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Hoepfner, Steffey deaths top local stories of 2007

IU coach's battle with cancer, college student's disappearance, death touched many hearts

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BLOOMINGTON — Readers and the H-T newsroom agree — the tragic deaths of two Bloomingtonians, one a prominent member of the sports and university communities and the other a young man of wonderful promise, led the news of 2007.

IU football coach Terry Hoepfner died in the summer after a tough battle with a brain tumor that began more than a year earlier. Purdue freshman and Bloomington South graduate Wade Steffey was reported missing from his dorm in January. Massive searches that extended across the Purdue campus and beyond and which involved hundreds of people finally came to an end in late March. That's when a Purdue service worker discovered his body in an electric utility room only yards from where he was last seen.

The room was at the rear of a dorm he had visited the night he disappeared. It contained high-voltage electrical equipment but was unmarked and unlocked. It was believed that when he died, the 19-year-old may have been searching for a way back into the dorm, which is not accessible to nonresidents, to retrieve a coat. His death was ruled an accidental electrocution.

Hoepfner's death, as tragic but not so shrouded in mystery, nonetheless shocked the IU community and Bloomington fans who had been charmed by the coach's earnest belief in his program, his optimism and his fervent calls for support for the team.

His successor, Bill Lynch, took the team that Hoepfner built to IU's first bowl game since 1993. The coach's widow, Jane, a continued inspiration for the program, is in Tempe now. She's waiting for Monday night's Insight Bowl kickoff and the chance to watch the Hoosiers "play 13" — the team's rallying cry — that is, to win enough games in the 12-game regular season to go to a bowl game. This year's winning 7-5 season, topped by a victory over Purdue in the Bucket Game, ensured that.

In a separate measure, not of news value or interest but of actual Web activity, the story that most readers of our Web site connected to was the October shooting incident on the west side of Bloomington that disrupted morning rush hour, shut down parts of the city and locked down some schools.

In that incident, in which no one was hurt, reporters were on the scene at an apartment complex on West Second Street, providing live Web updates that explained what was going on to readers in the

area and to others in the city who had heard about it. The reports had an immediacy and relevance that in the past would have been left to radio or TV, providing a real live-action preview of how the breaking news of the day will be delivered in the future.

The Steffey and Hoepfner stories were the top two newsmakers in both the reader and newsroom polls, although readers had the Hoepfner story No. 1 and the Steffey story No. 2, while newsroom voters reversed that order.

Opinions were more varied for the story next in line, with readers voting the FBI's recent raid on the offices of Bloomington physician Kamal Tiwari as the third-place story, while the newsroom picked the elevation of Michael McRobbie to the IU presidency as No. 3. Readers had the new IU president story pegged at ninth on their list.

The Tiwari story was one of three reader choices that didn't make the newsroom's top 10, with the stories on calls for the resignation of the county auditor and the re-election of Bloomington's mayor the other two. The three newsroom story choices that didn't make that much of an impression on readers included Finelight's announcement of its departure from downtown, the Bloomington Hospital proposal to partner with Clarian and the opening of the Bloomington Volunteers in Medicine free clinic in the spring.

IU sports, as might be predicted, placed high in both polls, with the report of sanctions for the IU basketball program for recruiting violations making it to both lists, along with the Hoepfner story — and the good news that his football team won an invitation to a bowl game.

The grisly discovery of two bodies in barrels on a piece of property southwest of Bloomington and the arrest of scrap merchant Jerry Pelfree in connection with the deaths were on both Top 10s.

Much happier news was the story of the restoration and reopening of the West Baden Springs Hotel, made possible through the largesse and deep pockets of Bloomington businessman Bill Cook and his wife, Gayle. The grand reopening of that hotel and of the French Lick Springs Hotel, along with the new Orange County casino that is partnered with the hotels, is seen by many as the salvation of a region that has long been near the bottom of the economic barrel.

2007's top 10 local news stories

AS RANKED BY THE H-T

Results of votes by reporters, editors and other newsroom workers:

1. Wade Steffey missing, later found dead from electrocution.
2. Coach Terry Hoepfner dies after battle with cancer.
3. Michael McRobbie becomes IU president.
4. IU football plays 13 with Insight Bowl game.

5. Kelvin Sampson recruiting rules violations.
6. Bloomington Hospital proposes partnership with Clarian.
7. West Baden hotel reopens with help of Bill Cook.
8. Finelight announces it will leave downtown for west side.
9. Jerry Pelfree charged with murder after bodies found in barrels.
10. Volunteers in Medicine clinic opens its doors.

AS RANKED BY ONLINE READERS

Results of HeraldTimesOnline.com readers' votes:

1. Coach Terry Hoepfner dies after battle with cancer.
2. Wade Steffey missing, later found dead from electrocution.
3. FBI raids Dr. Tiwari office.
4. Kelvin Sampson recruiting rules violations.
5. IU football plays 13 with Insight Bowl game.
6. West Baden hotel reopens with help of Bill Cook.
7. Jerry Pelfree charged with murder after bodies found in barrels.
8. Officials call for county auditor to resign.
9. Michael McRobbie becomes IU president.
10. Mark Kruzan elected for another mayoral term.

AS RANKED BY HTO WEB HITS

HeraldTimesOnline.com users gravitated toward breaking news and crime in 2007. The story of a man shooting a gun from his westside apartment building was the most-read story on HTO this year, with its installments ranking No. 1 and No. 3.

1. Police: Suspected shooter still in apartment building, Oct. 16.
2. FBI, police at Tiwari offices this morning, Dec. 18.
3. Reports: Incident on Second Street, Oct. 16.
4. Terry Hoepfner dies, June 19.

5. Police investigating reported shooting, Dec. 6.
6. Senderoff out as IU assistant, Oct. 30.
7. Man charged in double homicide, Sept. 16.
8. Lawrence County judge found dead in his home Tuesday night, Oct. 31.
9. Woman found dead was facing ID deception charges, Dec. 7.
10. Dead man found in car along North Walnut Street, Oct. 8.



Terry Hoepfner. Chris Howell | Herald-Times



Members of the Indiana University football team honor their head coach, Terry Hoepfner, one last time June 23 by raising their helmets high as the hearse rolls by near Assembly Hall. Chris Howell | Hoosier Times



Wade Steffey. Courtesy photo



Dale Steffey and Dawn Adams of Bloomington talk about their missing son, Wade Steffey, in January. The Purdue freshman disappeared on the West Lafayette campus, prompting weeks of searching before his body was found in the electrical room of a dorm. David Snodgrass | Hoosier Times

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