

'Voice of the Tigers' enters the Hall

Ephrata Athletic Hall of Fame inductee Dave Middleton spent 25 years calling EHS games on the radio. He may have lost his fight with ALS in 2006, but his legacy lives on.

BY RICHARD BYRD
of the Journal

EPHRATA — From a young age sports fans are glued to their television or radio listening to broadcasters/announcers detail what is happening in a game. Their voices provide clarity and emotion and sometimes paint a better picture of what is happening in the game than what a television camera can provide.

As sports fans grow older they take the memories of their favorite broadcasters with them and oftentimes find themselves quoting some of their favorite catchphrases of the past.

Ephrata Athletic Hall of Fame inductee Dave Middleton was one of those broadcasters that stuck in the memory of countless people in the Columbia Basin. 'The Voice of the Tigers' was a staple on the radio for 25 years calling EHS games, creating a legacy that will now be enshrined forever in the hall.

Middleton's story is one that has the pedigree of a Hollywood movie with its twists, turns and triumphs.

Few people know that from a very young age Middleton was considered to be a medical anomaly.

Before he even hit the age of one doctors discovered his trachea (windpipe) was not growing and as a result he had to have a tracheotomy — an opening

created at the front of the neck to allow a tube to be inserted into the windpipe, which allows breathing.

"The doctor that cared for him always insisted that Marie and Tom (Dave's parents) only listen to him. Because he insisted that this child is going to live. When he goes through puberty things will change," Dave's wife, Billie, explained.

The tube remained in place until around the age of 12, when Middleton's trachea started to grow — a feat that puzzled medical professionals.

As Middleton grew older he developed a fairly severe stutter however. He could have easily let the impediment slow him down, but that didn't sit right with Middleton and his family.

He went to speech therapy in high school and college and — interestingly enough — even competed on debate teams.

History books are full of stories of singers, announcers, politicians, et. cetera, who have a speech impediment that somehow goes away when they have to hit the stage or speak in public. Middleton was one of those sorts of people.

"He stuttered quite badly, but he never stuttered when he was in a debate," Billie said. "He was a different person. He was fully involved in whatever he was debating."

Middleton was a Tiger through and through and graduated from EHS in 1963. He moved to Cheney to attend Eastern Washington University, graduating with majors under his belt in political science and economics.

It was at Eastern that Middleton met the love of his life, Billie. The pair married Dec. 28, 1967 and began an epic journey that brought them to several different places.

Their first stop was Seattle, where Dave worked for the Federal Reserve Bank and managed apartment buildings. The Middletons came back to the Columbia Basin in 1971 when Dave got a job as a data processor for the City of Moses Lake.

The next leg of their journey brought them north — way north. Dave got a job for the City of Kodiak in Alaska as the city's finance director.

The Middletons were only there for about a year though, returning to Washington in 1974 when Dave got a job working as city treasurer in Oak Harbor.

With two kids — Tom and Brenda — in tow, Dave and Billie moved back to the Columbia Basin in 1975 when Dave got a job in the data processing department at the Grant PUD.

Dave always wanted to be his own boss though. So in June 1980 he went looking for a business to buy. The opportunity



As the 'Voice of the Tigers' Dave Middleton (above, right) called Ephrata High School games on KULE-AM for 25 years. Middleton loved broadcasting so much that he never took any money for calling the games. Even in the wake of an ALS diagnosis in early 2004, Middleton still continued to announce games for over a year with the help of his wife Billie (below) until he finally stepped away from the microphone in March 2005.

he found was to purchase the Ephrata-based Lindsay Water Conditioning.

The Middletons later expanded the scope of the business and changed the name to Lindsay Water, Pool & Spa.

At the time Billie was helping teach preschool, but Lindsay only had one-part time employee when the Middletons took over and Dave needed more help at the business.

"Within the first three months of buying the business he told me he needed me to come into the business with him because he couldn't do it all," Billie said.

It was around that same time that a broadcasting opportunity came a-calling for Dave when his longtime friend, Bruce Reim, invited him on a trip to a regional wrestling tournament in Chelan in 1980.

Dave wasn't an athlete growing up, but he found a passion for broadcasting and it didn't hurt that he was pretty darn good at it to boot.

"He kind of got brought into basketball because the person that was doing it was stepping away. And he also did football," Billie recalls. "For all the years that he announced he never accepted any money from KULE-AM (radio broadcasting company). He just loved doing it."

"He wasn't an athlete growing up, but he really knew it all."

It was over the next 25 years that the legend of the 'Voice of the Tigers' grew. Dave was lucky enough to be there during a run of success for EHS athletics in the 1980's and even had enough time to serve the City of Ephrata for 13 years on the city council.

It was in the fall of 2003 that Dave began to think something was wrong when he started noticing some weakness in his right

hand. On Jan. 13, 2004 — Dave's 59th birthday — he went to see an orthopedic specialist in Wenatchee. X-rays were taken, but they didn't show any abnormalities.

As a result, Dave went to see a neurologist and after undergoing a series of tests he and Billie were dealt a shocking blow: Dave was diagnosed with Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). ALS — also referred to as "Lou Gehrig's Disease" — is a degenerative disease of the nervous system that there is no known cure for.

"It was a shock. And it was difficult. We wanted to be sure and tell our kids first, which we did," Billie remembers. "He accepted the diagnosis and had a peace about it. He said he just knew that God would get him through it."

The next two years brought massive changes. Dave and Billie moved into a new house and had it remodeled to accommodate Dave as the disease progressed. Their son, Tom, left his law practice to help run the family business and even moved kitty corner from his parents' new home.

ALS is a disease that progresses slowly and makes the muscles atrophy. Billie said the first year after the diagnosis wasn't too bad and the disease didn't progress too rapidly.

"He knew things were changing because he could feel it in his body. It went down into his right arm and right hand and from there it went to his legs," Billie said. "At the time that Dave died he was experiencing breathing problems. It's just a progressive disease."

There is no way to sugarcoat it; ALS is a terrible disease. Dave wasn't the type of person to give up and let it take him without a fight and a hopeful spirit however.

He continued broadcasting — with the help of Billie — even after the diagnosis and the disease progressed.

He called his final game March 12, 2005 at the state 2A girls basketball tournament in Yakima.

"This is Dave Middleton, 25 years later. I do want to thank everyone for the last 25 years, it's been very special to me. I do what I do because the kids put their hearts and souls into it. We see them a few hours each week, but the kids and the coaches put so much time into this — I just try to give them the attention and a little bit of glory...see you down the road," were Dave's final broadcasting words.

Dave passed away over a year later on Aug. 19, 2006. His life was extraordinary and his memory will never be forgotten.

His dedication to EHS athletics and athletics in the community as a whole was honored after his diagnosis by the renaming of the Cal Ripken League youth baseball field in Ephrata to Dave Middleton Field.

Now comes another honor; his induction into the Ephrata Athletic Hall of Fame.

Billie knew Dave better than anyone and knows words cannot express how much the induction would have meant to her husband.

"It would have been an absolute honor for him to be inducted," said an emotional Billie while wiping tears out of her eyes. "It would have meant the absolute world to him."

The 2021 EHS Athletic Hall of Fame induction ceremony is scheduled for Sept. 11.

Tickets can be purchased at Goin' Postal, 159 Basin St. SW, or by visiting www.ephratatigers.com.

