

https://www.hngnews.com/mcfarland_thistle/article_dec44901-bead-5a3c-a203-2a2a786d014b.html

MCFARLAND SOFTBALL
A McFarland softball legend

By Mike Klawitter mklawitter@hngnews.com
Sep 21, 2020



Jim Wickert served 27 years as the assistant coach for the McFarland High School softball team.
Lucy Ripp

When contacting Jim Wickert via email to gauge his interest in a story about his years as the long-time McFarland High School assistant softball coach, his response is: Why me?

“I’d been away from the McFarland High School softball program long enough that I thought that I was long forgotten,” said Wickert, an assistant for the Spartans for 27 years and currently, a recruiter for the Madison College softball team.

Yet, his return email contains thousands of words about McFarland’s softball history and how he helped put it all together.

Perhaps Wickert feels like he is forgotten, but his positive contributions to the program remain to this day.



He was inducted into the Wisconsin Fastpitch Softball Coaches Association (WFSCA) Hall of Fame and pioneered the McFarland Youth Softball program.

He proudly watched McFarland reach two state tournaments and defeat some of Wisconsin’s biggest softball powerhouses. He was also an avid softball player and participated in numerous leagues.

His story is one that deserves to be told especially for the younger generations that may not fully understand his impact on Spartans’ softball.

Playing, learning the game

Wickert learned how to play and coach softball from mentors that could have their heads etched in Wisconsin softball’s version of Mount Rushmore. Among them were Steve Schmilka, who compiled better than 400 wins as the McFarland head coach,

Del Schneeberger at Madison College, Bob Tomlinson at Poynette and Bob Sulser, who head coached at Madison Memorial, Beloit Turner and Madison Edgewood. Like Wickert, all four men are members of the WFSCA.

There was also Leo Kalinowski, a member of the Madison College Athletic Hall of Fame and Dave Halverson, who turned over the head coaching reins to Lea Lackey after the 2018 season.

Wickert learned a lot about the game by playing it including four years of high school intramural softball, three years of college intramural softball and one year of recreational level softball while serving in the Marines. Along the way, he earned his Bachelor's degree in agricultural journalism from UW-Madison in 1969.

His playing career really started to take off in 1971 as he joined a number of softball leagues in Madison. He was playing two or three nights a week and weekends as well.

In 1988, Wickert was named assistant coach of the McFarland squad and would stay with the team until 2014.

He began with the Spartans after head coach Schmilka approached him.

“It was never a job. It was an opportunity to do something that I came to love,” Wickert said. “I didn’t exactly land it. It came to me.”

He didn’t let his coaching get in the way of his playing softball as he stayed active until 2004 when injuries forced him to retire as a player. He was 57 years old.

Once his coaching career began, Wickert witnessed the most memorable moments in McFarland softball history. He said coaching the game back then was far different than it is now

“In the early years the pitching was very primitive compared to today’s pitching. ‘Throw it as hard as you can and hope it’s somewhere around the plate,’” Wickert said. “In 1989 I was able to convince our pitcher, Lesley Kalscheur, to throw a change-up. I don’t remember the result but it was the first change-up I’d seen thrown at the high school level.”

Starting with the Spartans

In his first year of 1988, McFarland reached the sectional semifinal game against Platteville at Waunakee. Despite hot and humid conditions, the Spartans won an extra-inning thriller to put them one game from the state tournament. Yet, Wickert said the win took a lot out of McFarland, which lost later that day in the sectional final game.

In 1994, the Spartans defeated Verona 11-6 to win the Capitol Conference title. It was also Schmilka’s 200th career coaching victory. Eleven years later, Schmilka would earn his 400th career win as his daughter Stephanie took the victory as starting pitcher.

McFarland would advance to the state tournament in 2006 for the first time in program history after winning in the regional round over Mount Horeb and Brodhead and then defeating Madison Edgewood and Dodgeville. The Spartans earned the state berth by knocking off Waupun 6-2 in the Division 2 sectional championship game. Yet, the team fell in the state semifinal game to Plymouth.

Halverson started his successful 11-season career in 2008. According to Wickert, the Spartans lost their first three games that year but upset Verona, which was ranked in the top 10 among WIAA Division 1 schools. After that, McFarland went on an 11-game winning streak.

McFarland returned to the state tournament in 2014 after triumphs over Madison Edgewood and Edgerton in the regional. The Spartans took the sectional semifinal game over Delevan-Darien 6-4 and then defeated Marshall 6-4 at McFarland's Brandt Park. In the state semifinal match, Mosinee eliminated the Spartans 6-0 on Goodman Diamond at UW-Madison.

That marked Wickert's final year as assistant coach for McFarland.

He was never a head coach and had no desire to take on that responsibility. Before he retired from his position with the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection in 2004, the demands of his job made it impossible for him to attend all the games and practices.

"Even after retirement, I had no desire to be a head coach. Having the good fortune to serve under head coaches who gave me the autonomy to coach my pitchers and catchers without micromanaging, I was able to do what I loved to do," Wickert said. "I had the pleasure of enjoying the success of our program and the development of our student/athletes without having to deal with the administrative hassles."

Hall of Famer

In 2016, just two years after leaving the McFarland softball program, Wickert was inducted into the Wisconsin Fastpitch Softball Coaches Association Hall of Fame after he nominated by Halverson.

Wickert was thrilled and humbled to have his name recognized among other contributors to the game. He was the first assistant coach to enter the Hall and currently one of three McFarland coaches inducted.

"It's something that I would never have dreamed about when I started coaching. It's an honor that I share with all of the players and coaches that I've had the pleasure to be associated with. Any special thank you to Dave Halverson who made the effort

to nominate me.”

Today, Wickert recruits players for the Madison College softball team and travels to different high schools to see athletes perform on the field. He said there are a lot of things he looks for: athleticism, speed, arm strength, hitting mechanics, skill level of pitchers but first and foremost, academics.

“No matter how good the player is she is not helping the team if she is academically ineligible,” Wickert said. “Our goal is a team grade point average of at least 3.25. We had six Academic All-Americans and better than half of our team earned Academic All-Conference honors in 2019.”

Wickert, who is approaching his 74th birthday, said he is working on reviving a spring softball tournament with the McFarland youth softball organization and the American Legion Post 534 where is a member.

Aside from that, Wickert considers his long career to be rewarding and he thanks the student/athletes for making the McFarland softball program a success.

“I never ceased to be amazed the quality of the players that came to us, year in and year out. Wonderful young ladies who were focused on and willing to put in the work to achieve the team’s goals,” he said. “And I don’t think that they fell out of bed one morning with those traits. They were learned. Taught by their family. And there were moms, dads and summer coaches who spent untold hours preparing these young ladies to compete at the high school level.”

Mike Klawitter

