

48 years later, 1973 EHS girls track team enters the Hall

Loaded with talent from top to bottom, Tiger girls' squad won 1st state championship in school history

**BY RICHARD BYRD
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EPHRATA — Absolute perfection is a feat in sports that few teams ever achieve. No matter the level — high school, college or professional — a perfect season is a rarity.

To dominate an entire season a team has to be firing on all cylinders, day in and day out; no matter what.

The Ephrata High School athletic record books are chock full of stories of successful teams having great seasons and winning championships.

The 1973 EHS girls team very well may be the best of the bunch in terms of overall dominance and given the fact that they were the first EHS team to capture a state championship.

Consider this. In the 1973 season the squad competed in and won eight meets. They averaged 96.62 points per meet and their average margin of victory was 36.68 points. Moreover, they had four individual first place finishers and four second place finishers at the state championship.

Teams don't reach that level of success without a sense of oneness and true camaraderie, which is exactly why the induction of the entire 1973 team into the EHS Athletic Hall of Fame is especially fitting.

"I was lucky enough to have some of my best friends on the team," recalls team member Marsha (Kinney) Lance. "It seemed like we just all worked so well together and that is how we made it happen. I just have real fond feelings to this day from that time."

The 1973 team's season was born out of unfortunate circumstances that were out of the athletes' control.

For folks around the Columbia Basin that have followed local sports the name "Ray Cross" rings some sort of a bell. People associate him with the "Ray Cross Invitational," but most aren't aware of his impact on the 1973 EHS girls track team without actually being around the squad.

Cross passed away in September 1973 from a heart attack after having served as the girls track team coach in the years leading up to his death.

A stern, yet inspiring coach who loved to have a good time and smile, Cross is still remembered fondly to this day by his former athletes.

"Coach Cross was a pretty intense guy," remembers Pam (Hoyt) Hungenberg. "I started with him and he made me run the mile relay. I didn't like running and I remember I waved at the crowd once and I thought he was going to kill me."

"He made us try things we weren't good at, but after you tried it, then you felt good about it."

With nobody to lead the girls track program following Cross' unexpected death, EHS went to work finding a qualified replacement. The problem was that nobody else seemed interested in the job at the time.

In stepped George Smethers. At the time of Cross' death Smethers had been coaching football, wrestling and track at Ephrata Junior High, so he wasn't a complete stranger to the community and team.

Still, Smethers — who passed away in March 2021 at the age of 86 from congestive heart failure — was stepping into an unprecedented situation in the wake of Cross' death. The team had all the talent in the world, but without an inspiring coach they knew they weren't going to make it very far.

Cross and Smethers may have had different coaching styles/philosophies, but what they shared in common was a talent for listening to their athletes and getting to know them on an individual basis.

"Both of them asked us what we wanted to do. What do you feel like doing? What race do you want to do? Both of them were encouraging," said Donna (Swem) Kammer. "I actually don't have a favorite between the two of them."

The good news for Smethers was that he was taking over a team that was bursting with talent. With athletes like Kinney — whose high school resume includes five state championships (four individual, one relay) — and Debbie (Agranoff) McDonnell — who was first in the 100 meters and a part of the winning 440-yard relay squad at the 1973 state championships — all Smethers had to do as a coach was come alongside his athletes and do his best to steer them in the right direction.

Saying the 1973 team was



The 1973 Ephrata High School girls track team was one of the best in any sport in school history. The squad left behind a long-lasting legacy and served as an inspiration for countless EHS teams through the years. Among team members receiving recognition during an awards banquet following that championship season were (front row, l-r): Jody Thomas, Cathy Livingston, Laurie Womack, Lisa Lybecker, Dodi McAlpine. Back row: Donna Swem, Coach George Smethers, Marsha Kinney, Susan Schuh, Pam Hoyt, LuAnn Heer, Debbie Agranoff, Cheri Moore. Other team members included Diane Livingston, Debbie Ross, and Debbie Lund.

good is a massive understatement. There was no point in the season at which Smethers or the athletes reached for the panic button. The Lady Tigers steam rolled the competition. The closest second place finisher behind the team was Wenatchee during a May 8, 1973 meet that was held in Quincy. Other than that the team's leads — even during districts and the state championship — provided them with enough breathing room each week to not have to worry if they dropped a few events.

The closest thing to a bump in the road came the day before the state championships in Goldendale.

Some of the members of the baseball team and girls track team were horsing around and one of the boys caught Agranoff on the back of her heel with his baseball spikes, just missing her Achilles tendon.

Agranoff — who passed away in February 2014 after a 3.5-year battle with cancer — was in a tremendous amount of pain the night before the state meet. The injury required six stitches and somehow Agranoff was able to push through the pain the next two days at state and take first place in the 100 meters, second in the 70-yard dash and run a leg of the winning 440-yard relay team.

"I just want people to know that she ran and she was in a lot of pain and still won," Hoyt said. "She was fun too. She was just fun to have around and I want to

make sure that people remember her, because I really miss her."

"I kept icing her foot and helped her sleep the night before the race. She was nervous, but the more nervous she got, the faster she ran."

All-in-all, nine of the 12 girls who went to state took home a ribbon. First place finishers were: Kinney in the long jump, Dodi McAlpine in the 880-yard run, Agranoff in the 100 meters, Susan (Schuh) Taxter in the 440-yard dash and Schuh, Kinney, Agranoff and Lisa (Lybecker) Stagaman in the 440-yard relay.

Second place finishers were: LuAnn Heer-Weisgerber in the shot put, Kinney in the 80-yard hurdles and high jump, and Agranoff in the 70-yard dash. The EHS 880-yard relay team — which consisted of Cathy Livingston, Jody (Thomas) Treffry, Swem and Schuh — finished third.

Forty-eight years have passed since the state meet. Some memories of state and the season as a whole have faded away over time, but the pure thrill and excitement that the athletes experienced has not lost its luster.

"The state track meet was just an awesome thing. I made a friend for life there from another town (Entiat) and we still keep in touch," remembers Swem. "It really produced camaraderie in the team and really strong friendships."

Grant County Journal stories from the 1973 season tell a story of a team that was truly unified. A

team that used the death of Cross as a rallying point to achieve greatness and left an impression on the community at large.

"Although the girls track team has not had the crowds at their track meets, or the publicity normally associated with a winner, they didn't let it bother them," reads a May 23, 1973 column by Journal columnist Mark Lowe. "Our personal congratulations to each of the team members and their coach, George Smethers. Welcome state champs! Maybe our recognition of your efforts are belated, but believe me, they are sincere."

The legacy of the 1973 team cannot be stated enough. They snagged the first state championship in school history and served as inspiration for countless teams in the following years.

The 1973 team is now the second team to be inducted into the EHS Athletic Hall of Fame — the first being the 1977 state championship baseball team.

A big honor for sure, especially for a team that did so well without high expectations heading into the season.

"It's a real honor to be recognized as a team for what we accomplished. At the time I think maybe it took us as a surprise that we came out of nowhere and did so well," said Kinney. "It was kind of the beginning of starting a strong program in Ephrata."

The 2021 EHS Athletic Hall of Fame induction ceremony is set for Saturday.