

# Mary Beth Nelson: former Tiger an artist, on and off the court

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EPHRATA — A lot of changes happen to kids during the middle school years. For Mary Beth Nelson, a growth spurt in seventh grade shaped the future of her life.



By the time she graduated from Ephrata High School in 1986, Mary Beth (now Fletcher) had gone from gangly to dominating as one of top prep basketball post players in Washington state.

Her accomplishments, both individually and as a consummate team player for the Lady Tigers, will be recognized Saturday during her induction in the EHS Athletic Hall of Fame.

Now 53, Mary Beth is an art teacher for the Pomona Unified School District, located east of Los Angeles, working in two middle school campuses.

She is looking forward to returning to Ephrata for the ceremony and a chance to visit friends and family, including her mother, Grace Nelson, and former coach Don King.

"I'm a little bit shy about it," Mary Beth said of the HOF honor. "But my mom is so excited, and Coach King is, too."

As a seventh grader, Mary Beth literally stood out in a crowd, sprouting quickly from 5-foot-7 to over 6 feet, towering above her classmates.

That got the attention of teacher/coach Van Morgan, who told Mary Beth that if she worked hard, she could get a paid college education playing basketball. As the eighth kid and youngest girl in a family of 10 siblings, that was a tantalizing possibility.

King, who headed the high school's basketball program, visited the middle school games to check on future prospects. He reiterated Morgan's comments about basketball and college.

"They recruited me," said Mary Beth, "and, honestly, I was horrible."

"My body was so new, and I was so awkward. But I went to practice, and Mr. King recommended some summer camps," she said.

When she arrived as a high school freshman, King put her on the varsity, along with another ninth-grader, point guard Becky Wiersma. By season's end, both were starters and formed the nucleus of a ballclub that eventually became a force in the Caribou Trail League and the Class A basketball ranks across the state.

During that freshman year, King's Lady Tigers compiled a 19-8 record and finished eighth in the state tournament. They improved to 23-4 and a fourth-place state finish the next year.

Nelson and Wiersma then led Ephrata to back-to-back 26-1 seasons during their junior and senior years, with fourth- and second-place finishes at state. Their only loss in 1986 came in the championship game against the Foster Bulldogs, also a tough and talented ballclub from Tukwila who prevailed, 51-38.

As a lean 6-foot-3 senior, Nelson was the team's leading scorer and rebounder, averaging 20 points and 15 boards a game. She set school records for most points in a season and a career, along with best field-goal shooting percentage, and most rebounds and blocked shots in a game, season, and career.

A two-time rebound leader in the state tournament, Nelson made "unbelievable progress from a freshman to a senior," King said at the end of the 1985-86 season.

Mary Beth "can play against anybody. Bar none, from triple-A schools on down, she's proved she's one of the best post players in the state," said King.

Nelson and Wiersma (now Packard) — who was inducted into the EHS Hall of Fame in 2019 — were co-captains, perennial all-leaguers, state all-tournament selections, and together played on the inaugural All-State East-West game, which featured players from school divisions in Washington.

Joined later by fellow seniors Tracy Allen, Tammie Chamberlain, and Jeanie Allan, they led the Lady Tigers to two consecutive Caribou Trail League championships and four straight district championships.

Collectively, they keyed a fastbreak offense that literally ran past nearly all opponents. While it may have bored some fans, King loved it. "I never had to worry about a close game," he said at the time. "I never got any grey hairs."

Earlier this week, Packard described Mary Beth as "crazy fun and so often a crack-up, but also serious and so competitive."

"She could battle with the very best of the bigs in the state. She worked so hard posting up... collecting massive amounts of rebounds. She was also amazing at that quick outlet which led to many fast breaks and layups," said Packard, who now lives in Brentwood, California.

Mary Beth, in turn, called the Tiger point guard "an incredible player. Becky was so quick and so intuitive. She saw everything on the court. She made the team."

While in high school, Mary Beth also played volleyball for two years, but gave that up — "too much diving on the floor" — and turned out for track, throwing the shot put and qualifying for the state meet her senior year. In comparison to basketball, track "was so laid back."

Following graduation, Mary Beth had "a lot of offers" from

colleges across the country to play basketball. But she wanted to go to California and accepted a full-ride scholarship from Biola University, a private Christian school near Los Angeles. It was a Division III school, which appealed to her.

"Division I schools — there are some big girls at that level, really physical, and I was petite," she said. "Division III is a lot more chill, and there's not so much travel."

She played for three years, then left the program and focused on her studies. The coach, she said, "was the opposite of Don King."

"It was not joyful. At that point, it wasn't worth it. It was a lot easier my senior year (without basketball); it opened the door to more classes."

She had achieved her goal: college was paid for, and she got to study art. She went on to earn a master's degree in fine art from Claremont Graduate School.

Mary Beth spent 15 years teaching in the district in various capacities and grade levels, primarily art classes, but also as a reading specialist in primary grades 1-3. That is meaningful because she is dyslexic and can personally identify with kids who have difficulty interpreting words, letters, and other symbols.

"Writing was hard for me. In high school, higher level math, writing, Spanish — they were brutal for me," she said, adding with a laugh, "I took a lot of P.E. and art classes in high school."

Mary Beth returned to the Pomona school district in January after a 10-year break during which she and best friend Jen Rosen started their own private educational services program specializing in reading and math instruction.

Leaving the steady pay and job security of teaching in a public school to become self-employed was a scary step, she admitted. "But I learned so much in the process, and I can bring that back into (the public school) program."

Outside of school, Mary Beth loves hiking, gardening, and travel. She is involved in initiatives to plant fruit trees in low-income areas around Los Angeles.

"I have 200 trees growing in my backyard. I have a really big backyard, but they're small trees," she said.

Divorced, Mary Beth has a 33-year-old stepdaughter whom she calls "a delight," and Om, a "super chill and cool" mixed-breed dog she rescued from an animal shelter.

Along with Rosen, she started the Claremont Blessing Box, which acts as a conduit to provide food, clothing, toiletries, and other essentials to the homeless.

In her travels, she has roamed around the world, from Africa to



Tiger post Mary Beth Nelson (41) challenging Mt. Baker's Susan Anderson during their matchup in the 1985 state Class A girls basketball tournament. Watching the action were Nelson's teammates, Becky Wiersma and Tracy Allen. Ephrata won the contest, 65-59, for a fourth-place state finish. Anderson was a high school All-American and the tournament's all-time leading scorer while Nelson was the tourney's leading rebounder and a top defender. After playing college basketball at Biola University in the late 1980s, Mary Beth (Nelson) Fletcher continues to live in southern California with her "super chill" rescue dog, Om (below), while working as an art teacher.



Central America to China. She has stayed at an ashram — a monastic community — in India.

Mary Beth is something of a spiritual sojourner: art and meditation are vital components in her life, and she looks forward to more world travel and introspection when she fully retires.

But she is also looking forward to returning here this weekend and reliving old hoop memories.

"I loved playing in Ephrata," said Mary Beth. "I loved Coach King. He pushed us really hard. He was focused and driven, but he really made it family. He really understood how to run a team."