News



Notre Dame alumni coach Lou Holtz speaks to his team before the start of the Notre Dame Japan Bowl football game against Japan in Tokyo July 25, 2009. Holtz, a legendary college football coach and devout Catholic who led the University of Notre Dame to the 1988 National Championship, died March 4, 2026, at age 89. (OSV News/Reuters/Issei Kato)

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Leading up to a college football clash between Notre Dame and heated rival Miami in the late 1980s, a team chaplain for the Hurricanes proclaimed that God doesn't care who wins football games.

Lou Holtz, coach of the Fighting Irish at the time, agreed. "I don't think God cares who wins, either," he replied with a smile. "But his Mother does."

This now-famous quip captured the essence of the legendary coach: an uncanny wit, an unwavering Catholic faith and an unshakable love for Notre Dame — Our Lady's university. On March 4, Holtz died in Orlando, Florida, at the age of 89, surrounded by his family. Forever etched in Fighting Irish lore for leading Notre Dame to the 1988 National Championship, Holtz leaves behind not just a decorated football resume but a legacy of shaping young men and inspiring people to live virtuously.

"Notre Dame mourns the loss of Lou Holtz, a legendary football coach, a beloved member of the Notre Dame family, and devoted husband, father, and grandfather," said Holy Cross Fr. Robert Dowd, Notre Dame's president, in a public statement. "Among his many accomplishments, we will remember him above all as a teacher, leader, and mentor who brought out the very best in his players, on and off the field, earning their respect and admiration for a lifetime."

Louis Leo Holtz was born on Jan. 6, 1937, in Follansbee, West Virginia, and grew up in East Liverpool, Ohio. He played linebacker at Kent State University before beginning a coaching career that would span over four decades. With head coaching stops at William and Mary, North Carolina State, Arkansas, Minnesota, Notre Dame

and South Carolina, Holtz became the ninth-winningest coach in college football history with a record of 249-132-7. He received national Coach of the Year honors on three occasions and remains the only coach to lead six separate programs to bowl games.

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However, Holtz is best remembered for his 11 seasons in South Bend, where he revitalized the Notre Dame football program. From 1986 through 1996, the Fighting Irish won 100 games, reached a program-record nine consecutive bowl games, and were undefeated national champions in 1988 — Notre Dame's last national title to date.

As coach of the Irish, Holtz was humble but confident, respectful but fearless, and wise but candid. He established several traditions at Notre Dame that remain in place today, from the iconic "Play Like a Champion" sign that players slap on their way to the field, to the removal of names from the football jerseys to emphasize the team dynamic. The mark Holtz left on the program, the university and especially the young men who played for him cannot be overstated.

"Lou and I shared a very special relationship," Notre Dame head coach Marcus Freeman said in a statement. "He welcomed me to the Notre Dame family immediately, offering me great support throughout our time together. Our relationship meant a lot to me as I admired the values he used to build the foundation of his coaching career: love, trust, and commitment. Lou's impact at Notre Dame has gone well beyond the football team. He and his wife, Beth, are respected across campus for their generous hearts and commitment to carrying out Notre Dame's mission of being a force for good."

Former Irish great Jerome Bettis shared on social media that Holz "believed in building men, not just players."

"Coach was so much more than a football coach to me. He was family," Bettis, a fullback for the Irish from 1990-1993, posted March 4. "I still remember the day he came to my house to recruit me. He didn't just sit down and talk to me about football or what I could do on the field. He talked to me as a young man. And he spoke to my mom the way a man should speak to a mother who was trusting

someone with her son. He looked her in the eye and promised that I would be taken care of at Notre Dame. That moment meant everything to us, and it's something I've carried with me my entire life."

After retiring from coaching, Holtz spent time as a studio analyst for ESPN, a best-selling author and a motivational speaker, where he continued inspiring people with the same energy and charisma.

He often told crowds, "I follow three rules: Do the right thing, do the best you can, and always show people you care." Holtz preached that "life is 10 percent what happens to you and 90 percent how you respond to it." He challenged people to live exceptional lives, famously stating, "I can't believe that God put us on this earth to be ordinary."

Central to everything Holtz did was his faith. A lifelong Catholic, Holtz served as an altar boy and credited the education he received from the Sisters of Notre Dame with instilling the desire to make God the focus of his life. Holtz was outspoken about his faith and believed following Church teachings "brings meaning and lasting happiness to life."

He possessed a deep and profound love for Notre Dame — not just his team, but the university, the students, the fans and the faith alive on campus. "Every single day being there was very special," Holtz told the National Catholic Register in a 2012 interview, "because there were so many opportunities to encounter and live out the Catholic faith."

The late Bishop John D'Arcy of the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend once asked Holtz what it meant to be the head football coach at Notre Dame. His answer displayed a life not consumed by his career but anchored by his Catholic faith. "It means if you have an 8 o'clock meeting, you can find a 7 o'clock Mass," Holtz responded. "When you want to go to confession, you just walk across the campus to the basilica. When you are leaving at 10 o'clock at night, the Lady on the dome is smiling down at you."

Holtz reaffirmed his love for Our Lady after coaching his final game at Notre Dame Stadium. After his final home game, when asked by a Fort Wayne News-Sentinel columnist how he'll be remembered, a tearful Holtz said, "I never disgraced the Lady on the dome." Holtz was a living embodiment of the final line of the university's alma mater song, "Notre Dame, Our Mother," that marks the end of each sporting

event: "And our hearts forever love thee, Notre Dame!"

Holtz is survived by his four children, Luanne, Lou "Skip" Jr., Kevin and Elizabeth. His family is finalizing funeral arrangements, including a Mass of Christian Burial at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart at Notre Dame. Holtz will be laid to rest at Notre Dame's Cedar Grove Cemetery next to his wife, Beth.