



Gary Lee Burton

October 18, 1937 - February 16, 2026

Gary Burton, who came to Corning High School as a physical education teacher in 1961 and went on to build a staggering legacy of success while inspiring generations of athletes and future coaches over a 30-year career, died Monday, Feb. 16, 2026

He was 88.

A Vacaville native, Burton came to Corning High at the urging of principal E.L. “Bud” Gott, who had been Burton’s physical education teacher and football coach at Vacaville High. From there, he built a track and field program that dominated the Westside League for most of the next three decades, and led an already strong football program to unprecedented levels of success — winning seven consecutive Northern Section championships in the 1980s, a state record that was finally eclipsed only by De La Salle High School of Concord.

But it wasn’t just as a coach that Burton made an impact. From his decades as a teacher and filling other roles as varied as driver’s training instructor and crop adjuster, he was a true “pillar of the community,” said Bob Hall, who worked under Burton as an assistant football coach.

“He was a huge influence on a great number of people,” Hall said.

The son of a Vacaville farmer, Burton attended East Contra Costa College (now Diablo Valley) before transferring to Chico State. He ended up as a Chico State Hall of Famer in two sports, dominating in both football and track and field.

From there, “I was all set to teach at Orland. I’d signed the contract,” Burton told the Enterprise-Record two years ago. “About three weeks later Bud called and said ‘I’m going to Corning, do you want to go?’ I said no.” But Gott persisted, and Burton became a Cardinal.

For the rest of the 1960s all the way through Burton’s retirement in the early 1990s, Corning’s athletic program had few equals. Burton’s strict, discipline-heavy style spilled over into the teams he coached; the Cardinals won the league track title 16 times in a 25-year span, and his junior varsity teams went 91-40-7 over a 15-year span, winning eight league titles.

But it was his varsity football teams that brought Corning its greatest acclaim. After taking the helm in the fall of 1977, Burton compiled a record of 126-43-2 with 10 WSL championships, winning seven consecutive section titles from 1982-88 — the longest streak in the state at the time.

In addition to the league titles and section championships, Burton’s teams brought a lot of pride to Corning with its success in the “Tehama County Shootout” rivalry. Despite having about one-third of Red Bluff’s enrollment, the Cardinals went 9-0 against the Spartans under Burton, starting with a 16-8 victory in 1983 — the first meeting between the schools in over 30 years.

In an interview before his induction into the Chico Sports Hall of Fame in 2024, Burton credited his Chico State education with helping to build the mindset that led to his success at Corning.

“Probably the guy who had the most influence on me was Art Acker,” Burton said. “He said ‘The thing you’ve got to do with kids is you’ve got to be honest with them. No matter how much you discipline them, as long as it’s fair and honest, they’ll accept it. But when you start going down that gray area, look out.’”

As anyone who ever played for Burton could attest, there wasn’t much “gray area” in his coaching style.

“I remember how difficult our practices were. Our practices were harder than the games,” said J Howell, who played on Burton’s first two section championship teams before embarking on a long teaching and coaching career of his own. “I remember him talking a lot about playing for your school, your community, and something bigger than yourself. There was a lot of pride. He knew how to get the most out of his players.”

Among those players was Jeff Stover, who competed for Burton in track and field as well as being on Burton’s junior varsity football team. Stover ended up being one of the top shot-putters in the nation and earning a track scholarship at the University of Oregon — and then switching paths to become a standout defensive lineman for the San Francisco 49ers, earning a pair of Super Bowl rings over an eight-year career.

“He was somebody you really wanted to compete for, and do better, and prove what you can do,” Stover said in 2024. “He pushed me, and he brought out the best in me.”

Those sentiments were echoed by Gary Towne, the longtime Chico State cross country coach who was coached by Burton in the mid-1980s.

“I might not be doing what I’m doing right now if not for Gary Burton,” Towne said. “I was a scrawny little 98-pound freshman and getting positive feedback from him — like ‘you can do this’ — was really influential and made me feel better about myself. He brought out the best in me.

“Those were great days, with a really special vibe. It all started at Corning.”

Corning High School superintendent Miguel Barriga said Burton’s influence was so great, it continues even today.

“Throughout his years of service, Coach Burton was known for his dedication, high expectations, and commitment to helping young people succeed both in the classroom and in athletics. The lessons he taught extended far beyond the school day and left a lasting mark on those he mentored,” Barriga said.

“His legacy lives on in the many former students, athletes, and colleagues whose lives he helped shape. Heartfelt condolences go out to his family and loved ones during this difficult time.”

Burton’s status as a “pillar” of Corning’s community extended beyond the high school as well. He was the person who literally taught almost every person in Corning how to drive for much of his time as a teacher in his role as a driver’s training instructor. He was also known as one of the most dominant fastpitch softball pitchers of his era.

He also followed in his father’s footsteps as a farmer, growing prunes for a couple of years and walnuts “for quite a long while,” said Don Minto, one of Burton’s longtime assistant football coaches.

“He had a tremendous reputation as a very knowledgeable person in the crop

insurance business. One week I talked to him and he was in Napa with the grapes. The next week he was up in Tulelake with mint,” Minto said. “He was going all over the country doing crop stuff and loving it.”

While his work took him to many areas, his heart remained closest to his family.

“He had a pretty soft heart and he was a loving father and he would go to the end of the earth for us,” said his daughter, Britt Freeman, of Chicago. “Maybe that was obvious because that’s what he would do for every kid.

“He was not only our biggest fan in motivating us, but his grandchildren.”

Freeman said her father recently turned back the clock back to his driver’s training days by doing some “coaching” for his granddaughter, Jane, 15, as she was learning to drive.

“It was if he was 35 again,” she said.

Burton is survived by his son, Brad Burton, of Sacramento and grandchildren Casey, Emily and Kylie; daughter Britt of Chicago and grandchildren Morganne, Brooks and Jane; daughter Darci of Lexington, Kentucky; and three great-grandchildren, Henry, Charlee and Chase.

Webpage for scholarship donations

<https://app.schoolfundr.org/fund/gbdynastyscholarship26>

Upcoming Events

Celebration of Life

MAY 9. 11:00 AM - 12:00 PM (PT)

Corning Union High School
643 Blackburn Ave
Corning , CA 96021

In the old gym (aka the Cave) at Corning High School, with a reception to follow.

Tribute Wall

JB

“ Coach Burton, had a way of inspiring you to do your best. He was willing to put in the time and to assist you to do just that your best. Having played football my four years, and track and field for three, I sat out my junior year. He talked me into coming out my senior year and coached me at becoming a hurdler after I finished work, evenings until dark sometimes. Then there was the dreaded physical fitness test everyone had to take he encouraged all the guys to push their limits. I have thought of him often through these many years May GOD bless his family and those who were dear to him.

Jack B. Wilbourn, Class of 1964

Jack B.Wilbourn - February 26 at 05:15 PM

BB

“ Mr. Burton was the main reason I became a 30 year teacher and a coach. He was an amazing educator who gave his all for students. While he was a disciplinarian, it was always carried out with humor and a caring attitude. He was the teacher that you never wanted to disappoint; you did not behave because you feared him, you behaved so you did not disappoint him. Bus rides for sports, pizza runs after fixing the track, and stops at McDonalds were always happening. Hook shot tries from half court for bear laps were fun; he usually made them in our class, though. Him yelling at freshmen who made footprints on our pristine track were usually trouble, but again, it was done with caring. I even got my truck stuck in the ag class garden one time, and he pulled me out while laughing and making fun of my old Chevy. He was a Ford man, you know. I bought him dinner at McDonald's on the next sports trip. When you say they don't make them like this anymore, Mr. Burton is the poster child, Rest in Peace, Coach. Beau Brown, class of 1978

Beau Brown - February 19 at 02:06 PM



“ 6 files added to the album *Memories Album*



Hall Brothers Corning Mortuary - February 18 at 08:37 PM