

Karl Kassulke > 1941-2008

All out, all the time

On or off the field, former Vikings star Karl Kassulke always made a strong impact.

From staff and news service reports

Karl Kassulke, a ferociously hard-hitting Pro Bowl strong safety for the Vikings who loved family, football and life, died Monday night at age 67 after a massive heart attack at his Eagan home.

One of the most popular Vikings from the team's glory days of the late 1960s and early '70s, Kassulke was perhaps equally admired for his ability to deal with a 1973 motorcycle accident that ended his career and left him paralyzed from the chest down.

Kassulke was paralyzed for 35 years but never complained, Sue Kassulke, his wife of 33 years, said Tuesday.

"Karl was just a real loving family man, just a wonderful guy," Sue said. "I can't tell you how much I'm going to miss him. Everything that happened to him, he never asked, 'Why me?' He didn't care about that. He just wanted to live his life to the fullest."

Kassulke spent all 10 years of his NFL career with the Vikings, from 1963-72. He started in the team's 1970 Super Bowl loss to Kansas City and was named to the Pro Bowl the following season.

"He would come up on you no matter who you were and clean your clock," said former teammate Jim Marshall, a hall of fame defensive end. "He would hit any time and anywhere. He was without fear as a player."

Former teammate Carl Eller, also a hall of fame defensive end, remembered Kassulke as a practical joker and hard-nosed strong safety.

"Everybody loved to have him around," Eller said. "I just know that he was the kind of guy you wanted on your team. He was fun, but he did anything you asked him to on the field."

Kassulke was on his way to training camp when his playing career came to an end on July 24, 1973, in the accident on Interstate 494 near Minnetonka Boulevard. He was a passenger on the motorcycle he owned.

"The first meeting (coach) Bud Grant held," former teammate Bob Lurtsema said, "he was on stage, and we were in seats. He said, 'We have to pray for one of our teammates.' Bud just broke down. He just totally broke down."

"That brought tears to all of us, myself included."

"That tells you everything about a man. You don't have to look anywhere else. Because when Bud gives that sort



ASSOCIATED PRESS: FILE PHOTO

Former Vikings safety Karl Kassulke flashes the victory sign to the Metropolitan Stadium crowd before a Nov. 25, 1973, game against Chicago, four months after a motorcycle accident left him paralyzed from the chest down. The Vikings dedicated the game to Kassulke, and they won 31-13. For more photos, see twincities.com.

of testimonial to one of his players, that's special."

Lurtsema recalled that Kassulke's fun-loving disposition was on display shortly after the accident.

"When he was in the hospital, I would go play cards with him at least three times a week, at the University of Minnesota," Lurtsema said. "He

owed me money, and then he acted like he forgot, like he had memory loss."

Lurtsema said he last saw Kassulke two weeks ago, at the funeral of former teammate Wally Hilgenberg.

"He was having trouble with his shoulders. But he really didn't have any heart problems," Lurtsema said. "Film and 'Cheap Shot Wally' s---"

going to b.s. about the good ol' days." Kassulke is survived by his wife, their son Chris, two older sons, Kurt and Kory, and three grandchildren.

Visitation will be from 4-8 p.m. today at Klecatsky and Sons Funeral Home in Eagan and at 10 a.m. Thursday at Oak Hills Church in Eagan, followed by an 11 a.m. funeral.

Vikings great succumbs to heart attack

● Karl Kassulke, the former safety known for his fearless play, was paralyzed in a motorcycle accident in 1973.

By JUDD ZULGAD and PATRICK REUSSE
Star Tribune staff writers

Bob Lurtsema remembers seeing Bud Grant break down only once during the six years he played for the Hall of Fame coach.

The Vikings were set to open training camp in 1973 when Grant got up in front of his players. Grant informed the team that safety Karl Kassulke had been in a motorcycle accident hours earlier and could possibly die.

"Bud broke down and started to cry," Lurtsema said. "Tears were coming down my cheeks. You could hear a pin drop. ... That says more for any individual of being the total package for a coach to respect him that much."

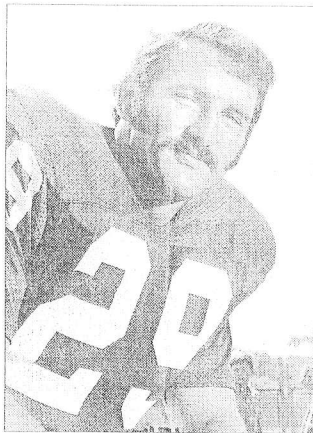
Kassulke, who was paralyzed in that accident, died Sunday after suffering a heart attack at his Eagan home. He was 67. A member of the Vi-

kings from 1963 to '72, Kassulke is the second member of the team from that era to pass away in just more than a month. Linebacker Wally Hilgenberg (1968-79) died after a battle with ALS in September.

"It's tough because I respected them both so much as teammates and got to be friends with them and know their families," said Stu Voigt, a tight end with the Vikings from 1970 to '80. "Wally died at 66 and Karl at 67. That is too young. But they both had a twinkle in their eye, were mischief-makers, fun guys and catalysts for a lot of things that happened."

Drafted by the Detroit Lions in the 11th round out of Drake in 1963, Kassulke quickly ended up with the Vikings. He started in the team's Super Bowl loss to Kansas City in 1970 and played in the Pro Bowl the following season.

Teammates remember Kassulke for



Karl Kassulke was one of the hardest hitters in the league. "He was without fear as a player," Jim Marshall said.

being one of the NFL's hardest-hitting safeties. "He would come up on you no matter who you were and clean your clock," former Vikings defensive end Jim Marshall told the team's

website. "He would hit you anytime and anywhere. He was without fear as a player."

Lurtsema, who arrived in Minnesota in 1971 after playing for the New York Giants, became close friends with Kassulke and the two were training camp roommates.

"His laugh was just infectious and totally spectacular," Lurtsema said. "He was a type-A personality a lot like myself. When we roomed together, after practice we'd go bowling. We had to be doing something all the time."

After his accident, Kassulke spent time at the University of Minnesota hospital. It was there he met Sue, who was his rehab nurse. The two ended up married for the past 33 years.

Sue and Karl became parents to Chris, now 29, after the accident. Karl also had two older sons, Kurt and Kory, from his first marriage, and there are three grandchildren.

Sue said what attracted her to Karl was the fact that despite his misfor-

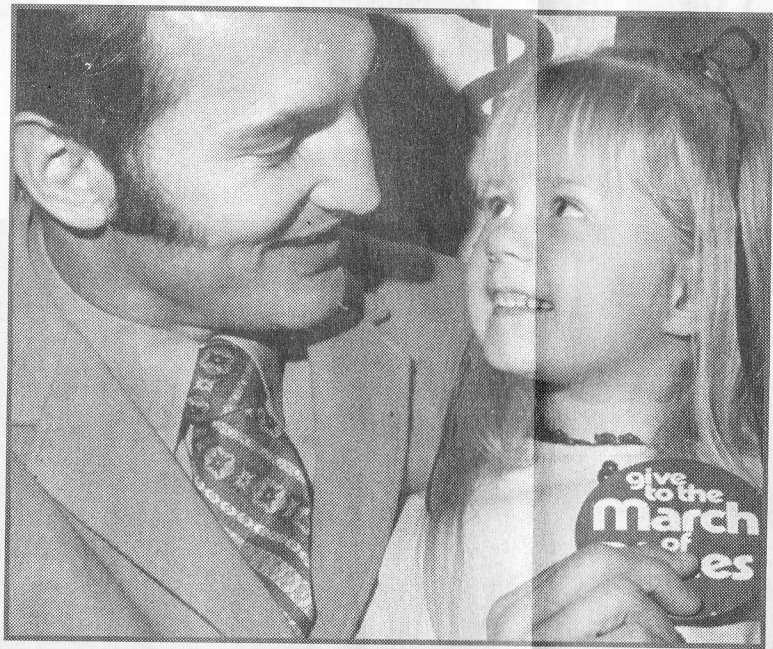
tune he remained an eternal optimist.

"He never did say, 'Why me?'" Sue said. "His question was, if they could send a man to the moon, which happened in 1969, why couldn't they fix him? It was never, 'Why me?' I've known Karl for 35 years and been married 33 and the guy never had a bad day. He was so, so upbeat."

Sue said her husband "had been in good health, except for a few things that come with the paralysis." Karl had recently undergone a cardiac exam that detected no problems, Sue said, and was at the Vikings' victory over Detroit on Oct. 12.

"He had season tickets to the Vikings and he and his buddy from Eagan would hop the Hiawatha light rail line and go down and watch the home games," Sue said.

Visitation for Kassulke will be from 4-8 p.m. Wednesday at Klecatsky and Sons Funeral Home in Eagan, and on Thursday at 10 a.m. at Oak Hills Church in Eagan, followed by an 11 a.m. funeral.



PIONEER PRESS FILE PHOTO

Good guy Karl Kassulke pins a button on Minnesota March of Dimes poster girl Rene Horner at a kickoff dinner in 1970. Kassulke was the campaign director for the St. Paul chapter.