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Ex-mayor, college football star, dies

Zeke Martin, 82, dies from injuries after car accident

By **Lowell Brown**
Staff Writer

Former Denton Mayor Zeke Martin, a former football star and coach who found a long-term career as an oil company executive, died at a Fort Worth hospital Monday from injuries sustained in a car accident.

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He was 82.

Fort Worth police could not provide additional information about the accident Tuesday.

Son Steve Martin said his father was driving alone to a retired football coaches' luncheon when the accident occurred.

Friends and family remembered the University of North Texas alumnus and athletics supporter as a generous man

whose accomplishments ranged from sports to business to politics.

"He just loved the whole town," Steve Martin said. "He loved the school, North Texas, and helping them all he could help."

Longtime family friend Pete Kamp, a Denton City Council member, called Zeke Martin "an incredible man."

"He put a smile on your face every time you saw him," she said. "He really was pure joy to know."

Mayor Perry McNeill called Zeke

Martin's death a loss for the community.

"He's been a superb example of a citizen-servant," McNeill said. "He was a sports figure and successful businessman, but he took time to devote to public service, and I appreciate that."

The son of a carpenter, Cecil F. "Zeke" Martin was born on Sept. 26, 1924, in Denton.

He attracted attention as a quarterback

See **MARTIN** on 15A

Martin

at Denton High School and later at North Texas State College (now UNT), where he is ranked 10th in university history with 2,522 passing yards. The total includes his play from 1949 to 1950, but not from 1947 to 1948 because no records exist for that period.



Martin

The Eagles quarterback also received all-conference recognition for three seasons in a row and was later inducted into the UNT Athletic Hall of Fame.

UNT Athletic Director Rick Villarreal called Martin a close friend whose impact on the university — both as a player and supporter — was immense.

“Zeke was a three-time all-conference player, and I think he helped set the tone for future guys in that era who had success,” Villarreal said. “He was a leader by example, and I think he inspired others to be the best they could be.”

On June 11, 1949, Martin married his college sweetheart, Bettye Lassiter, in Houston. They had two children, Steve Martin of Argyle and Gary Martin of Denton.

After graduating from the university in 1951 with a master's degree in physical education, Martin went on to play one season of professional football with the Canadian Football League's Hamilton Tigers.

He left the league to take a basketball coaching position in Denton, and he went on to coach football at Denton High School from 1953 to 1960.

In 1960, he founded Martin Eagle Oil Co., which would grow from a single service station to a multimillion-dollar business. In recent years, he had been semi-retired from the business, where his sons are vice presidents.

At age 42, Martin jumped into politics with a successful City Council bid in April 1967. The council appointed him mayor that month, and he would serve as the city's top elected leader for two years before stepping down.

As mayor, Martin helped guide projects to fix neglected streets in Southeast Denton and secure a

new City Hall.

He declined to seek re-election in 1969, saying the unpaid city government work consumed a lot of time and that he “had to make a living.”

During his stint as mayor, he ran unsuccessfully in 1968 for state representative on a platform that included increased support for Denton's educational institutions and highway access to the new Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport.

Martin made headlines again in 1976 when he fought UNT's plan to condemn a lot he owned at the corner of Highland Street and Avenue C to make way for a parking lot. The lot was once the Martin family home site and was home at the time to several businesses.

After more than a year of wrangling over the property's price, the parties reached an out-of-court settlement in December 1976 to transfer the land for an undisclosed amount.

Among his other accomplishments, Martin also founded Little League baseball in Denton and was a longtime supporter of UNT athletics. He was active in the UNT Lettermen's Association and the related golf tournament that bears his name.

Martin's death follows the recent deaths of two other former Denton mayors whose impact transcended local politics: Frank Barrow and L.A. Nelson Jr.

“We're losing our elder statesmen,” McNeill said. “Age is catching up with us here and that's a shame, because they had a lot to offer and continued to offer a lot to the community after they had stepped out of public service.”

Nelson and Martin served on the council together in the 1960s and were good friends, said Martha Len Nelson, L.A. Nelson Jr.'s widow. The Martin and Nelson families even shared a second home in Florida together for more than 20 years, she said.

“He [Martin] had an interesting life ... and he had a lot of friends,” Martha Len Nelson said. “If you knew him, you loved him.”

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