tying touchdown against Purdue, and the officials flagged us for a dead-ball penalty *after* I scored. They moved us back, and that killed us. We didn't score, which ended our perfect season. That's why they call Purdue the 'Spoilermakers.'"

Against Illinois the following week, Kowalczyk made a 36-yard run for the game-winning touchdown late in the fourth quarter, and MSU stopped the Illini, 19-14. In the final game, the Spartans trailed Kansas State, 9-6, at Spartan Stadium when Kowalczyk scored to ignite his team. State went on to win, 27-9, finishing the season at 8-1 and second (5-1) in the Big Ten.

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 26, No. 4 (2004)

---

Talking about his coach, Walt reminisced, "Duffy Daugherty was *the best*. Duffy was a man who treated us like men. He chewed our butts out if we did something wrong. But after he finished, he'd pat you on the back, put his arms on your shoulder pads, look up at you with that Irish twinkle in his eyes, and say, 'Now, do you understand what I've been trying to tell you?'

"Yes, sir, I'd say.

"Then he'd say, 'Get yourself back in there and do the job we know you can do.' When a coach talks to you like that, you're ready to run through a wall for him.

"When Duffy saw us lacking enthusiasm during a practice, he'd gather us all in and tell us one of his famous jokes. He probably told the same joke two or three times in a season. I remember one was about a golfer. But after the joke, you'd see the enthusiasm begin to come back. We'd really turn it on. Duffy was just a *fabulous man*."

After the 1957 season, Kowalczyk played in the East-West Shrine Game, the Hula Bowl, and the Senior Bowl, scoring a touchdown in each contest. He had met Mary Lee as a freshman in a Social Science class. They dated as sophomores, and they got married on December 1, 1956, the week after the Kansas State game.

Walt wanted a shot at pro football, and the Philadelphia Eagles drafted him in the first round in 1958. Under coach Buck Shaw, the Eagles finished last in the six-team Eastern Conference with a record of 2-9-1. Norm Van Brocklin arrived in 1958 from the Rams, and by 1960 the Eagles would win the NFL title. But Philly was set in the backfield with two good young backs: second-year pro Clarence Peaks, Kowalczyk's former running mate, and Billy Barnes, in his second season out of Wake Forest—and Barnes led the Eagles in rushing in 1957.

In 1958 the 5'11" 200-pound Barnes paced Philadelphia again, this time with 551 yards rushing. Peaks, who stood 6'1" and weighed 218, ranked second with 386 yards. Both backs had good strength and good speed. Playing in all 12 games on special teams, Kowalczyk also carried the ball 17 times and picked up 43 yards, but he didn't score. In 1959, as the Eagles climbed to 7-5, Peaks and Barnes again ranked one-two in rushing. Kowalczyk played in every game and virtually repeated his '58 numbers, gaining 37 yards on 26 rushes.

Reflecting on the Eagles, Kowalczyk said, "We did rather well in the 1958 preseason. The first time I carried the ball in a preseason game against the Giants in Hershey, Pennsylvania, I got a pitchout from Norm Van Brocklin and ran for a touchdown. That evening Chuck Bednarik and I snuck home. My wife Mary Lee was in Wade, Pennsylvania, and she was pregnant.

"Just as I was getting ready to go back to camp, the doctors told me, 'Congratulations, you have a son!' Jeffrey was our second son. He was born on August 16, 1958.

"I went back to camp with Chuck. We went into the dining hall and never said a word. One of the assistant coaches came up to me and said, 'Congratulations! You have a baby boy. Here's the keys. Go one home and see your family.'

"I couldn't say a word, because we weren't supposed to leave camp. Chuck Bednarik ended up becoming the godfather of my new son Jeffrey, and Chuck's wife Emma was the godmother. We had three sons. Our first was Thomas, and later, we had a third son, Gregory."

But Kowalczyk didn't get a real opportunity to play offense for the Eagles:

"They had me going both ways. I was playing backup to Billy Barnes and Clarence Peaks. They also put me on defense. They had me playing behind Tommy Brookshire and Eddie Bell, the defensive halfbacks. They wanted me to learn the linebacker's position, which I did, but I never played linebacker in a game. We all played special teams. I was on the kickoff team, the punt team, every kind of a team. Most of us had two positions to play. We only had 33 or 34 ballplayers in those days, so we didn't have many specialists."

Kowalczyk played less in 1959, which he found frustrating: "It was hit or miss. I'd go in and play some good ball, and they'd take me out. I'd go in again and come back out, so it was frustrating. In 1959 we tied the Browns for second place with a 7-5 record, so we won second place money. That was around \$1,000.

"I was traded to the Detroit Lions in 1960. Jerry Reichow finagled that trade. He came to the Eagles, and I went to the Lions. I wasn't even in training camp six weeks before Detroit sent me to the Dallas Cowboys, a new franchise."

Kowalczyk made a good beginning with Dallas in 1960, although the Cowboys finished last in the NFL's seven-team Western Conference with a record of 0-11-1. The former MSU standout rushed 50 times for 156

## **THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 26, No. 4 (2004)**

---

yards, making him the team's third leading ground gainer behind L.G. Dupre and Don McIlhenny. Walt ranked fifth in receiving, with 14 catches for 143 yards and his only NFL touchdown. But the last-place Cowboys traded him in 1961 to the AFL's Oakland Raiders. Walt played four games and decided it was time to go home and get on with his life.

"I have never looked back," the modest former Spartan observed. "But playing with guys like Bill Barnes, Pete Retzlaff, Norm Van Brocklin, and Chuck Bednarik was great."

Kowalczyk had earned a Bachelor's in Education, and he began teaching in Pontiac, Michigan. He taught until 1967, but the riots in Detroit that summer shook him. He recalled sitting in the front room with a hunting rifle and watching the light of fires from Detroit filling the skies over Wayne County.

Walt left the public schools and began working in traffic safety. As part of Wayne County's program in highway safety education, he worked with persons convicted of drunk driving. After several years in that field, he served as a substance abuse counselor. "I do it primarily for my own personal interests," Walt said in 1990. "My mom and dad were both alcoholics, and I saw so many people become involved with drugs."

Now retired, Kowalczyk still enjoys teaching driver education on a part-time basis. An excellent high school athlete who came from a small town to earn All-American honors, Walt Kowalczyk thanks football for giving him the opportunity to meet people, get an education, travel around the country, and enjoy a professional career. Happily married since 1956, the "Sprinting Blacksmith" has nothing but praise for his football experiences at Michigan State, the friends he made through playing football, and the family he cherishes every day of his life.

Because he understood the meaning of growing up under difficult circumstances, the 1956 Rose Bowl hero dedicated much of his teaching career to helping others overcome the kind of alcohol-related problems that plagued his own parents.

"I was very fortunate to be able to play football at Michigan State," Walt said. "We were regular guys who wanted an education, and we wanted to play ball."

In many ways, Walt Kowalczyk's life illustrates the American football dream of the 1950s.