

Gary Archer: for all his assistance, the Hall of Fame

BY RANDY BRACHT
of the Journal

EPHRATA — Assistant coaches seldom attract much attention. Gary Archer — athlete and artist, teacher and coach, multiple Halls of Famer — is the rare exception.

On Sept. 11, Archer will be among the inductees into Ephrata High School's Athletic Hall of Fame, both for his prowess as a prep and collegiate player in basketball and baseball, and his years of coaching expertise in both programs for the Tigers.

His involvement is uniquely interwoven with fellow coaches Dave Johnson and the late Marty O'Brien. The three men all came to Ephrata in the early 1970s as teachers and all shared coaching roles — Johnson as the Tigers' Hall of Fame varsity baseball coach, O'Brien as the Hall of Fame varsity basketball coach, Archer as assistant to both.

"He's so deserving," Johnson said of Archer earlier this week. "Gary was a very good teacher and just an excellent coach, both in baseball and basketball. He brought so much consistency to both programs."

That all three men — each a distinct character — remained in Ephrata and coached together for three decades made a unique impression on the community, and thousands of student athletes.

If you grew up here, you've got a Johnson story, an O'Brien story, an Archer story. Most likely, you have several.

"We just gravitated together," Archer said on Tuesday. "We flipped roles at times, and that was a neat thing about working with them."

All three were fueled by a highly competitive nature and determination to succeed. But in their collaboration, they checked their egos at the door, treating one another as equals and constantly sharing ideas on ways to improve.

"We were like co-coaches," said Archer. "All three of us had the same philosophy on what we wanted to accomplish and what we wanted (the programs) to look like."

That bond made it easy to stay in Ephrata during times when he was approached about varsity coaching positions at other schools, said Archer.

"Why leave when I've got it good here?" he said. "I felt like I had a part in the program and how it was run."

Archer "could have easily been a head



The artist at work: Gary Archer (at left) painted the iconic Tiger logo that adorns Ephrata High School's Marty O'Brien Court, named for the legendary coach who passed away in 2007. Archer was a long-time assistant for both O'Brien (above, middle) in basketball and head baseball coach Dave Johnson (at left). Archer's contributions were recognized with his induction into Ephrata's Athletic Hall of Fame. File photos by Randy Bracht, Doug Miller

coach in basketball or baseball, but felt satisfied developing players (here) for varsity competition," said Johnson. "He was intensely loyal ... his role as an assistant coach made two head coaches very successful."

IN THE BEGINNING ...

Born and raised in Ephrata, Archer, now 74, graduated from Ephrata High School in 1965 and was a standout basketball and baseball player.

Except, perhaps, his very last play as a senior in a Tiger uniform. Ephrata was at Ellensburg; bottom of the seventh, score tied, two outs, bases loaded.

A routine pop fly was hit to Archer at short-stop. Glove it, and it's extra innings with a chance to win.

"It's a catch you would make a thousand times," said Archer. "But it bounced off my glove and I dropped it."

Bulldogs score. Game over. "It was a long bus ride home," he recalled with a rueful smile. "I think I cried most of the way."

After high school, Archer attended Spokane Community College for two years and was the leading hitter on SCC's first-ever baseball team, which finished first in its league and second in the state tournament. Both Archer and the ballclub are now enshrined in the college's hall of fame. He was offered a baseball scholarship to SCC based solely on a recommendation letter from legendary Washington State University baseball coach Chuck "Bobo" Brayton, who had seen Archer play in a summer American Legion doubleheader in Wenatchee.

"He was just an excellent baseball player. A very good hitter and a tremendous infield-

er," said Johnson, who played for Whitworth College and faced Archer during their time in Spokane.

Archer then received a baseball scholarship to Eastern Oregon University in La Grande, where his standout play continued until a detached retina sidelined him in 1969. Johnson believes that injury likely cost Archer a chance to play professional baseball. He remained in school, served as an assistant coach for EOU, and graduated in 1970 with a degree in education.

Archer said he wanted to teach, in part because he wanted to continue coaching. But teaching gigs were hard to get at the time. In 1971, he interviewed for a job in Ephrata. Meanwhile, his wife, Sandy — they met at an ERG dance in 1967 and married two years later — had a nursing offer at Sacred Heart Hospital in Spokane.

"On Friday, we packed an old Ford Fairlane with all our stuff. On Saturday, we were either going to Ephrata or Spokane," he said.

Ephrata called, and the Archers returned here to stay, raising their two children; Geoff, now living in West Seattle, and Becca, in Spokane.

Initially, Gary served as the school district's teaching liaison/tutor for the state-operated Sunrise Group Home. He then took a position teaching English at the Ephrata Junior High School, now Middle School, except for a one-year stint at the high school when the ninth-graders moved up. He went back to the middle school and remained there until retiring in 2002. But that was brief: Archer returned to the high school in 2003 under a retire/rehire program before stepping away for good.

During his tenure, Archer spent 30 years coaching baseball and 25 years with the bas-

ketball program. He also assisted at times with the TBI baseball and coaches camps operated by Johnson and O'Brien, who passed away in 2007.

THE ARCHER IMPACT

Johnson said Archer's influence as freshman baseball coach was tremendous in preparing young players for the lofty expectations of the Tiger program, both on and off the field.

He credited Archer for his patience, attention to detail, and sharing his knowledge and love of the game. That ranged from how to wear a uniform to learning situational skills, from pre-game warmups to post-game conduct on the bus or in a restaurant.

"That's why Gary deserves to be in the Hall of Fame — because he developed so many young kids. It was so important to the program," said Johnson, whose ballclubs won eight state championships and innumerable league, district, and regional titles.

"He showed them, 'This is how you play Ephrata baseball. Gary had discipline, but kids respected him. He made sure we got good compliments on and off the field,'" said Johnson.

At times, though, it involved a tough learning curve for the freshmen. In every season, there came a point when Archer had seen enough missed signs, called third strikes, lack of hustle, or other issues from his young players. That's when it was time for "Hell Day."

"I would tell them, 'Don't bother bringing your gloves to practice tomorrow. You're not going to need them,'" recalled Archer. "You're going to be running."

And run they would, from foul pole to foul pole, eventually slowing to an exhausted panting jog, interspersed with much sharp-tongued lecturing from the coach.

"They knew my voice," he said.

Johnson said Archer's perennial "Hell Day" practice served to remind them of the need to focus, and grow up, as players.

"They learned there's a direct line between your brain and your feet," Johnson quipped. "Baseball players don't like to run. If they did, they would've joined cross country."

And they don't forget. When he encounters former players and they reminisce, said Archer, "They always bring up Hell Day."

When each freshman season ended, Archer joined the varsity ballclub, which was invariably headed into the playoffs by then. He would coach first base while Johnson manned his usual spot at third and O'Brien barked commentary from the dugout.

In one game, the Tigers were facing a pitcher who had previously shut down their offense. But Johnson said Archer, at first, discerned which pitch was coming by how the ball was gripped. With coded verbal commands, he let the Ephrata batters know what to expect.

"Gary called every pitch," said Johnson. "We just hit the guy, and he was gone in just a couple innings. All because of Gary."

Archer began coaching high school basketball in 1972 as an assistant to Jim Livengood, who departed several years later to pursue a career as an athletic director which eventually took him to WSU and the University of Arizona.

Livengood was succeeded by O'Brien. From 1972 to 1999, Archer's jayvee teams only had one losing season, and once went undefeated.

This July, Archer was inducted into the Washington Interscholastic Basketball Coaches Association Hall of Fame. He was nominated by Marty O'Brien's son, Devin, now head boys basketball coach at Connell High School.

"My father ... would have nominated Gary the second that the Hall of Fame started honoring assistant coaches," the younger O'Brien wrote in a letter to the WBCA.

Johnson also provided a letter of support for Archer's induction.

During his 25 years as a Tiger hoop assistant, Archer was involved — in Devin's words — "one of the most successful runs of basketball in program history, including eight state tournament appearances and (the Ephrata boys) first basketball state title in 1993."

Archer's dedication, Devin continued, was among the reasons that the elder O'Brien was a Hall of Famer.

"When my father was inducted ... he told The Spokesman-Review, 'I guarantee you, there is not a coach in the world who has done anything by themselves.' Devin wrote. "He was right. The honor he received for the program doesn't happen without Gary Archer's coaching expertise, loyalty, and commitment."

To receive such recognition as an assistant coach, said Archer, "really made it special." Not that Archer and Marty O'Brien always

saw eye to eye during their long association. There were times when some lively discussions could be seen and heard on the bench.

During the 1993 championship season, for example, Archer said the Tigers were listless and losing by 10 points during a league game. "We were just sluggish, struggling. I told Marty, 'We should press 'em,'" said Archer. "Just to get something going."

O'Brien was dismissive of the suggestion, saying they hadn't practiced a press defense in two weeks.

Archer remained insistent. Visibly irked, O'Brien handed over his diagram clipboard with the curt instruction, "Fine, but you gotta draw it up."

O'Brien then stood aside as the Tigers huddled around Archer. They responded with an uptempo effort and went on to win the game. Johnson, the freshman coach, was on hand during that particular discussion.

"They were talking on the bench, back and forth," recalled Johnson. "But Gary, he could be so adamant when he thought it would make a difference. And Marty would change."

ON ART, AND ANOTHER HALL OF FAME

Along with his contributions in the classroom, on the hardwood and the diamond, Archer has long been recognized for his artistic talents.

"I like to draw and paint. It's something I can do, and something I've really liked," he said, adding, "Is that a curse, or a blessing?"

For years, he designed every uniform for the baseball and basketball programs, along with T-shirts for TBI camps, summer tournaments, the Ephrata Canal Caper fun run, programs and brochures, and more.

Many of the commercial outfield signs at Johnson-O'Brien Stadium are Archer's handiwork. He provided illustrations for two books published by former men's collegiate basketball coach George Raveling. Archer designed a unique "Ephrata Tiger" graphic that remains an official school logo.

A few years ago, he was commissioned by 1973 EHS grad Dave Canfield to paint signs for a resort renovation in Mexico, travel expenses included.

"That was a pretty good couple of weeks, getting paid to sit with an easel on the beach," Archer smiled.

"Gary has a talent for art and design," wrote Devin O'Brien. "He did this all ... before you could just Photoshop things together on the internet."

And now, another Hall of Fame induction is coming up, and probably the most special for Archer.

"The Ephrata one means more. I think, because it's my home town," he said, believing the recognition also reflects well on the community and kids through the years.

In various vignettes, Archer looked back at the roller-coaster coaching rides which led to so many playoff contests and championship titles, then shook his head at the memories.

"All those games ... unbelievable. Incredible," he said.

Made possible, in many ways, by one man's assistance.