

Nephi M. Jorgensen, Ph.D. 1909–1988: “A Big Man”

J. Edmond Welch

West Virginia Institute of Technology

He was a star athlete in three sports during his high school days in Idaho. At Utah State University, Nephi Jorgensen was a varsity football player until sidelined by knee injuries. He had massive forearms and hands. He had a big heart. Above all, Nephi Jorgensen was A BIG MAN who thought mainly of the needs of others around him.

When Jorgensen settled in Greenville, NC, in 1947 to become Head of Health, Physical Education, and Athletics at a small state school of less than 2,000 students, he had no idea that East Carolina Teachers College would grow into an educational and athletic power, first as East Carolina College and then as East Carolina University. He had no idea that his executive leadership would be a primary factor in the development of a unified Department of Health, Physical Education, and Athletics which had 350 students as Majors and 26 Faculty, seven of whom held the Doctorate. Under Jorgensen, coaches had faculty status and each coach, including the Head Football Coach and the Head Basketball Coach (Men), taught classes.

Facility-wise, Jorgensen found very inadequate facilities at ECTC in 1947. The gymnasium doubled as the campus auditorium; there was no swimming pool; the football field had only bleachers. When Jorgensen gave up his executive positions in 1970, East Carolina University had Memorial Health and Physical Education Building with a gymnasium and a pool; Minges Coliseum which seated 6,500 for basketball and had a handsome natatorium; Ficklen Stadium which held 20,000 spectators; and ample athletic fields.

It is fair to say that Jorgensen was not in favor of East Carolina College's move to go “Big Time” in college athletics. This was the plan of President Leo Jenkins. Also, it is fair to say that Jenkins accomplished his aims, for now ECU plays football against teams such as Penn State University, University of Miami, Florida State University, North Carolina State University, and Syracuse University.

Jorgensen was well-suited to guide ECTC to greater heights, especially in Health and Physical Education. In addition to his B.S. degree, he had his Master's degree from the University of Oregon and his Ph.D. degree from the University of Iowa, where he was the Graduate Assistant to the famous Professor Charles McCloy. At Iowa, he was a fellow student of Arthur Esslinger. They became lifelong friends and professional colleagues. Jorgensen always used in his Organization and Administration Course the textbook by Voltmer and Esslinger.

Before coming to ECTC, Jorgensen accumulated valuable and varied experiences in teaching and in coaching. He was at Defiance College in Ohio, Plattsburgh State College in New York, Malad High School in Idaho, and Vallejo Junior College in California.

Those of us who had the privilege of being Jorgensen's students or of being Faculty Members in the Department of which he was Chairman will remember him as a special person. Dr. Clinton Strong, now Associate Dean of the School of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation at Indiana University, wrote in February 1988:

“Doc Jorgensen did not have a vindictive bone in his body. I am thankful that our paths crossed at East Carolina College. Jorgensen was a ‘Professor's Professor.’ Unfortunately, he never got the credit he deserved in our Profession.”

Yes, Nephi M. Jorgensen was indeed A BIG MAN!