

Ephrata's Top Gun? You Betcher

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of the Journal



E P H R A - TA — “Right here,” Ephrata football coach Bill Betcher was yelling at his outside linebacker and pointing to a spot in the flat on the near sideline. “They’re coming right here.”

The situation: playing in front of a packed house, Betcher’s Tiger ballclub was hosting Caribou Trail League nemesis Cashmere for the conference title in November 1988.

Based on his quick assessment of the offensive formation, the down, and the field position, Betcher knew — absolutely knew — that the Bulldogs were going to run left to the short side of the field. To that spot in the flat near the sideline. And Betcher wanted his linebacker to be right there to greet the ballcarrier.

As anticipated, there was a collision at the specified location. No gain. Mission accomplished.

It was just one play in a thrilling game, barely won by the Tigers, 15-14. And it was just one play in the thousands overseen by Betcher during his eight years as head coach at Ephrata.

But that one call, formed in an instant, was also indicative of Bill’s remarkable football mind — combining knowledge, experience, scouting, film study, intuition, and the confidence of a riverboat gambler (he once dealt cards in Las Vegas), all honed through years of playing and coaching the game.

Now, at age 82, that mind has begun to stray at times, a concern for those who know this enigmatic nomad and his colorful history. Nonetheless, on Saturday, Betcher will be inducted into Ephrata High School’s Athletic Hall of Fame. At last report, he was in Mexico with a caregiver and was not expected to attend the ceremony.

But his outstanding legacy at Ephrata will certainly be shared.

As head coach from 1985-1992, he compiled a 90-8 record and his teams won back-to-back state Class A football championships in 1986 and ’87, going undefeated in the process. A 38-game win streak was finally halted in the 1988 championship game, a 23-20 loss to Castle Rock. Ironically, Betcher began his coaching career at “The Rock” in 1963 compiling a 22-5 record over a three-year span.

Ephrata reached the state title game again in 1990, but lost a heartbreaker, 10-6, in the closing minutes to Eatonville, the only blemish on a 12-1 season record.

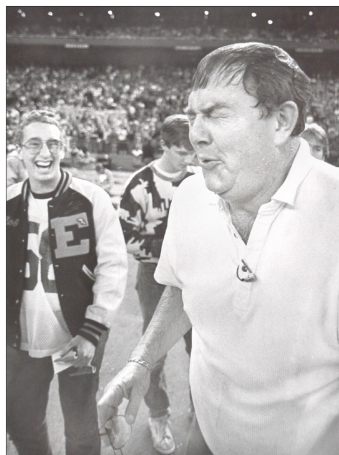
Betcher came to Ephrata in 1984, serving initially as an assistant to then-head football coach John Kinnard. The two men switched roles the next season — a move fully supported by Kinnard, who remained a stalwart assistant in the program.

At the time, Betcher said, “I want us to win. And I want us to look good doing it.”

In ’85, the Tigers fashioned an 8-3 record, culminated with a 3-0 loss at Cashmere, the defending state champs, in “The Ice Bowl” — a memorable quarterfinal playoff contest held in zero-degree weather on a frozen ice rink of a field which negated the



Ephrata’s Top Gun: Tiger coach Bill Betcher (above) overseeing an August practice session in the mid-1980s. During his eight-year tenure as head coach, his teams played in four state Class A championship games and won two. He was inducted into the EHS athletic Hall of Fame on Saturday, Sept. 11, 2021. At right, in the December 1987 Kingbowl, Betcher got a brisk Gatorade shower from his players after they achieved a second undefeated season and state football championship.



team’s speed.

But after that, Ephrata steamrolled the Caribou Trail League for seven consecutive conference championships, until Betcher decided to step down as coach following the 1992 season.

Ephrata was moving up to Class AA, and to the Mid-Valley League — both factors in Betcher’s decision.

A native of Woodland, Washington, Betcher graduated from Washougal High School, then initially attended the University of Oregon before transferring his freshman year to Central Washington State College (now University) in Ellensburg. He played center and linebacker for the Wildcats, earning all-conference honors and getting named to the NAIA All-American team in 1961 as a center. Knee injuries may have cost him a shot at playing pro ball. He was inducted into CWU’s athletic Hall of Fame in 1988.

Graduating in 1963 with a degree in physical education, Betcher coached at Castle Rock, then joined the football staff at the University of Montana in 1967 — the same year as another assistant and Washington state native, Jack Elway.

Elway, the father of NFL Hall of Fame quarterback John Elway, moved on as an assistant to Washington State University in 1971, followed by collegiate head coaching jobs at Northridge, San Jose State, and Stanford, the latter from 1984-88. Elway reportedly wanted Betcher to join him as an assistant at Stanford.

But Betcher applied for a job in Ephrata, which had an opening for a P.E. teacher at the middle school. At the time, Pat Flannery was the principal and Dick Kinart was the school district superintendent. Kinart had grown up with Betcher and they played

football together in the small town of Washougal.

“Dick Kinart said Betcher was a good teacher and (an) even better coach,” said Flannery, himself an assistant coach with the Tigers. “Dick Kinart was my mentor, and I totally trusted his judgment.”

And Kinart was right on both counts, said Flannery. “The rest is history. Bill Betcher’s legacy will be told for years.”

Listening to his drawing, aw-shucks demeanor off the gridiron, or watching his slow, ambling walk onto the football field during a timeout, it might be easy for casual observers to underestimate Betcher. He was not a rah-rah guy; there were no emotional meltdowns on the sidelines. His Friday night post-game locker room comments to players typically ran along these lines: “You fellas did a good job tonight. This weekend, you boys keep your noses clean and we’ll see you on Monday.”

But Betcher carried an underlying passion for the game and subtle form of swagger. When he flashed that crooked grin and his eyes squinted into a sidelong glance, it conveyed an innate confidence, perhaps bordering on menace if provoked.

Players and opposing coaches all quickly learned: Big Bill’s middle-aged paunch might be carried on two bad knees, but he was still a tough dude, and that mindset was shared by his EHS staff and conveyed to their teams.

“They created what they wanted — they made you believe you were tough,” said All-State Tiger runningback/linebacker Jason DeChenne, a three-year starter who graduated in 1991 and went on to play at Wenatchee Valley College.

Betcher fostered an aggres-

sive defense that often shut out opponents and a high-octane triple-option running game mixed in with the occasional pass. To effectively run the wishbone offense, with all its split-second defensive reads, you need a quarterback who is agile, quick-reacting, and tough. He may have had the best in QB Dale Hagy, who was undefeated as a two-year starter, culminating in the 1986-87 state championship wins over Lynden Christian and Lynden, respectively.

Betcher often referred to Hagy as “The Doctor” because of his ability “to operate” the wishbone, usually with surgical precision.

Before most games, Betcher rarely expressed any genuine apprehension about an opponent, saying simply, “I think we’ll be okay.” But prior to their first Kingbowl appearance, Betcher was rightfully concerned about the overall size of Lynden Christian, describing the Lynces “as big as a house.”

After the opening kickoff, his worries were immediately eased. The Tigers scored a touchdown on their first play from scrimmage and went on to methodically thump LC, 32-15. The game was not nearly as close as the final score might indicate.

Ephrata was, indeed, Top Gun.

Afterward, a Seattle Times sportswriter wondered if “the best Class A team of all time.” Another coach speculated that the Tigers could have beaten any team in the Kingdom that day up to Class AAA finalists Gonzaga Prep and Juanita.

Hagy, a standout three-sport athlete who went on to play college baseball at Nebraska, is now an industrial arts teacher and coach at Ephrata High School. He recalls the lead-up to that stunning “first play” against Lynden Christian: an option fake followed by a pitch to his older brother, Gary, reversing from his end position, taking the ball, and throwing a scoring strike to runningback Troy Zerb streaking up the middle.

“I still remember Coach asking me the night before we played Lynden Christian for the state championship if I was good with running our end-around pass on our first possession,” said Hagy. “He again spoke to me about it during pre-game to make sure I wanted to run it right out of the gate. I remember telling him, ‘Let’s do it,’ and we opened the game with a trick-play touchdown.”

Earlier, the Tigers used the same play against league opponents Cashmere and Quincy, with the same success. Gary Hagy — an inaugural EHS Hall of Famer — went three-for-three in touchdown passes that season, while Dale said he “usually got knocked on my butt while pitching the ball. Good times.”

Of all the coaches he played for, Dale said he felt that Betcher did a better job preparing him for each game and opponent than anyone else.

As quarterback and team captain, Hagy said Betcher allowed him to be involved in scripting plays prior to games, and was the first coach who “allowed us as players” to make adjustments during a game.

“It seemed like we could always capitalize on the adjustments that teams tried to use to slow us down,” said Hagy.

Despite the game’s complexity, which can be overwhelming as a quarterback, Hagy said Betcher would run through enough offensive scenarios in practice that he was never surprised during a game by any defensive adjustment — a testament to the acumen and preparation of Betcher and his staff.

Although he stopped coaching after 1992, Betcher continued as EHS athletic director until 2000, a position he held for 13 years. He was succeeded by Michele (Ratigan) Webb, EHS Class of 1979.

Webb was out of the area during most of Betcher’s coaching tenure, and she knew him more as an AD and fellow P.E. teacher.

“Bill had an ease in connecting with all different types of kids,” said Webb. “Students respected him and he easily motivated kids to try skills they may not be comfortable with. He had high expectations, yet always enjoyed having a laugh with his students.”

Webb said Betcher was a mentor who encouraged her to seek the athletic/activities director position, and he was always very supportive of girls programs at EHS.

She said Betcher also felt strongly that coaches, and others, should not overreact when prep athletes made mistakes.

“He was passionate about (that) ... the idea that athletes did not try to play poorly, whether it was a missed layin, a dropped pass, or a strikeout, so coaches need to keep that in perspective,” said Webb.

Betcher, as AD, was “very instrumental” in helping develop the north and south divisions of the Central Washington Athletic Conference, after the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association reshuffled school classifications in the late 1990s.

“He was able to help other ADs come together in a cooperative manner and many AD’s gave him much of the credit for helping the schools in Central Washington come together” at that time, said Webb.

Throughout the years, Betcher enjoyed hunting and fishing, and would roam from Mexico to Alaska. In retirement, he settled in the tiny burg of Hay, Washington, about 10 miles south of La Crosse in Whitman County. Last July, he went missing for a couple days, after reportedly leaving town on a cross-state trip to buy a horse. When he failed to return home, the Whitman County Sheriff’s Office was notified. Authorities said he might be experiencing “some memory issues.”

Deputies found him three days later sitting on the front porch of a residence about two miles from his home. They also found his wrecked truck and an empty horse trailer nearby.

Neighbors and friends, in Hay and across the state, were relieved he was reasonably okay. Their affection for the man, and his accomplishments, continue to this day.

Both will be celebrated on Saturday.