*One of the more heartbreaking stories in Muskegon Athletic lore was the untimely passing at a much too early age of Mike Pedler.*

*Pedlar is the first of three stories listed below honoring those who have left us.*

**The Mike Pedler Story**

**Moyes’ Memories**

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When Fennville’s Wes Leonard tragically passed away shortly after his last regular season game a year ago, my thoughts quickly reverted to a similar sad tale that took place right here in Muskegon fifty years ago next month.

However, the sudden passing of Muskegon Community College star basketball player Mike Pedler unfortunately received little notice outside our community.

There was no ESPN; USA Today; and Mega Cable TV channels, that currently exist in today’s high-tech world of Sports, during Pedler’s era.

While Leonard’s death was mourned nationwide by millions of television viewers and readers throughout this nation, Pedler’s passing didn’t even merit a feature story in our local newspaper.

I recently googled the name: Wes Leonard, and it showed that there have been an astonishing 9,850,000 hits ----compared to zero when I googled for Muskegon’s Mike Pedler.

And how good of a player was Mike Pedler?

Records show that he was the fourth leading single season scorer in MCC history. And he only played his freshman year!

According to long time MCC coach Gene Gifford, currently the head coach at Olivet College, his records show Marvin Moore heads the list with a 26.7 accrued during the 1987-88 season.

I spent an afternoon last September at the Hackley Library pouring over old box scores for the Jayhawks 1961-62 basketball season and found that Pedler tallied 541 points, an average of nearly 24 points per game!

If one could toss out the final two games, when Pedler played extremely ill, he would place second behind only Moore with a per game average of 25.7 points.

Who knows what Pedler would have averaged if this deadeye out court shooter had the three-point line in effect a half century earlier?

Prior to enrolling at MCC in the fall of 1961 Pedler was a two-year starter at Muskegon High School and was a pivotal player on one of Muskegon’s strongest squads in Big Red History.

Muskegon had an outstanding team in Pedler’s senior season, where he teamed up with notable former Big Reds Al Nichols, Ben Strong, Bill Pendall and Roy Krumweide.

This Big Red powerhouse also featured one of the greatest players in Muskegon high history, the enigmatic Sam Moore. Moore would have a stellar high school and collegiate career before falling off the straight and narrow path in the years to follow.

Aptly nicknamed “The Bird”, Moore would be the last player cut by Chicago Bull’s NBA coach Dick Motta, coincidently, the college head coach of Gene Young, the former Muskegon Heights cage star who was instrumental in getting Moore, Nichols and Pedler out to the Rocky Mountain state to play college ball.

Pedler averaged 15 points a game for Big Red coach Ed Hager’s team that posted an impressive 13-2 regular season mark. How he got off enough shots to score that many points was a mystery as passing the ball to Moore was like watching a star going into the Black Hole --- the ball wasn’t coming out.

The 5’10 senior guard showed his mettle in crunch time throughout the season.

Midway through the campaign Pedler led the Big Reds to an overtime win in front of 2800 fans crammed into Benton Harbor’s gym. Pedler led the Big Reds to the victory over the undefeated Tigers with 21 points, scoring five of the seven Muskegon points in the deciding overtime period.

On December 9, 1960, Pedler’s Muskegon five joined Muskegon Height’s cagers in playing in the inaugural basketball game first played in the then recently completed LC Walker Sports Area.

In front of 4200 fans the Heights shocked undefeated Muskegon 62-53. Savvy Tiger coach Oakie Johnson surprised his followers by implementing a 2-3-zone defense, which he said following the game he hadn’t used “in about 20 years.”

The two teams again faced each other at the Walker Arena on Jan 20, 1961, with 5100 fans in attendance. Muskegon turned the tables on the Tigers and won 55-51 as Pedler added 12 points to aid the Big Red’s cause.

The two archrivals would meet again in a first-round playoff game played in front of perhaps the largest crowd to ever pack this venerable arena. Over 5600 fans crammed into the Walker in a game that would mark the end of Mike Pedler’s high school career.

The Heights win would help propel the Tigers all the way to the Class A championship game at MSU’s Jenison Fieldhouse, before losing to Detroit Catholic in the finals.

Fondly recalling those great moments and cherishing the memory of his teammate and close friend during a recent conversation was Al Nichols.

Nichols and Pedler were co-captains of the 1960-61 Big Red Machine and would be as good a backcourt combination as ever witnessed in Muskegon High School’s long history.

“I remember so much about Mike, he is really dear to my heart,” recalled Nichols.

“Playing three years on the varsity together was like playing alongside your brother. We had great chemistry between us because we had played a lot of playground ball before coming up to the varsity, going all the way back when we were youngsters in the Junior Police organization.”

Nichols mentioned how he often thinks back to those days and especially the battles they had with Grand Haven. The Bucs handed Muskegon one of their two losses and featured a backcourt that also may have been unmatched in Grand Haven’s basketball history.

Al was quick to point out how he and Pedler looked forward to battling Grand Haven’s noted backcourt duo of Doug Vanderwall and John Sluka.

“Mike and I were often compared with Doug and John, and we sure had a lot of mutual respect for one another,” reminisced Nichols.

During the summer Pedler honed his skills on the local outdoor courts along with Nichols and his pals at Nelson Jr. High School, Park Avenue, Baker Street in the Heights or St. Joseph Church at Houston and Fifth street in Muskegon.

At the advisement and recommendation from Gene Young, who at the time was playing hoops at Otero Junior College, Nichols and Pedler headed west to join up with Young.

Pedler, however, quickly decided the Rocky Mountain life was not meant for him, and after but a few short days in Colorado, Mike purchased a bus ticket and headed back home to the Port City to enroll at Muskegon Community College.

Although the Jayhawks had a less than spectacular record of 10 wins against 14 defeats, Pedler and the Jayhawks experienced some exemplary moments during the 1961-62 season.

Seven times during the season the sharp shooting Pedler scored more than 30 points, including a career high 37 in a loss to Aquinas College.

Yet another highlight during Pedler’s lone year with the Jayhawks was their 86-82 victory over rival Grand Rapids Junior College, with Pedler canning 15 field goals in a 33-point scoring outburst.

The leading scorer for the Raiders with 20 points was Bob Lurtsema. Lurtsema would have a stellar career in the NFL including playing in two Super Bowls for the Minnesota Vikings in 1974 and 75.

Perhaps the signature moment of the season came in late December of 1961 when they won the Port Huron Holiday Classic. Pedler had 28 of the Jayhawks 68 points in their championship win over Dearborn and was an easy pick for the All-Tournament team.

During the closing stretch of this campaign, Pedler may have had the best seven games run in MCC’s basketball history when he averaged just a shade less than 30 points a game.

On February 9th, the Jayhawks took to the courts and were soundly defeated by Detroit Henry Ford JC. Unbeknownst to all, Mike Pedler had begun showing the first signs of what would lead to his fatal illness.

Playing at far less than 100 per cent in the losing cause, Pedler was still able to score 20 points, even though the Chronicle’s game day story depicted Pedler as experiencing ‘an off night.’

A week later the headlines in the sports section of the Chronicle read: “PEDLER ILL, JAYHAWKS LOSE TO PORT HURON.” The game story mentioned that Pedler made only a token appearance as the normally sharp shooting guard hit but 1 of 12 shots.

Nine days later he would be dead.

Pedler sat out the last two games of the regular season with an illness that was thought to be influenza. On Thursday February 22, 1961, Pedler attended the Muskegon Zephyrs hockey game with Minneapolis.

The following night Mike was scheduled to go on a date with his friend Sue Sweet. Sue suspected something wasn’t right when Mike failed to show.

“Mike was living at the time at the downtown YMCA,” Ms. Sweet sadly recalled.

“Mike’s Aunt and Uncle were on vacation down South and they didn’t want Mike living alone in their house. Mike then went to live with his father at the YMCA.

I called the YMCA the next morning and the person I spoke with at the Y said Mike was really sick. I was upset, began crying and told my mother about Mike’s illness and she then called her family physician.”

Ms. Sweet recalled that the doctor replied that he had to work until noon, but he would make a house call to the Y to check on Mike.

Immediately upon seeing Pedler’s deteriorating condition he called for an ambulance.

“After church the following morning I was given a ride to Hackley Hospital, and when I arrived, I was sent to a waiting room,” said Ms. Sweet in a recent interview.

A staff physician informed Sue that Mike Pedler, one of this area’s greatest all time basketball players, passed away about an hour earlier from spinal meningitis. (2:15 PM.)

When I asked his Big Red High School co-captain to his reaction when first hearing the word of Pedler’s passing, Al Nichols quickly replied: “I cried.

I first heard of his passing from my God brother – Sam Moore. Sam called me long distance and sent me Mike’s press release (Obituary). I couldn’t return home because we were still into our basketball season at Otero, but I remember people telling me that they had a full house at his funeral.”

So distraught were his teammates at MCC that they declined to play in the upcoming State Junior College Tournament.

Shortly following the post-season tournament Pedler was selected as a first team All-State JUCO player, with the plaque presented to his father George Pedler by MCC coach Rudy Bartels at a school ceremony.

Pedler’s legacy reaches far deeper than what he accomplished on the basketball hardwoods.

His greatest athletic feat came the previous September when he averted a near tragedy with a quick thinking move to save the life of four-year-old Brian Pinter.

While visiting the Pinter home with his friend Sue Sweet there was a three-car collision in front of the Pinter home in North Muskegon.

“Mike was outside playing ball with little Brian,” Sue so vividly recalled.

“When a car catapulted the curb at the intersection of First St. and Mills, Mike made a lifesaving move by first pushing young Brian out of harm’s way before making a last second dive to safety as the car crashed into the Pinter home.”

Another former teammate and high school friend of Pedler, Ross Recknagle, recalls Mike being much more than just a basketball star.

“I remember Mike was an outstanding pole vaulter on the track team as well as a talented baseball player.

Mike was the humblest, and quiet of an athletic person I ever met,” recalled Recknagle.

There was one common denominator from all the people that I interviewed for this story who were close to Mike Pedler: They all mentioned that Mike had less than an idyllic family upbringing.

The soft-spoken Pedler was never one to bring up his relationship with his parents and spent much of his teenage years living with his aunt and uncle in Muskegon Heights.

Our culture has seen some dramatic changes since Mike Pedler left us a half-century ago.

There is an award in honor of Mike Pedler at MCC --- ‘The Mike Pedler Sportsman Award’---and now hopefully when current and future Jayhawk players read Mike’s story, they will have a much deeper appreciation behind the spirit of this award.

The Muskegon Class of 1961 celebrated their 50th class reunion this past year and they had a screen that flashed the names of their departed classmates.

“When Mike’s name came on the screen,” said Nichols, “Oh my Gosh, I know I got chocked up. He was so revered by his classmates.”

Mike Pedler was 19 years old.

*The next story was a tribute to the late and great Ed Burton, a big man with a big heart who arguably is the best to have put on a basketball uniform in our area.*

**Muskegon Heights Loses an All-Time Great in Ed Burton**

Moyes’ Memories

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The beleaguered city of Muskegon Heights took another hit today, and the passing of Ed Burton Monday morning may have been the most painful blow of all.

Arguably this area’s greatest of all basketball players, “Big Ed” led Muskegon Heights to consecutive state Class A titles in 1956-57, eclipsing records during his epic journey that still stand today.

Ed followed in the footsteps of his older brother M.C., both on the hardwoods, and years later, into the Muskegon Area Sports Hall of Fame.

It was M.C. Burton and the Tigers who collared the first of the three state titles this proud basketball powerhouse earned over a three-year stretch beginning in 1954.

1955 would be the only year this pair of iconic roundballers would team up on the same high school team, and, oddly enough, was the only Heights team during this unprecedented run when the Tigers didn’t win a state championship.

It’s been well over a half-century since Ed and M.C. last donned a Tiger uniform, and yet the Burton brothers still rank 1-2 in career scoring at the Heights.

Ed tallied 1143 points during his three-year stint for the Orange & Black, just two points more than brother M.C. scored during his career.

In addition to his still standing career scoring mark, the 6’7 Burton still holds the single season record of 45 points scored in a single game.

Someday, if Muskegon Heights still retains their school, perhaps somebody will eclipse some of Ed’s more than 50-year-old records but let’s put things into perspective.

Teams in the Burton era played only 15 regular season games. And --- Muskegon Heights was only a three-year school. Burton set these still existing records despite missing out playing a possible 30 games--- or more.

This reporter has witnessed many outstanding basketball teams over the years, but none could hold a candle to that great Tiger team in 1957.

After winning the state crown in 1956 with a convincing 10-point victory over Hamtramck, four starters and two other lettermen greeted veteran coach Oakie Johnson for the start of the 1956-57 campaign.

Nary a single opponent threw a scare at this great Tiger team as Big Ed and his mates never saw an opponent come closer than 10 points throughout the entire season, a feat unmatched in MHSAA Class A basketball history.

In a quarterfinal romp against Traverse City, in front of a sold-out crowd at Central Michigan University, Big Ed Burton put on a show that has yet to be equaled in Greater Muskegon History. Ed tallied 44 points and pulled down 31 rebounds in the Tiger’s 79-52 thrashing of the outmanned Trojans.

Much ado has been printed over the years of the 1958 state final battle between Detroit Austin and Benton Harbor, featuring a pair of future NBA -All Stars in Austin’s Dave Debusschere and the downstate Tigers’ Chet Walker.

Somehow lost in the shuffle over time was the 1957 state final four when Big Ed took both future stars to school. Burton and the Tigers polished off Walker and Benton Harbor 74-52 in a semi-final blowout win and then took care of business in the state final by deposing of Austin 61-49 to claim their third, and final, Class A title.

Burton was accorded All-State and All-American honors and was eagerly sought by a bundle of major college powerhouses. Burton accepted a scholarship to Michigan State University, at a time when a freshman was not eligible to compete at the varsity level.

However, the college way of life was not agreeable to Burton and certainly took a back seat to his affection for his sweetheart back home in Muskegon Heights, Queen, who would become Mrs. Ed Burton for more than fifty memorable years.

Ed Burton left the campus of Michigan State to begin a two-year odyssey with the famed Harlem Globetrotters, where he was teammate with two of Basketball’s greatest icons, Wilt Chamberlain and Meadowlark Lemon.

Following a couple of years with Abe Saberstein’s legendary Globetrotters, Burton became the first Muskegon area player to make it to the NBA when he joined the New York Knicks.

Following a brief tenure with the St. Louis Hawks, Burton would conclude his basketball journey by showcasing his remarkable basketball skills in the Muskegon Area by performing for the fledging Muskegon Panther franchise in the middle 1960’s.

Some of my most compelling moments were spent watching the Burton Brothers during the off-season. I would stay out of harm’s way when Big Ed and his brother would square off on the Baker Street court.

They were such dominating players that they rarely, if ever, played on the same team. A team that would have included both Burton brothers would have created a horrific unbalance in talent.

A ferocious rebounder, as well as a dominating scorer, Burton was indeed a Tiger on the court, but he was like a little lamb off the hardwoods.

Growing up in the Muskegon area when Burton was in his prime, Ed was the benchmark we all looked up to, not only as a player, but also as a person who was liked by all.

There was one occurrence many years ago when my long-time sidekick, and dear friend of Ed Burton, Gene Young, informed me that Young would have to miss a broadcast.

I called Ed and asked him if he would like to take Gene’s place on the microphone for one game. Following the broadcast Burton mentioned how honored he was to share this time with me on the air. Ed had it all wrong --- it was me who was honored.

Ed Burton’s high school number of 55 became the first number ever retired at Muskegon Heights.

I truly believe my proudest moment in my many years in sports was when I received the call from Heights’s principal Danny Smith asking me if I would handle the introduction of Ed Burton’s number retirement.

What an honor! For Ed certainly, a truly deserving accolade, but a thrill for me as well to be asked to take part in this moving ceremony.

To stand at midcourt and recap some of Ed’s innumerable accomplishments during his basketball career in front of a huge crowd at the new gymnasium was mind-boggling.

“Ed had been in declining health for the past few years, and despite his body taking a downward spiral, his infectious spirit always remained high,” said his pal, Gene Young.

Gene was emphatic in today’s phone conversation that Ed should be remembered for being more than a dominant basketball player. “He was also one of the nicest guys I ever knew. He was always mild mannered and just a big, warm-hearted guy his many friends will never forget,” replied Young.

I have not been given any specifics as to the date, place, and time for Ed’s funeral arrangements, but I do know --- that with his multitude of friends and admirers--- there isn’t a church big enough to handle the crowd that will want to say their final goodbyes to one of this area’s greatest all time athletes, as well as a great guy and a gentle giant.

We may never again see another like ‘Big Ed.’

**John Swinburne Tribute**

The Muskegon area has lost another good guy and good coach – make that a great guy and a great coach with the passing of John Swinburne on Friday April 18. John passed away after a long but courageous illness that was first discovered as far back as 2002.

Tributes and condolences have been pouring in from the many athletes, students and friends who were inspired by John’s coaching and teaching during his many decades of working with area youths.

Typical of the praises now heaped on John Swinburne came from Walt Gawkowski, his athletic director from his time spent at Mona Shores.

"There's no question that his training of runners is second to none," said Gawkowski. "But much more deeply than that, teaching and coaching is about relationships. He has lived a faith-based life that has served as an example to so many young people. To me, that is the ultimate responsibility of any educator."

I first became close to John when he was a part of the committee that formed the West Michigan All Star Track meet back in 1979. The meet’s founding father, Orchard View’s John Nash, wasted no time in asking Swinburne, the area’s leading track coach from that period, to serve on the committee with the ‘ole announcer’, Jim Kanaar, Mona Shores’ Dan Hamilton and John Jarrvi, who represented the Muskegon Chronicle.

It took me little time to see what a special person was John Swinburne. John’s Oakridge Eagle track teams were dominant during his long tenure as the school’s track coach. How dominant? Just for starters, Oakridge won every West Michigan Conference track title from 1971 through 1985 with Swinburne being the coach except for one year (1981) when Ken Abel coached the Eagles. His teams also won multiple regional championships and produced several state individual state track champions.

Warning signs for John began as far back as 2002 when a tumor about the size of a softball was discovered according to my conversation with his daughter Heather. “Unfortunately, it kind of went from there,’ added Heather.

Shortly after leaving Oakridge John’s mystifying illness (a complicated form of Leukemia) again began to rear its ugly head. Not to be deterred from working with area students and athletes, Swinburne would continue to work with area athletes until as recently as last season.

After John retired from his brilliant coaching career at Oakridge Swinburne worked at many area schools, mostly assisting in track & field. For several years John would assist Chad Brandow, one of his track stars at Oakridge who became the head coach at Fruitport. Fruitport, not noted as a track power before Brandow and Swinburne, became a dominant team under their guidance.

Swinburne, in addition to working his magic as a track coach, would also take on the duties as the athletic director at West Michigan Christian. He also served briefly as the cross-country coach at Muskegon Community College. His final years, in coaching, despite all his physical ailments was at Mona Shores where he was assisted by his daughter Heather. And how proud John was when one of his runners was none other than one of his nine grandchildren, Heather’s daughter now a junior at Mona Shores. A coach for more than 50 years, “he even had the intention of coaching this year, said his daughter Heather.

Not too long ago in one of my Moyes’ Memories stories I made a plea to the Muskegon Area Sports Hall of Fame that Swinburne should be the next track coach inducted into their Hall of Fame. How appropriate when the Local Sports Journal began their annual Varsity Blues Sports Awards Show that the winner for the top award in Track & Field was titled the John Swinburn Track and Field Award. John was extremely proud of this honor with his only regret was his serious illness prevented him from attending in person to personally present the award.

During the many meetings I had with John during his career I was curious as to where he got started in his sport. Swinburne, who graduated from Dickinson High School in Jersey City, New Jersey high school in 1964, was a state champion in the 440-yard dash that earned him a track scholarship for college.

John’s choice to attend college surely had to raise some eyebrows in the middle 1960s. John received a scholarship to Central State University, an all-black university in Ohio. One must remember that this was an era when racial tensions were rampant in our country and it was a rarity, to say the least, for a white student/athlete to attend an all-black college. But not John.

In all my conversations with John he had nothing but praise for his experience at Central State. The humble Swinburne only had kind words for his time spent at Central State and never made a reference of his own personal achievements. One of the last photos of John before he passed was a Central States t-shirt worn under his robe during a visit with from his daughter Shannon and son Dave.

“Dad loved his years in college. His college coach would often visit Dad, and he would always bring a T-Shirt or two for Dad that he would proudly wear,” said Heather. While at CSU John was a member of numerous winning relay teams that included Martin McGrady, a former world record holder in the 600-yard dash.

Unlike (too) many of today’s current coaches who (unfortunately) attempt to motivate their teams using numerous profane expletives, that was surely not the style of John Swinburne or his legendary football coach at Oakridge, Jack Schugars. Both Schugars and Swinburne were 1964 high school graduates whose most colorful curse words were kindred to ‘gee,’ ‘golly’, or ‘shucks. “You’re right about Dad never swearing” said Heather and her sister who I could hear in the background. “He would never use the Lord’s name in vain. If he got angry, he would say ‘oh my stars.”

John had many big wins during his lifetime, but he would have been quick to boast that his biggest victory was winning over a young Muskegon gal by the name of Rosemary Huff. The two were married on November 11, 1967, and enjoyed 56 years of marriage. However, while John was still in the throes dealing with his own illness, cancer quickly took the life of Rose in May of 2024. It was Rose who spent countless hours attempting to nurse John back to health. Gone, but not forgotten, were the days of the many team spaghetti dinners and pancake breakfasts that often occurred at the Swinburne household when John was the track coach for the Eagles.

It has been 46 years since I served with John on the inaugural West Michigan All Star track committee. As I concluded my chat with his daughter Heather, I was shocked to learn that John, almost to his dying day, served on this committee with his daughter Heather as recently as last ye ar. “Coaching is what kept him alive,” added Heather as we concluded our talk.

As Heather so aptly put it in announcing the passing of her father last Friday “has now finished his last race and will be reunited upstairs with Rose.

-The visitation/meeting with the family for John Swinburne will be Friday April 25 ,4pm-6pm at Forest Park Covenant Church at 3815 Henry Street in Norton Shores. Celebration of life will be Saturday, April 26 10:30 am with luncheon to follow.

*Finally, a story of a much brighter nature as the ‘ole announcer’ recalls some thrilling games from the past.*

**MOYES REMEMBERS THOSE STATE FINALS VISITS**

We are now currently enjoying one of the most exciting times of the year in our world of sports. It doesn’t get much better than the NCAA basketball tournament, and for this baseball buff, the opening of the MLB season.

For the ‘ole announcer’ many of my fondest Moyes’ Memories was the annual ritual of attending the state finals in boys’ basketball. How I looked forward every March to join up with some old pals and journey to primarily East Lansing, and Ann Arbor to watch the best of high school basketball.

Many of those precious days was traveling with my long-time broadcasting partner Gene Young, where we were often joined with my high school coach Bob Morris and super high school sports fan Tom Kampenga. It was Kampenga who encouraged me to replace him as the ‘stringer’ covering North Muskegon sports for the Muskegon Chronicle beginning in 1956.

For many years finding a ticket to attend the state finals was comparable to latching on to a ducat to the Masters in golf. However, that is certainly not the case today as attendance in recent years has taken a decided nosedive in attendance. The big question is Why?

I surely do not have the answer to that question but perhaps the easy availability of streaming has put a damper on attendance. The loss in revenue from ticket’s sold surely has been softened by money accrued by the cost of subscriptions to the NFHS network. For me, and I’m sure for countless others, attending the state finals with my friends was often secondary to the games itself.

My first state title game was in 1947 but since I was only six years old at that time. I have little details to offer. I was attending those finals only because I had an uncle who played on the Haslett High team who played and lost in the Class D finals.

It was in 1956 that I began to attend these classics on a regular basis. Although the game has changed immeasurably over the years, it would be hard to top the 1950s as interest was at a peak and sellouts at the state finals were the norm.

High School basketball in the 1950’s was mostly played on courts that almost universally had wooden backboards. The scoreboards were not the modern digital style utilized today but were comprised of hand dials that kept time like a big clock in your grandparent’s living room. A special feature of these time clocks was the white background that would turn a shade of blushing red inside the last minute of each quarter. In the 1950’s the cheerleaders wore skirts that hung down to their white bobby sox while the players wore shorts that were truly short. And the officiating…….

To this old timer it appears that officials now look away when a player palms the ball, takes two or three steps, while a whistle blown for a double dribble is a rarity.

In the 1950’s and even through the 1960s, players dribbled primarily just with their strong hand and never did a player dribble a ball between their legs. And woe be the one who would not raise their hand after committing a foul, an embarrassment that thankfully has long been abolished.

Even though I have witnessed many state finals over the decades, my first state finals of 1956 still rank as my favorite. Veteran Detroit Sportswriter George Maskin may have summed it up best with his report of the 1956 state finals. “It was a day and night of fabulous shooting, heart stopping plays, brilliant rallying and record-breaking – the likes of which have never prevailed in a state final before.” And, arguably, it has never been matched in the many years to follow.

And what a year it was for three teams from the Upper Peninsula!

Prior to my visit to East Lansing of 1956, I must confess that I had never even heard of the towns of Chassell, Crystal Falls and Stephenson. I was a young freshman at North Muskegon High School in the Lower Peninsula, hundreds of miles from the three tiny municipalities in the Upper Peninsula that would soon be the ‘darlings’ of the entire state.

Crystal Falls opened the festivities in Class C by nipping unbeaten Berrien Springs 71 to 69 in a thriller that saw the lead change hands 17 times. The next game was perhaps even more exciting as Stephenson went to two overtimes (and sudden death) before it was able to defeat Detroit St Andrew 73 to 71 in Class B. I can still vividly see Stephenson’s ‘Marvelous Mel Peterson, who scored at the time a state record 35 points, hitting a bank shot for the game winner. The game would be the only contest in more than 100 years of MHSAA state finals that would be decided in sudden death. Not to be outdone, Chassell came from 15 points down with less than four minutes remaining to edge Portland St. Patrick for the Class D crown.

The Class A game would see history made as Muskegon Heights, starting the first all African American starting five in the MHSAA finals, won the Class A championship in the final game of this electrifying day. Perhaps the season of 1956 was the beginning of the story behind the true meaning of “March Madness.”

Although the 1956 finals top my all-time favorite state finals, here are a sampling of a few other magical moments over the years that will long be remembered by your author beginning with the final three seasons of the 1950s.

1957 would be a year that was highlighted by this author’s biased opinion of the top prep team in Greater Muskegon History, the Muskegon Heights Tigers. The first basketball team, and the second overall team to be inducted into the Greater Muskegon Sports Hall of Fame, the Ed Burton led Tigers easily breezed past all comers in repeating as Class A State champs.

The 1958 Class A state finals was an epic game between Detroit Austin and Benton Harbor that featured two of Michigan’s all-time best players, Austin’s Dave DeBusschere and Harbor’s Chet Walker. West Michigan Christian old timers will best remember that year as the first of many Warrior state championships.

Many years have now passed since the 19509 state finals but the comeback victory by Lansing Sexton over Hamtramck is still regarded as the most thrilling game in MHSAA history. I still remember from my seat near courtside Sexton’s Bob Davis winning shot in overtime that bounced numerous times on the rim before falling through as pandemonium erupted in a sold-out Jenison Fieldhouse.

There have been numerous other memories that have stood out but to save space I’ll bring up a handful. How I remember going bonkers while broadcasting the 1979 state Class B finals when the Tiger’s Cedric Scott did his best Dr. J impersonation when he took off near the foul line and dunked a shot in the Tigers victory over Saginaw Buena Vista.

In the first game of the 1986 state finals, Buena Vista’s Chris Cole turned a dull game into one for the ages when he drilled a desperation shot from ¾ court in a win over Flint Beech. Beecher coach Moses Lacy wasn’t impressed as he ‘accidentally’ dropped the runner-up trophy on the Crisler Arena floor as many in the sold-out crowd voiced their displeasure of Lacy’s act.

Two years later a sold-out crowd at Crisler Arena was on hand to watch Mr. Basketball, Grand Rapids South Christian’s Matt Steigenga play in the B finals against Bishop Borgess. In the first half Steigenga picked up four fouls, all questionable calls that drew the wrath of the fans, many who had traveled from the far corners of the state to see Steigenga in action. Never in all my years of attending the state finals had I heard booing louder than when the officials left the court at halftime. Steigenga then played the entire second half without picking up his fifth foul as his team rallied for the victory. I’ve often wondered if an MHSAA administrator could possibly have visited with the officials at halftime to make a ‘subtle’ point that the crowd did not attend this game to watch the referees.

On a more positive note, I’ll not soon forget WMC’s Nick Bultema, with time expiring in the 1999 state D final game being fouled on a desperation 3-point shot in a tie game. With the score tied at 59-59, after missing his first free throw, Bultema made his next attempt for the game winner. The foul took place right in front of our broadcasting spot at the Breslin Arena, much to the delight of my broadcasting partner Gene Young and me.

On a more somber note, I will end this latest story lamenting the recent passing of a couple of my friends who left an impact in Muskegon area athletic lore. Former Muskegon Athletic Director Steve Hoffman, a 1963 Big Red grad and Dick Seymour, a part of the first graduating class of Muskegon Catholic in 1954 will be missed by many.

Hoffman who served as a teacher, coach and AD at Muskegon High for more than 40 years was best remembered by many as an outstanding AD for the Big Reds. I must confess that I was initially surprised with Hoffman’s promotion to the highest position in athletics at the turn of the century. I thought Steve was just too nice of a guy for a job that requires some toughness on occasion. Well--- I was both right and wrong. I was right that Hoffman was still a nice guy but clearly wrong on his toughness as he was an outstanding AD.

Nobody ever accused Dick Seymour of not being tough, yet he too was also one of those nice guys. Seymour was an outstanding football and basketball star, first at Muskegon St. Mary’s and then at Muskegon Catholic where he starred on the first football team at MCC in the fall of 1953. Dick’s late brother George was my first broadcasting partner working the high school football games and often Dick would join us in the press box where I welcomed him with open arms. At St Mary’s in its final year as a four-year school, Seymour was a teammate of one of this area’s all-time greats, the late Jim Morse. Morse and Seymour would be more than just former teammates, as Jim Morse would marry Seymour’s sister Leah Rae.

**Longevity is a staple in Shelby.**

With the recent announcement that current Muskegon Community College coach Gene Gifford has now reached the half century mark in his successful profession of mentoring our young athletes for many decades, it made the ‘ole announcer’ think that longevity is contagious for those with ties to Shelby High School.

The likeable Gifford, a 1968 grad of Shelby high school, isn’t alone when it comes to those who call Shelby their home for traversing the long haul in the coaching ranks. In today’s day and age when coaches are coming and going like a revolving door current Shelby coaches Rick Zoulek and Brian Wright have been coaching, basketball for Zoulek and baseball for Wright, for more than 40 years!

As for Gifford, if one needs to look for the quintessential definition of a basketball coaching junkie, then your man is Gene Gifford. This septuagenarian, who is creeping dangerously close to 80 years of age has worn many hats over the years with a myriad of destinations. As far back as 1973, he began as a coaching assistant at Alma college. His travels have taken him from Ravenna, to MCC, to Olivet, Aquinas, Mona Shores, and back again to the Jayhawks where he first led MCC from 1981 to 2007.

And how many hundreds of players as Gene coached over the years? I have no idea, but one can be certain that none of those multitudes of players will ever speak an unkind word for their (now) old and beloved coach.

One could easily surmise that Gifford was just a basketball player when he played for Jimmy Darrow at Shelby High in the late 1960s. No sir! Gifford was a more than a hoopster for the Tigers. Gifford was also the quarterback on the football team and was an outstanding pitcher for the Shelby baseball team. And no, Brian Wright wasn’t yet the baseball coach at Shelby. Wright was still in grammar school at Ravenna High in the 1960s.

Gifford was the ace of the pitching staff for Shelby and one of his scrapbook highlights was when he ended North Muskegon’s 1967 season when he pitched a 1-0 eight inning shutout over the Norsemen.

Current basketball coach Rick Zoulek was another who put a dagger in my old alma mater’s heart at North Muskegon when he was playing for Shelby High in 1974. Surely the humble Zoulek, who never likes to toot his own horn, will never forget the game 51 years ago when he drilled a 25-footer at the buzzer to give the Tigers a 64-62 victory over my beloved Norsemen.

It has been a rollercoaster ride for Zoulek. After going winless in his first season as the head coach for his alma mater, Zoulek has now won well over 700 games as a coach for the boys and the girls team. And like his ‘idol’ Gifford, who is eight years senior to Zoulek, Rick also played football, basketball and baseball at Shelby High. Hitting that buzzer beater in basketball wasn’t the only hurt Zoulek put on my alma mater. He one upped his pal Gifford by pitching a five inning no hitter in a run ruled 11-0 victory over the Norsemen in 1976.

The third ‘old timer’ still coaching at Shelby High is baseball guru Brian Wright. While Gifford and Zoulek can’t get enough basketball in their blood, the same could be said for Wright with baseball. Also, a 1976 high school grad as was his longtime friend Zoulek, Wright was a graduate of Ravenna High School. Wright was part of that awesome 1-2 pitching duo of Brian Wright and Joe Coletta who led Ravenna all the way to the state championship in 1975 before they were beaten in the finals by perennial baseball power Blissfield.

Following his days as a student and baseball player at Grand Valley, where his head coach was former major league player and manager Phil Regan, Wright would join Zoulek at Shelby as the Tiger’s baseball coach. As if coaching baseball wasn’t enough for Wright, Brian for years helped his buddy Zoulek as Shelby’s JV basketball coach. Coaching baseball is the spring isn’t enough to satisfy his thirst for baseball. During the summer one can find Wright sharing his baseball knowledge as the assistant coach for the Muskegon Clippers.

Wright and Zoulek have continued to lead Shelby through thick and thin. For whatever reason, the talent level in Shelby has been on the downside of late but both Wright and Zoulek are more concerned with making the kids better no matter their skill level. It would be nice if there were more Griffins, Beckmans, Whitsell’s and Giffords enrolled at Shelby. Perhaps Wright and Zoulek would be blessed with additional talent if there were more families in Tiger Country like Mr. and Mrs. Walter Griffin. No wonder there were so many Griffins in Shelby as Walter and his wife produced 17 children.

I would be remiss if I didn’t catch our readers up with the news that one of Gene Gifford’s former players at MCC has recently been named as the interim head coach at Stepnen A. Austin, a division 1 University in Nacogdoches, Texas. Jasick is one of many of Gifford’s former players that have become well known in the coaching fraternity that includes Donnie Tindall, a former head coach at Tennessee who is currently producing winning teams at Chipola Junior College in Florida, and, of course, the current Muskegon head coach with numerous honors in Keith Guy.

After working wonders at Indiana Purdue Fort Wayne, where he was named the winner of the Hugh Durham award that goes to the top coach in mid-major basketball, Jasick was hired as the head coach at Jacksonville University. I visited Tony shortly after his appointment as the head coach of the Dolphins. I was frank in my conversation with Tony when I brought up the fact this (JU) was a tough place to coach winning teams. Even Tony’s mother was skeptical of Jasick taking over a program that has been a graveyard for coaches ever since Artis Gilmore and his teammates did the inconceivable and advanced all the way to the NCAA Championship game in 1970 before eventually falling to powerful UCLA.

Shortly after taking over the head coaching duties at JU, Gene Gifford, Mike Mack and I were given a tour of Jasick’s basketball complex in Jacksonville. Although Tony was proud of some of the improvements made to the facility, it was clear to us that Tony would have his work cut out attempting to entice recruits to play in a gymnasium vastly inferior to many high school gyms in West Michigan.

After being released by JU after serving as the head coach at Jacksonville from 2014-21 Jasick was hired as an assistant coach at Stephen A. Austin. Tony was tabbed to become the ‘interim’ head coach for the Lumberjacks after head coach Kyle Keller was fired in January after an 8-11 start. With Jasick now the head coach, Stephan A. Austin has won their last five games in a row as the former Whitehall grad is making waves that ‘interim’ will be removed from his description.

His friends in our area can see Jasick work his magic when his team plays McNeese State on March 3rd in a game that game be seen on ESPNU.

*With a few exceptions, the three-sport athlete is on the decline. However, Moyes Memories highlights some of his favorite multiple sports stars from the past.*

**ARE THREE SPORT STARS A DYING BREED?**

A high school athlete living in the state of Florida has a multitude of amenities placed in front of him, not the least of which, naturally, is the balmy weather 12 months out of the year.

However, prep stars here in Florida face one major drawback that the lads up north do not have to face: It is almost an impossibility for one to take part in three sports during a high school year.

I know my good friends at the Michigan High School Athletic Association are often criticized for their conservative ideals, but Jack Roberts, John Johnson, and the good people in East Lansing have it right. Perhaps they should be the poster child for interscholastic sports throughout our great nation.

And what is a major cause for the Florida preps not being able to experience the complete high school experience? To me there appears to be an inordinate overlap from one sports season to the next.

A Florida high school football season schedule finds teams playing a schedule that runs longer than many collegiate programs. Over a span of twelve weeks a school can play a 10-game schedule, with a bye week and a pre-season game thrown into the mix.

A team making a run all the way to the state football finals will have one week before sitting under the tree at Christmas time. Those athletes who desire to play both football and basketball could miss nearly a month of regular season basketball.

The FHSAA (Florida High School Athletic Association) then crams 27 games in a schedule that begins their basketball tournaments by mid- February.

And those basketball players that desire to play prep baseball can miss as much has six weeks or more of baseball practices and games.

Thankfully, Michigan has a minimum of at least one week between seasonal sports so one could possibly experience the euphoria of being a complete three-sport athlete.

Last year’s Muskegon Area Male student athlete award winner, Jamie Potts, would undoubtedly have had to make a major decision as to what sport (s) he would choose from if he would have resided in the Sunshine State.

And certainly, Jamie Potts will have no regrets for playing three interscholastic sports and enjoying a full high school sports year.

However, are players like Jamie Potts about to be a dying breed even here in the Wolverine State?

Demands for a player to focus on one sport have become more prevalent as every year slides past.

Eventually, even a gifted athlete like Potts will probably have to make a serious decision and focus on football or baseball during his career at Grand Valley State College. And you can be sure each one of his coaches will be tugging mightily on his shirtsleeve to steer Potts to their sport, and understandably so.

Which leads me to the topic of this latest Moyes’ Memory story of Muskegon’s all time three sports stars.

Three sports stars were a common commodity during the 1940’s and 50’s but the Jamie Potts and Nate McLouths of today’s era appear to be on the downslide.

I have established an imposing list of my picks for the area’s Top 10 three sport stars dating back to the early 1920’s. Criteria for making this list hinges on an athlete not only participating in three sports, but making all state, or winning a state championship in more than one sport.

Headlining this group would obviously be:

1. Benny Oosterbaan (Muskegon High), arguably the top all-around athlete in Michigan prep history. If all state teams were picked for all sports during the 1920’s Benny would have been at the top of the list in four sports, but Muskegon High didn’t offer baseball during his era. Benny would have been Mr. Basketball and Mr. Football in the early 1920’s and was a state champion discus thrower in track. Benny picked baseball over track at the UM (where he was an All-American baseball player) but the UM track coach at the UM claimed that Benny would have made our Olympic track team as a Javelin thrower
2. Earl Morrall (Muskegon High), Many perhaps forget that Earl was an outstanding baseball player at Muskegon and MSU. Morrall was recently honored by MSU with a baseball Alumnus award. In his spare time during the prep season Morrall was a standout forward on the Big Red basketball team.
3. Dave Whitsall (Shelby) This All pro football player, who once led the NFL in interceptions, was a four-year starter in basketball at Shelby as well as a state champion in track.
4. Jack Weisenberger (Muskegon Heights) The spinning fullback for the UM 1948 Rose Bowl champs made it all the way to AAA in baseball in the Boston Braves farm system. Also, a starter on the Heights basketball team during the winter months.
5. Osie McCarty (Muskegon Heights) Best known during his prep career as a star football and basketball performer, former Detroit Tiger manager Jack Tighe thought he had a chance to make it to the big leagues in baseball.
6. Jim Morse (Muskegon St. Mary) An easy pick on all the all-state football teams, this future Notre Dame football captain led St. Mary’s to the state finals in basketball. He also had few peers has an outfielder on the baseball diamond.
7. Paul Bard (Muskegon) Named captain of all state basketball team by the Detroit Free Press, Bard would have been captain of the All-State baseball team as well. After 70 years, Bard still has the lowest ERA in MHSAA baseball history and was the starting quarterback at Western Michigan before enlisting into the service during World War II.
8. Dan Byslma (West Michigan Christian) I may be bending my criteria slightly as Bylsma was only prevented from being an All-State high school player because there was never a hockey team at WMC. A state medalist in golf, Bylsma led the Warriors to this area’s only state high school baseball championship in 1985.
9. Frank Howell (Muskegon Heights) a three-sport star at Muskegon Heights Howell earned his hall of fame credentials in football and baseball. As a star halfback at the UM Howell scored the Wolverines lone touchdown in their season finale against rival Ohio State, A three-year starter at centerfield Howell scored three runs as Michigan won the NCAA baseball title against Texas.
10. Nate McLouth (Whitehall) Nate will best be remembered as a standout major league star who nearly won the MVP award for his outstanding play in the 2008 All Star game in front of a sold-out crowd at Yankee Stadium while millions more watched on TC. Nate as the starting quarterback led Whitehall to back-to-back WMC football titles and was the point guard in the Viking basketball team.

**MOYES’ MEMORIES REMEMBERS THE LATE RAY NEWMAN, MUSKEGON’S FORGOTTEN BIG LEAGUER**

There perhaps has been no other Muskegon Area athlete who was remembered for his outstanding athletic achievements less than the late Ray Newman.

A 1963 graduate of Muskegon High School Newman wasn’t just an outstanding high school baseball pitcher, but one who made it all the way to the major leagues where he pitched for three years wearing a baseball uniform for the Chicago Cubs and Milwaukee Brewers. One could certainly ask the question on why isn’t Ray Newman in the Muskegon Area Sports Hall of Fame?

Surely Newman had the credentials to be inducted into the MASHOF, but Ray Newman did not experience a pleasant relationship with his town, classmates, or teammates during his childhood years here in Muskegon. To say that Newman was different and maybe misunderstood would be an understatement.

Several years ago, during one of our meetings with our Hall of Fame committee, Newman’s name was brought up for nomination. The first problem was how was one to contact Ray Newman? I took on the challenge of locating Newman and it wasn’t easy to say the least. I contacted many of his former teammates, classmates and even the chairman of the 1963 Class Reunion Committee.

Nobody had a clue to this major leaguer’s whereabouts. Fortunately, through my membership in an organization titled SABR (Society for American Baseball Researchers) I made a plea to SABR members if anybody had a contact for Ray Newman. After receiving a phone number, I then called Ray at his workplace in Fort Myers, Florida to inform him that he was being considered for induction into our Hall of Fame.

I was shocked with his response that I recorded and later played back to our committee at our next Hall of Fame meeting. Ray thanked me for the nomination but brusquely informed me that he would not accept the honor. Newman informed me that he was honored to be considered but that he wanted no part of returning to Muskegon as it left a bad taste in his mouth.

Newman was even upset on how he was treated in organized ball despite making it all the way to the big show. To this day, Newman is the only athlete to turn down induction into our popular Hall of Fame.

According to a pair of former teammates interviewed for this story, as well as talks with many of his former classmates at Muskegon High over the years, Newman was a loner, with few if any known friends, but one who truly loved baseball.

At an early age Newman displayed his potential as a pitcher. While in little league Newman was dominant but as was often true with young hurlers before they reach their teenage years, he often had trouble with control.

However, when he was on, he was nearly unhittable. Perhaps his best outing as a 12-year-old little leaguer was a pitching duel he had with his future high school teammate Jim Johnson. Six innings were played in the game and neither had given up a run. Rules in the 1950s for Little League baseball dictated that no pitcher was allowed to pitch more than six innings.

Although Johnson and Newman were Little League standouts in the late 1950s, their accomplishments were often overshadowed by little league phenom Larry Maxwell. Little League rivals in 1957, Maxwell and Newman hitched up in a pitcher’s duel to decide the Little League championship between teams from the East and West divisions. Newman pitched a no-hitter against Maxwell’s Muskegon Chronicle team yet lost the game, just the beginning of the saga and mystique of Ray Newman.

Maxwell would team up in high school at Muskegon High with Jim Johnson and Newman and would lead the Big Reds to a 22-1 record in their senior season of 1963. And what a 1-2 pitching combo coach Harry Potter had at Muskegon High!

Both Newman and Jim Johnson would reach the pinnacle of success and pitch in the major leagues. And how rare is it that of the thousands of players who played in MLB to have two pitchers who graduated from their high school in the same year pitch in the major leagues? I was astonished when I did research a few years back to learn that this had happened only five times in MLB history.

It didn’t take long for Newman and Johnson to put their talents on display as in their very first game of the 1963 season they each pitched three hitless innings in a combined no-hitter in a 16-0 rout of West Michigan Christian.

Newman was the hard luck losing pitcher in Muskegon’s only loss during the 1963 season. The Big Reds lost in late April to Grand Haven 3-2 in extra innings despite Newman giving up but one hit. Ironically, it was Grand Haven who ended Muskegon’s 55 game winning streak in the 1940s. Muskegon out hit the Bucs 6-1 but committed seven errors. To add insult to injury, after Muskegon had rallied to tie the game in the seventh inning a pinch hitter was called out to end the inning for failing to report to the umpire.

Later in the season when the Big Reds and Buccaneers met again Muskegon trounced Grand Haven 12-4 as Newman struck out 10 and got hitting help from Johnson and Maxwell, each with three RBIs.

Newman and Johnson combined to win a doubleheader in the North Division of the Lake Michigan Athletic Conference playoffs played at Marsh Field. The Big Reds took care of Traverse City 8-3 in the opener behind the pitching of Newman. The lanky left-hander was less than his best as he gave up nine walks and even hit a batter but received plenty of hitting help from his mates.

The second game was a pitching masterpiece that went nine innings before Muskegon’s Jim Johnson outlasted Muskegon Heights pitcher Tom Hylland. The Big Reds won 1-0 with the game winning run coming from a steal of home from Mike Abraham.

Coach Potter called on Newman to take the mound for the championship game. With Newman pitching, Potter was able to use Jim Johnson, the team’s MVP in centerfield. Newman nearly threw a no-hitter, giving up but one hit as Muskegon crushed Holland 14-3. The big blow in the game was a towering home run that sailed far over the left-centerfield fence by Larry Rop.

I interviewed Larry Rop and Larry Maxwell for their memories of their teammate who had not seen Newman since their high school days. Rop and Maxwell had similar remembrances of their long-lost teammate. “He was different to be sure,” said Maxwell, a powerful hitter who hit several home runs at Muskegon High. “He went by many names, especially several not so pleasant names called his way from his opponent’s dugouts.”

Newman stood 6’4 with dark horn-rimmed glasses and the feature that was most noticeable was his abnormally large ears. Newman was the subject of many taunts from the bench jockeys from many years back. I too, that I now regret, called Newman ‘Dumbo’ when he played for the Muskegon Independents team managed by Benny Chambers during the summer season. But that was just of one the nasty slurs hurled his way.

I asked both Rop and Maxwell if this name calling could be interpreted as bullying in today’s era. “You know, when I now think about it, that’s very possible said Maxwell. “But boy, could he pitch. Jimmy and Ray were something else.”

Rop believed that the razzing of Newman by his opponents had an effect. “The only time I saw Ray being abused with razzing was when he was on the mound. When he was not playing ball, or in school, I did not see that (bullying). “But then again, I didn’t see Ray that often. He was pretty much by himself; that’s just the way he was. He was kind of withdrawn, let’s put it that way,” said Rop. “He didn’t hang out with any of his teammates, or anybody else for that matter.”

Even though Newman was a hard-throwing pitcher during his teen years in Muskegon, unlike some of his talented teammates like Maxwell and Johnson, he was not invited to play on the best summer league teams. The Zephyr Gas team from the early 1960s recorded more than 60 wins in a row without a defeat, featuring the cream of the crop of local high school players, but Newman was not on the team. Nor was Newman invited to play for the Muskegon Pepsis, the dominant adult city league team of that era.

However, Newman’s talents were not missed by the Detroit Tigers scouting department as he was signed as a free agent the following spring. Newman would then begin a career in professional baseball that would see him pitch a full decade, with three of those years pitching at the highest level in baseball, the Major Leagues.

Although Newman had realized his dream of playing professional baseball, he left Muskegon with very few pleasant memories and would rarely return to his hometown.

Newman made an early splash as a rookie pitcher in the Tiger’s farm system when he pitched a 1-0 shutout, allowing nary a hit while striking out 11 in seven innings or work. On the dark side he made his catcher, recent Hall of Fame Tiger legend Jim Leyland work hard behind the plate as he walked seven batters.

Newman’s career in the Tiger organization was short-lived as he was drafted away from the Tigers in 1965 by the Chicago Cubs. After toiling six years in the minor leagues Newman got the call to the Big Show on May 16, 1971, almost an exact year later than his Muskegon High Classmate Jim Johnson pitched in the Major League for the San Francisco Giants.

Newman came on in relief of future West Michigan manager Jim Colburn with the Cubs trailing 7-2 and pitched two scoreless innings before being lifted for a pinch hitter. The Cubs would rally to defeat San Diego 9-8 with the big blow a two-run home run from Jim Hickman in the tenth to give the Cubs the walk-off victory. Interesting enough, Colburn wasn’t the only pitcher used by the Cubs in this game who would become Whitecap managers as Phil Regan was also used by Cub manager Leo Durocher in the win.

There can be little doubt as to the highlight game in Newman’s major league career. Newman’s first of his three wins as a Big Leaguer was memorable to say the least.

With 32,000 fans on hand at Wrigley Field on July 18, 1971, Newman came on in relief of Milt Pappas with the score tied at 4-4 and Rusty Staub at second base with nobody out. Newman than struck out Ron Fairly, Bob Bailey, and Ron Woods to keep the score tied. Newman would face 15 batters in five innings of work, and none would reach base as Newman was credited with his first win as a big-league pitcher.

Newman would finish the season with a 1-2 record with a respectable ERA of 3.52.

Newman was traded by the Cubs the following March to the Milwaukee Brewers where he would pitch in two seasons for Milwaukee. Following the 1973 season Newman was traded to the Tigers but would not make it back to the parent club as his final two years were spent at Triple A Evansville, the place of his birth on June 20, 1945.

Following his release from organized ball by the Tigers in 1975 Newman’s whereabouts was a mystery to his teammates. Both Maxwell and Rop said that most likely the last time they had seen or heard from Ray Newman was their last game on the ballfield.

The only known time that Newman ever returned to the Port City was to attend the funeral of his father several years ago. If Newman indeed had a friend in Muskegon, it was his father who was Newman’s mentor, and even his manager as a youngster in Pony League ball.

Newman not only acquired a lasting, and disparate image with his teammates but also with his manager of the Cubs, Leo Durocher.

Leo ‘The Lip” was in baseball for nearly 50 years. As a player he played for the mighty New York Yankees during the Babe Ruth era. Durocher also played for the Gas House gang of the St. Louis Cardinals that featured such baseball eccentrics as Pepper Martin and Dizzy and Daffy Dean. Durocher won more than 2,000 game as a major league manager and played against hundreds, if not thousands of players.

However, there was one player who clearly stood out in his published book from 1974 “Nice Guys Finish Last --- Ray Newman. To be kind to Ray, let’s just say that Durocher said that Newman was the ‘oddest player’ he ever came across that he penned in his biography. The one trait that stood out for Durocher was that Newman would ride his bike daily to Wrigley Field through the bustling streets of Chicago.

To add to the mystique of Ray Newman I should bring up an incident during the cross-country season of 1972.

As Larry Rop pointed out to me in our interview for this story, he praised Newman as a great athlete. Ray Newman’s first love was baseball, but he did participate in cross country for coach Tom McShannock’s Big Reds in the fall of 1962.

Ray was no slouch as he placed 10th in the Lake Michigan Conference championship, one spot ahead of Muskegon Height’s distance runner Ruvell Martin. Yes, the same Ruvell Martin who was the father of recent Muskegon Area Sports Hall of Fame inductee of the same name who prepped at Muskegon Catholic and later served as a wide receiver for the Green Bay Packers.

“The only thing I remember about Ray other than his pitching was that he ran cross country and in one meet he ran into a tree and knocked himself out.” I wasn’t there but I heard about it. It was talked about at school for a long time,” said Rop.

Just recently while browsing through an e-mail from a fellow SABR member, I was stunned when it was announced that Ray Newman had passed away on May 5 --- in 2023! Normally when a former MLB player passes away it is known immediately. But, true to form, embellishing the legacy of Ray Newman, neither Maxwell, Rop and perhaps all his former classmates and teammates had not known of Newman’s passing.

Ray Newman’s achievements as a Major League pitcher surely is worthy of being inducted into our prestigious Sports Hall of Fame. How I wish he would have accepted our invite. And how I now regret for ever calling one of Muskegon’s all-time great athletes ‘Dumbo.’ RIP Ray Newman.

*How please was I to be asked to write a story on North Muskegon’s improbable run in the 2024 football season. Headlining their success was their football coach Larry Witham.*

**For the key to North Muskegon’s gridiron success look no further than coach Larry Witham**

Many expected North Muskegon to once again reach the final four in football with a bevy of talented underclassmen returning to the Northside.

However, when their all-state returning quarterback James Young made a stunning departure to Muskegon, many thought it was just wishful thinking for the Norse to once again make a long playoff run in 2024.

NM’s hopes then fell on the shoulders of an untested junior quarterback Bruce Colbert and to say that Colbert has come through in flying colors would be an understatement.

When I asked NM head coach Larry Witham if he was surprised that NM was again making a long run deep into the playoffs Witham replied: “Yes & no. Certainly there were some questions marks heading into the 2024 season after the departure of Young. We knew who would play there (quarterback) but I don’t think anybody had any idea how well he was going to play. Bryce has been unbelievable. Where he has really developed over the course of the season is his leadership skills. We expect a lot out of or quarterback as he has a lot of decisions to make pre-snap, and we have not trimmed down the playbook at all from our previous season. He (Colbert) has answered the bell at every turn,” said Witham.

The left-handed throwing QB has completed 118 of his 185-yard attempts for a whopping 1989 yards good for 22 touchdowns with but one – yes one – interception. Colbert is a well-rounded athlete as he was the leadoff hitter and starting outfielder in all NM’s baseball games last spring and is expected to play a big role in the upcoming basketball season for coach Chuck Rypstra’s Norsemen.

Surely much of the credit for NM’s recent success must go to Witham.

The 1980 grad at NM now begins his 40th season in coaching at a myriad of levels, as well as different locals and in different sports. There are so-called football, baseball and basketball junkies and, if there is such a word, Witham could fit perfectly into a category called coaching junkies.

Beginning in 1984 where he assisted long-time NM coach Dave Cooke, Witham has seen duties as a football coach at West Ottawa, as well as at Kalamazoo College where he assisted his high school coach from his playing days at NMHS, the late Dave Warmack.

He’s also had stints at Mona Shores, coaching youth football on the Northside and even took over the NM softball head coaching position in 2001. Witham’s most recent coaching experience before returning to NM was at Hart where he resurrected from the dead the Hart football program. Hart did not have enough interest from their student athletes to field a varsity football team in 2015, but they coerced Witham to coach the JV team. Witham created enough interest and did such a great job that the Pirate JV team posted a perfect 9-0 record and Hart would shortly turn their program around.

Witham’s work didn’t go unnoticed by the NM committee formed to find a football coach following the 2015 season.

One of those on the committee that picked Witham as the new Norse coach was their long-time outstanding PA announcer, the Honorable Bill Marietti, who also has a ‘secondary’ position as a prominent Muskegon County Judge:

“Nobody can coach up a quarterback like Larry does. And look what he has done at NM! Six years in the playoffs and two final fours! Were so lucky to have him at this little school that he loves.,” said Marietti whose son Nick was groomed by Witham who served as the NM quarterback coach at the turn of the new century.

Before Witham took over as the head mentor for NM the Norse went through a period from 2002 where the Norsemen were in football purgatory. The Blue & Gold were only able to muster 53 victories while suffering 77 losses. Under Witham the Norse are 60-32 and what is more indicative of Witham’s stature was his ability to increase dramatically his roster numbers. For years NM, with their low school enrollment, was always at the bottom of the totem pole in the West Michigan Conference in number of students. The Norse often fielded teams that rarely had enough players to have a full-time scrimmage. That certainly has changed under the likeable Witham as NM’s varsity currently consists of 45 players.

NM will head into Saturday’s semifinal clash with undefeated Millington with more than just a passing team. Mixing the pass with the run the Norse have run roughshod over their first three playoff opponents but no victory was more surprising than last Saturday’s win in Menominee. After losing to the Maroons the preceding year at a neutral site, NM were decided underdogs against the higher seeded Menominee eleven that also include an eight-hour bus ride to the distant UP community. Colbert was efficient once again with 135 passing yards, but the Norse were even more effective in running the football.

Bringing balance to the offense has been sophomore Cullen Bartos and junior Hunter Wilder, arguably the best running duo since Witham’s father Al was a classmate of the NM twosome of Moe Sikkenga and Don Bowen from the Hall of Fame team from 1942. The duo combined to rush for 165 yards and all three Norse touchdowns in their surprising 23-0 shutout last Saturday against Menominee.

Often overlooked during the season has been the NM defense. NM has permitted but two touchdowns during the playoffs.

“If we may have had an Achilles heel with our defense it might be inside, but our linebackers are so good,’ gushed Witham. “They read so well, and they just fly to the ball and hit. Let’s hope that continues this weekend as we are probably going to play as athletic a team as we’ve played in a long time,” added Witham. Often utilizing a three-man front, the linebacker fivesome of Henry Hussman, Chuck Meyers, Drew Bartos, Tristan Thomas and Wilder has been a huge factor in NM’s long run.

The linebacking corps and the Norse secondary comprised of TJ Byard, Cullen Bartos and Jaden Villapando will be challenged by an outstanding Millington team.

“The Cardinals have a lot of weapons, but their quarterback Truk Terbush is the linchpin of their team,” said Witham. “Their offense is complicated, if not even more complicated than ours. TerBush has been a starter for years and he is supported by a lot of really good players. They are just a well-oiled team but ---- we are one of just four teams left and we plan to put out best foot forward and hopefully come up with a win.

Both teams are relative strangers in reaching the state championship game and surely will be hungry to play for a state championship next Saturday at Ford Field in Detroit. NM will be appearing in their 5th semi-final, and Millington has made six trips to the final four with the NM team of 1981 the only team to play for a state title. Both teams posted shutouts to win their respective regions with Millington posting a 28-0 over Pewamo-Westphalia, a team that nipped the Norse way back in August.

NM has come a long way since their slim one-point loss to Pewamo-Westphalia to begin the season.

“We’re hoping to pick and choose with our running game and hopefully we can pop a few,” said Witham. That would include what the accurate throwing Colbert does best as the Norse signal caller; hitting his outstanding receivers of TJ Byard, Landen Grimm, Chuck Meyers and Drew Bartos and let them do what they do best, gobble up huge yardage after a catch.

Thankfully, Witham has fully recovered from some heart problems that occurred in the previous season and one of his players has made a remarkable comeback from a serious illness in tackle Tait Panucci.

“Tait is an inspiration to all of us as he has been battling Leukemia and he will be starting at left tackle. He’s not just a guy who is putting on a uniform after his illness, but he is contributing big time after earning his starting position a few games back,” said his proud coach.

There was one point in my interview with Larry that created a momentary pause in our conversation. Larry’s father Al, (better known to his friends as Shake), for many years dating back to the 1970s filmed the North Muskegon games for the coaching staff and was honored at halftime at a NM football game in the early 2000s for his many contributions to NM sports. ‘Shake’ passed away before his son Larry became the NM head coach. When I asked Larry how proud do you think your father would be right now of his son? I could easily tell that Larry was emotional as he thought of his father.

After a brief pause: “I think he would be happy,” said his son with a cracking voice.

The Witham connection at NM goes back a long way. Larry’s uncle Joe Witham scored the first touchdown in NM history in 1932. Joe Witham would then be the long-time proprietor of the Canary Inn, first founded by Larry’s grandfather. It was Joe Witham who served the ‘ole announcer’ his first legal beverage of his choice in 1962. So prominent is the Witham family that one of the main streets in NM, that includes the Canary Inn, is named Witham drive.

Witham was so proud of the support NM received from their followers despite the eight-hour drive to Menominee.

“When we came onto the field just before the start, I couldn’t believe the amount people wearing the blue and gold and the noise they made. It often sounded like it was a home game.”

NM followers will have a much shorter jaunt to the Capitol City, and you can be sure they will be making a lot of noise encouraging their beloved Norsemen.

It has been nearly 15 years since I last called a NM game on the radio with my longtime partner Gene Young beginning in 1976--- when Larry Witham was a starting quarterback at North Muskegon.

I’ve since moved to the Sunshine State to be closer to my family and how I would love to be in Lansing to once again call a game for my alma mater. However, thanks to the marvels of modern technology I will watch the game on the NFHS network while listening to Tom Kendra and Jason Hutton voice the game on my former radio station.

Do you think I am envious and jealous of Tom and Jason?

Your darn right I am.

*Muskegon and the ‘ole announcer’ lost a good friend and a true legend with the passing of Jim Morse. Here is my story on this true Hall of Famer, as an athlete and as a person.*

**MOYES MEMORIES REMEMBERS THE GREAT JIM MORSE**

By Jim Moyes

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Muskegon has lost one of its great ones with the passing of Jim Morse. A legendary football star, first at Muskegon St. Mary’s and later at Notre Dame, Morse was much more than a Hall of Fame athlete, he was one of the most generous, humble, and well-liked personas this city has ever known.

Following a brief illness Morse passed away at the age of 87 Thursday evening, September 28, just days before he would have reached his 88th birthday on October 5.

An easy choice in a recent story written by Scott Decamp as one of the top 25 football players in Greater Muskegon history, Jim scored a total of 343 points during his legendary career at St. Mary’s. And he accumulated these points in but 26 games, long before today’s traditional 9-game schedule and possible lengthy playoff run.

Morse scored a total of 50 touchdowns and most of these TD’s weren’t your short goal line plunges. He ‘averaged’ an astounding 27 yards for each TD scored.

He has one record that I believe surely must stand today, more than 70 years after his high school career ended in the Fall of 1952. He intercepted a pass in a 1951 game against Bay St. St. Joseph and returned it 104 yards.

And what a career Jim had for the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame! Jim’s long-time friend and Heisman Trophy winner at Notre Dame, Paul Hornung, called Morse his go-to player for the Irish offense. Among his accomplishments at Notre Dame was a record-breaking feat that still ranks with the best performance in NCAA college history. Against USC in his sophomore year in a 23-17 Irish victory, Morse ran for 179 yards, caught a pair of passes and scored two touchdowns. He exceeded even that accomplishment the following year against those same USC Trojans. Morse caught five passes for 208 yards, an average of 41 yards per completion that I believe even today, nearly 70 years later, stands as an NCAA record.

And how well respected was Morse for his leadership attributes? Can there possibly be a greater honor than being elected captain for Notre Dame football, of one of the most iconic football programs in USA history? Morse always felt being named captain of the 1956 Notre Team was one of his proudest achievements.

In today’s era of specialization Jim was a three-sport star of gigantic proportion. Jim was also a basketball standout who led St. Mary’s to a state runner-up finish at the 1953 basketball Class C state finals. In a bit of irony that surely had to ask the question “What if” ---the 1953 St. Mary’s starting five of Morse, Mike Kanitz, Howie Meloche, Pat Donovan and Bob Kurant were favorites to win the Class C state title but lost a heart breaker to Saginaw St. Mary 59-57. Later that evening Muskegon St. Joseph, a team that lost TWICE to Muskegon St. Mary’s during the regular season, won the Class D title in overtime over Detroit All Saints. With that win by St, Joseph, and the two-point loss by St. Mary’s, it was the St. Joseph team that was inducted into the Greater Muskegon Hall of Fame this past summer.

Morse was also a baseball whiz who for a few years during his high school and college days played on a Home Furnace City League team that was the best the area in the middle 1950s.

In sports Morse left a huge legacy, but it was his numerous acts of benevolence that will also never to be forgotten by many. And he surely wasn’t alone throughout his highly accomplished lifetime. Jim married his high school sweetheart, the former Leah Ray Seymour in 1954 and together they would raise seven children. Jim always said it was Leah Ray who was the rock of the family. Jim and Leah Ray had been inseparable for nearly 70 incredible years with a gazillion memorable accomplishments.

Jim Morse surely wasn’t born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Jim could have been the poster child with his rags-to-riches riches story. He was primarily raised by his grandmother and often had to hitchhike to school at St. Mary’s. He would supplement his scanty income in his childhood days by selling newspapers on a corner in downtown Muskegon.

One of Jim’s first endeavor into the business world was having his own sports show at a local radio station, long before a sports show on radio and television became popular. Jim told me he earned his money for his show by getting sponsorship from local businesses. From those sport show segments on WTRU he spiraled quickly up the ladder in radio and TV. By the middle 1960’s Jim was the play-by-play voice of Notre Dame football as well as performing numerous roles in television for the CBS network. A common work week for Morse would be to call a Saturday Notre Dame game on the radio and then quickly hop on an airplane to work as an analyst the following day for an NFL game.

Locally, Jim began his climb to his incredible success in business as the General Manager of Wagoner Transportation Company, owned by my stepfather Harold ‘Red’ Wagoner. From there it was all uphill for Morse in the world of business. With Jim the voice of Notre Dame football and the Irish loaded with talent, he became one of the first agents in NFL history by representing Fighting Irish icons like Nick Eddy and Alan Page in procuring lucrative NFL contracts. Jim then invested wisely in numerous entities. With a tireless work ethic Morse made millions by making sound business investments in various entities ranging from purchasing radio stations, hotels, outlet shopping malls and, of course, private jet airplanes of which he was particularly proud. One could often find Jim working from his office at the Muskegon County Airport well into his 80s and shortly before he passed away.

I could write in perpetuity of the incredible generosity of Jim and Leah Ray over the years. He never forgot his roots, especially when it came to his education he received here in Muskegon at the parochial level as well at Notre Dame. I should add that many of his donations came with his request that his contribution came from an ‘anonymous’ source, and trust me, there were many!

Amongst his numerous acts of benevolence was the James and Leah Rae Center for Academic Services, a facility at Notre Dame that serves athletes as well as all students in their First Year of Studies. And if you are one of the many millions who watch a Notre Dame home football game, keep in mind that it was Jim Morse who provided the funds for installment of the Field Turf in 2014. Among the long list of gifts to Notre Dame is the Morse Family Scholarship Fund, which supports about 12 students annually; funding for football and baseball scholarships; an endowed fellowship for MBA students; as well as a significant donation to create the Morse Recruiting Lounge in the Guglielmo football complex.

The list of his benevolence to Muskegon Catholic would also be vast and varied as Jim and Leah Ray have spent so much in keeping up the high standards at MCC. As a longtime football buff, I well remember Jim footing the bill for the MCC football team to fly up to Marquette for a state football semi-final game in 2006.

Jim long ago was inducted into the Greater Muskegon Sports Hall of Fame and was indeed a proud father when his son Bobby joined his dad as a member in 1998.

In 2004 he was honored by Notre Dame with perhaps Notre Dame’s highest award, the Edward W. “Moose” Krause Distinguished Service Award.

Jim was so good to others, and I count myself as being so fortunate to have known Jim and Leah Ray for many wonderful years. I will never forget the incredible generous offer Jim proposed to me back in 1965. I was scheduled for discharge from my service duty while stationed in Vietnam very early into the USA conflict. Jim knew I was an enormous sports fan, and he invited me to join him in the booth while he called the Notre Dame-MSU game in 1965. I was scheduled for discharge on November the 18th but I was delayed in leaving Vietnam much to my dismay and was unable to take advantage of this overwhelming offer. I listened to Jim’s call of that game on a radio in a barber shop in Oakland, California. There was no way I was going to inform the others listening to that same game that I was invited to be in the booth with Jim as they surely would have thought I was off my rocker.

In the first few years broadcasting high school football games here in Muskegon my sidekick on the radio was George Seymour, Leah Ray’s younger brother. George absolutely idolized his brother-in-law, and why not? Muskegon may never again see the likes of a Jim Morse. Thanks for the memories, Jim.

*The next story is on one of my all-time favorites who became a dear friend. Walter ‘Stretch’ Hansen reached the century mark in November of 2024 and here is my tribute to this centurion.*

**A Happy One Hundredth Birthday to Walter ‘Stretch’ Hansen**

It has often been told that you save the best for last. That surely is applicable to Walter D. Hansen, one of the last and one of the best, an outstanding athlete and one of the few remaining veterans of World War II that are still with us. However, maybe only his mother called him Walter as the man everyone calls Stretch celebrates his 100th birthday on November 6th. And what a journey for this great man!

I first met Walter Hansen shortly after I began writing my Moyes’ Memories columns several years back. After I penned a story depicting the basketball gyms of yesteryear, I got a call from Stretch who wanted to share some of his experiences from his prep days in the early 1940s. I quickly agreed to meet with this former Hart cager from a long time ago and took a trip to his home in Twin Lake. It was the beginning of a friendship that now sees this grand ole man reach the coveted century mark.

Stretch was so kind and enthused to show me his amazing scrapbook. As was the norm during the 1940s Stretch was not just a one sport athlete but participated in all four of the major sports of his time and excelled in all. He wasn’t alone at Hart High. The entire starting five on arguably the greatest basketball team in Hart history were also starters on the Pirates football team while Stretch was not only a starter on the baseball team but was a member of the track team as a high jumper.

I originally thought Stretch played but three sports at Hart High, but a proud Stretch was quick to point out: “I also was on the track team and took first place in the high jump in a meet against Muskegon Heights.”

But first let’s begin with the Hart basketball team of the 1942-43 season. Newspaper reports covering this Pirate team always referred to this team as The Skyscrapers, and for good reason. Walter, who currently still stands at 6’7 was 6’6 in 1943, while his frontcourt mate Stan Kapulak was also 6’6. The rest of the starting five was comprised of high scoring Joe Mack at 6’2, 6’1 Lyle Burmeister while the lone underclassmen on the starting five, junior Stanley Riley was 5’11.

The Pirates would only experience one bump in the road during the season as they lost but one game while nearly doubling the total score versus their competition, amassing 741 points while limiting their foes to 373.

The one setback suffered by the Pirates took place at Scottville High on the Spartan’s peculiar home court, easily the most difficult place to play in both Stretch and your authors time as prep athletes. The Scottville’s ceiling was only about 12 feet high, the length of the court was half the size of today’s standard 94-foot court, while one the of backboards was attached to the wall.

To compound the problems a visiting team faced when entering this chamber of horrors, they had a three-point restraining line that shrunk the postage stamp size court even more. Hart lost that game by six points. When Scottville returned to play at Hart later in the season, the fired-up Hart cagers thumped Scottville 80-10!

The Pirates were rated as one of the top teams in the state and surely would have been one of the favorites to bring home a state title. However, that accomplishment never came to pass due to the extreme travel restrictions imposed in war torn 1943 as competition in prep basketball ended following district play.

Hart’s final game of the season would be their 53-33 convincing victory over Newaygo to win the Class C district championship. Nineteen Forty-Three was the only year the MHSAA cancelled post season competition until the covid year of 2020.

Just a few days prior to Stretch’s big day in reaching the century mark I had a chance to have a nice conversation with a guy who sounded like one who was in his 60s. His recollections of the past from more than 80 years past were remarkable.

Stretch was quick to say that a local dentist by the name of Stevens was instrumental in the success of the Pirates. “There was a small gym floor above his office where he would let us play basketball dating back in the days when we were in Sunday School. Doctor Stevens would personally take us to various towns and after he retired, he had a barn that he converted the inside into a basketball court that helped us become better players.”

The recent Covid pandemic did impose some tough restrictions, but it paled in comparison to what USA citizens had to endure in 1943. Rationing of many items was the order of the day during the midst of the conflict of World War II.

Many goods that we take for granted today in bountiful amounts, including meats, sugar, vegetables, coffee, and tires were rationed. But what affected Americans the most was the rationing of gas. So stringent was the availability of gasoline that households were limited to but three gallons a week.

Speed limit on the highways was posted at 35 MPH and was strictly enforced. Teams that had away games often used personal autos from parents who saved their gas as team buses were often out of the question.

Even spring training for Major League baseball teams was affected as all the teams abandoned their former Spring training sites in the South to train closer to home. The Tigers perhaps trained the furthest south as they trained in Evansville, Indiana, still hundreds of miles for the sunny climate of Florida. The horrific conflict of War was far from settled by 1943 and there was not even a guarantee that the good ole USA would even be on the winning side.

During a recent conversation with Stretch I asked Stretch how his Pirate teams traveled to away contests with the tough restrictions on gasoline usage. He was quick to point out: “We mostly used our parent’s cars to go to the games. When I asked how they got their gas for their travels Stretch said: “We were good friends with the gas station people in Hart,” Walter said with a chuckle.

What Stretch Hansen and the entire starting five of the Pirate Team of ‘43’ did was typical from those who composed this ‘greatest generation.’ In early July of 1943, just days after receiving their diplomas from Hart High, all boarded a bus to enlist in the Armed Forces of the United States. “We wanted to all go in together. I volunteered with hopes that we could serve in the same unit,” recalled Stretch. “But that didn’t happen as I never saw my buddies again until I came home “(from the war).

Stretch served in the Pacific Theatre, but it all wasn’t all war time duties for Stretch. While stationed in Manila he played on the 4025 Signal Corp basketball team that advanced to the service championship where Hansen had a game high 23 points, a two-point loss to a team that was led by Bob Davies, an All-American at Seton Hall who would go on to have a Hall of Fame career in the NBA.

Hansen into his 80’s was active passing along his basketball knowledge to our area youths as he was still serving as an unpaid assistant at Holton High.

Stretch was also proud of the accomplishments of his two children, daughter Barb and son Pete. His daughter Barb was a two-sport standout at Grand Valley, leading Grand Valley to four straight GLIAC titles and was inducted into their Hall of Fame in 2014 and later played professionally in the Women’s Basketball League for the San Francisco Pioneers.

Pete Hansen, after a great career at Grand Haven, played for Western Michigan University where his career with the Broncos was highlighted by hitting two foul shots with 16 seconds left to lead WMU to an 65-64 victory over a DePaul, a team that was rated No. 5 in the country in 1984.” I remember that game very well. I still have the newspaper with the story from that game, “said a proud father.

Barb and Pete and several other of his friends were at the bash to celebrate Stretch’s big 100. Among those in attendance was Richard Mullally. Thanks to Mullally’s exhausting research over the years, Richard has been able to keep the legacy of World War II vets like Hansen preserved so we all can better appreciate those who served and sacrificed to preserve the great life we currently experience in the greatest Nation in the World.

Stretch isn’t the only one of his Hart teammates about to reach the century mark. Harold Tate, who scored two points in the Pirates district win over Scottville will soon also reach the coveted century mark. “Harold’s just a kid as he’s younger than me” joshed Stretch.

Moyes’ Memories has certainly had its share of great memories, but those pale in comparison to my good friend Stretch. Happy Birthday good friend!

*My good friend Stretch, after living a life filled with memories, passed away shortly after this story was published in The Local Sports Journal*.

A recent story was a tribute to North Muskegon’s longtime athletic director, coach and three-sport standout, Jeff Cooke.

**Jeff Cooke retires after a long career at North Muskegon**

It will look different when the school year rolls around next Fall at North Muskegon High School--- much different. For the first time in many years Norseman icon Jeff Cooke will not be seen walking the hallways of NMHS. Cooke will be stepping down and getting a well-earned retirement from his many roles he has served at his beloved school, first as a student/athlete and for the past 32 years as coach and athletic director.

Cooke has announced his retirement and will officially clean out his office on June 30, 2025. Cooke will depart as the Norse AD with the cupboard well-stocked as NM has enjoyed unparalleled success in recent years. Despite numerous health setbacks Cooke has been resilient over the years, dating back to his days as a standout athlete on the Northside.

And what an athlete was Cooke! Our lifetimes are full of ‘What If’ moments, in life as well as in the world of sports. For me, and I’m sure it’s true with Jeff, I have often thought how great an athlete Jeff Cooke would have been if not for a ‘What If’ moment.

Cooke was destined for stardom as early as his ninth-grade year at NMHS in the Fall of 1977. Cooke was a starter in football as a freshman and teammate with a young sophomore quarterback who would also become a legendary coach for the Norse in later years, Larry Witham. One-week after the duo teamed up for the first of their TD receptions in a win over Ravenna, Cooke etched his name into the record book as he intercepted three passes in a win over Montague, a record still unsurpassed in Norse football history. As fate would have it, it would be the only season of football for Cooke.

However, it was in basketball where a young Jeff Cooke really excelled. As a freshman he tallied 23 points in wins over Whitehall and Montague, a program record for a freshman that lasted until 2000, a total second only to future MSU cage star Drew Naymick’s 26 points as a freshman against West Michigan Christian. Cooke was so proficient as a rebounder that he led the entire West Michigan Conference in rebounding and was selected to the All-Conference first team – as a freshman!

In a premonition of what was to be, Cooke was injured in a practice session the day before the Norsemen were to begin play in the 1978 MHSAA playoffs when he hyperextended his knee, the first of what would prove to be the first of many knee injuries and surgeries. With Cooke beginning his Norse career on the varsity, NM had gone from a winless season the previous season to 13-7. To no one’s surprise, without Cooke in the lineup the Norse lost their opening round playoff game to Hart.

During a summer workout a few months later Cooke again reinjured the knee so badly that it prematurely ended what surely would have been a promising football career for the burly 6’4 220-pound Cooke. He would not return to the hardwoods as a basketball player until the eighth game of his sophomore season.

Cooke was regaining his form following a 27-point effort in a narrow loss to Whitehall when fate again stepped in. With a knee encased in a brace and a wrap that encompassed nearly his total leg, disaster struck for Cooke in a moment that remains clear to me nearly 50 years later. With 5:31 to go in the fourth quarter in a game with Reeths Puffer, the once energetic crowd turned suddenly stone silent as NM’s sophomore center laid in agonizing pain on the floor after reinjuring his knee. Situated high above the court while broadcasting the game I could clearly hear the hideous break from my catbird seat at the old Rocket gymnasium.

So severe was the injury that Cooke missed his entire junior season.

Cooke sat out his first game of his senior season but that would be the only game the gritty Cooke would miss in his final year as a Norse athlete. One of the highlights for Cooke in his senior season was leading NM to a 65-53 victory over neighboring Reeths Puffer when he scored 22 points and grabbed 16 rebounds. Oddly enough, despite their proximity to one another, the two teams have not met again in more than 40 years.

Cooke would lead the Norse to the WMC championship playing on a leg and a half and easily led the WMC in rebounding, a feat he first achieved in his freshman season. NM would not win another basketball conference championship until ---- Cooke, as the head coach of his alma mater, led the Norse to a title years later.

After leaving NMHS Cooke was determined to give basketball another shot and who better to play for then the new coach at Muskegon Community College, Gene Gifford. “Jeff played for me my first two years at MCC.  He was one of the hardest and most dedicated athletes that I have coached,” said Gifford. “Jeff practiced and played hard and was a great example for other players on the team. He was always a team player and never complained about his knee or the knee injury he had suffered. He was truly a student-athlete and was always a positive representative of the Jayhawk basketball program, “added a coach who has tutored hundreds of athletes over his long, and still active career.

Cooke would leave MCC after two years and would get his degree from Central Michigan. Cooke’s first job was at the Tri-Cities Family YMCA where he served for eight years. “I was a Program Director responsible for Weightroom, Pool, Aquatic Programs, Youth Sports, Youth Summer Camps and helped with many Special Events. I say all this, because much of what I did at the "Y" is the same as being at NM. You need to wear many hats,” said Cooke.

Cooke would return to his alma mater in 1993 to begin a long career at North Muskegon, first as the Athletic Director, a role he would serve for 32 years.

NM’s basketball program was in the doldrums before Cooke was asked to take over the head coaching duties beginning with the 1996-97 season. Beginning in 1984, until Cooke took over as coach, the Norsemen had won but 75 games while losing 162.

It took Cooke but two season to produce a winning team as NM went 12-10 in the 1988-99 season, their first winning season since 1985 when, ironically, the head coach was none other than Jeff’s father, Dave Cooke. Under Jeff’s leadership NM had turned the tables. With Cooke at the helm the Norsemen over the next five years would win 81 games while losing but 33. In 2002-03 NM would have arguably their finest team in NM history when they went 24-2, advancing to the quarterfinals before losing a tight contest to perennial powerhouse Flint Beecher.

In a move that surprised many Cooke was replaced as the head coach at NMHS despite winning 184 games in his 18 years as the Norse mentor. When asked his biggest personal disappointment at NMHS Cooke replied: “When I was let go from coaching the Boys Varsity Basketball Team. That was very tough for me.

Fortunately, the hierarchy at NM retained Cooke as the school’s athletic director where he has loyally served for more than three decades. During Cooke’s tenure NM recently has seen unprecedented success, especially in the boys’ major sports of football, basketball, baseball and track. NM has even brought a wrestling program out of the mothballs that has done surprisingly well.

Cooke departs leaving NM in exceptionally good shape. In the last three years the boys’ football, basketball, and baseball teams have won an amazing 180 games while losing but 31. In all nine of those seasons NM were the Rivers Division champs in the West Michigan Conference.

But it hasn’t been easy for Cooke. Although he incurred numerous knee injuries and surgeries as a prep performer at NMHS, it pales with the health issues Cooke has had to overcome in recent years. Cooke lost a kidney in 2012, just the beginning of numerous health issues he would face in the upcoming years. In April of 2022 Jeff had a heart valve replaced. In August of the same year, he had a brain tumor removed and as if that wasn’t enough, just a month later a melanoma cancer was removed from his back. As recent as 2023 Cooke had melanoma cancer removed from his lung.

Instead of lamenting on his health issues, Cooke see’s it in a different light. “I’m now positive, I get tested every 3 - 6 months, so far so good.

Always standing by his side was his beautiful wife, Kim.

To be a successful coach as well as an athletic director one needs a supportive wife. For Jeff Cooke he hit the jackpot with Kim. “I am so grateful for Kim and love her!!” said Jeff. “Without Kim I would have been up (a certain well known) creek without a paddle. It is Kim who has kept me together.”

Despite his health issues Cooke as taken a positive stance. “There is always somebody that has had a tougher time than me, so I am thankful and understand how things have worked out for me.

For the first time in nearly 60 years there will not be a Cooke active at North Muskegon High. One of those who made a lasting impact on his life was his father Dave Cooke, who served many years at NM, first as a basketball coach dating back to 1968, and for 22 years as the football coach at NM.

“My dad has been a big factor in my career. His years in education, coaching and recreation, are second to none. Again, not worrying about wins or losses, the quality people Dad worked with at Whitehall, Reeths Puffer and North Muskegon, really wore off positively on me,” said a proud son.

Cooke’s was quick to give praise to the number of excellent coaches he has worked with during his long tenue at North Muskegon. “I’ve been blessed to work with so many people here, both young and old, that were hard working people, honest, and willing to share. Those wins are always nice, but a positive work ethic, seeing the value of the team and cheering and helping your teammates are important.”

In my talk with Jeff, he was so proud of his three children, all who starred in athletics at North Muskegon and have gone on to receive their degrees and play sports in college. Jeff also said he enjoyed working with the teachers, coaches, both past and present and appreciated the relationship he had over the years with his fellow athletic directors.

Jeff currently has no plans for retirement, but you can be sure he will be a fixture at upcoming NM athletic events. He did mention one other thing: “I would still like to coach NM JV boys’ basketball.”

Jeff just couldn’t escape his ties and love of basketball over the years. One can bet he won’t be too far away from the stomping grounds of NMHS where he has made a positive impact for more than 40 years as a student, coach and athletic director.

“Walking through doors for the last time - I'm sure it will make me think! My mind will also recall my student years at NM, my NM employment, my years as a parent of NM students and being a part of the NM Community. It’s been a great ride!”