

Some Of The Best

Nine Honorees Take Their Places Among Area's Greats

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LAKESWOOD - Alex Conti's wrestling resume places him among the most decorated athletes/coaches in the area, courtesy of a career that began in Fredonia and took him to opportunities around the world.

But as he stepped to the podium to accept his induction into the Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame on Monday night the man who has coached at the highest levels of the sport, chose to give thanks.

"I learned at a very early age to surround yourself with the best people you can find," he said to a crowd of more than 420 people. "That's all I've ever done."



The Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame held its 35th annual induction dinner at the Lakewood Rod & Gun Club on Monday night. Above is the Class of 2016. Seated, from the left, are John Crawford, accepting for Sarah Schuster Morrison; Alex Conti; Julie Gawronski Tickle; Barb and Gary Lefford, accepting for the late Heather Lefford Edborg; and Don Grosset Jr. and Davis Robinson, grandsons of the late Parke Hill Davis. Standing, from the left, are Trevor Hitchcock, accepting for Jim Ulrich; Robert "Doc" Rappole; Bill Olson and Terri Walsh, accepting for the late Clarence "Flash" Olson; and Dan Hoard. P-J photo by Scott Kindberg

Conti, a U.S. Women's World Team coach and part of the American coaching staff for the 2012 Olympic Games in London, might have been describing the 35th annual banquet at the Lakewood Rod & Gun Club.

The event honored nine new inductees and featured an inspiring message from Don Beebe, a beloved member of the Buffalo Bills during their runs to four Super Bowls in the 1990s. Also enshrined, bringing the total of inductees since 1982 to 172, were the late Parke Hill Davis; the late Clarence

"Flash" Olson; the late Heather Lefford Edborg; Jim Ulrich; Sarah Schuster Morrison; Julie Gawronski Tickle; Dan Hoard; and Robert "Doc" Rappole.

"It's great to train hard to be a great athlete," Conti said, "but it's more important to train hard to be a good person."

There were plenty of folks in attendance with both of those qualities last night, beginning with Beebe, who was the first person to play for six Super Bowl teams, including four with the Bills.

"I never should have been in the NFL," he said, "but I had a gift that I could run. It was instilled in me by my coaches and my dad to never give up."

Completely out of football for three years, Beebe hung aluminum siding on houses until he was asked to play at tiny NAIA Chadron State College in western Nebraska. Putting his faith as his top priority, he made the incredible journey from being a contractor to becoming a valued wide receiver for two Hall-of-Fame quarterbacks, Jim Kelly and Green Bay's Brett Favre. It was with Favre and the Packers that Beebe finally won a Super Bowl in 1997.

But the Sugar Grove, Illinois resident will likely be most remembered for his play in the Bills' Super Bowl XXVII loss to Dallas at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California.

"An hour before the game, I kneeled at the 50-yard line and prayed, 'Lord, let me glorify your name, not mine,'" Beebe said. "I felt so good. I thought I was going to score the winning touchdown, but God gave me the 'Leon Lett play.'"

With the Bills trailing big late in the game, quarterback Frank Reich fumbled and the ball was scooped up by Lett, the Cowboys defensive lineman, who appeared destined for the end zone and yet another Dallas touchdown. As he got to about the 8-yard line, he began to showboat, extending the ball out with his left hand.

Trailing the play, Beebe caught Lett just before he reached the goal line - "Giving up was never an option in my life," he said - and forced a fumble after a length-of-the-field chase. The effort earned Beebe ESPN's first-ever ESPY Award for "NFL Play of the Year" in 1993. It was also voted one of the top 10 most remembered NFL plays of all-time.

"If I would have made (a touchdown catch)," Beebe said, "I don't think it would have near the impact that the Leon Lett play had."

When the game was over, Beebe was approached in the locker room by Bills' owner Ralph Wilson.

"Son," he said, "you showed me what Western New York and the Buffalo Bills are all about."

Nearly 25 years later, Beebe said it was an "absolute joy" to come back to Western New York and if he could go back in time, it would be to the 716 area code.

"There was no better place than the 1990s and the Buffalo Bills," he said.

The rest of the evening was meant to honor the rest of the inductees.

Following are a few excerpts from each of their presentations.

Davis: Davis Robinson and Don Grosset Jr. accepted for their grandfather, who was known as the "grandfather of football statistics," including authoring "Football, The American Intercollegiate Game," which was the definitive book the history of college football (1869-1910).

Grosset reviewed his grandfather's accomplishments, both as an author, football historian, coach and lawyer, who had connections to Woodrow Wilson and Calvin Coolidge. Both would become president of the United States.

Olson: Bill Olson and Terri Walsh accepted for their father, who was known affectionately as "Mr. Southwestern" for his impact as a physical education teacher and coach at the school.

"Dad's life was coaching," Walsh said, "and it was a gift to all who are here tonight."

Bill Olson recalled his dad's keys to success: "First to arrive, last to leave and work harder than anyone in between."

Olson also recalled how his father incorporated pride, sacrifice and courage into his daily life.

"He didn't say those words, he lived them everyday," he said. "He treated everyone with respect and dignity."

Lefford Edborg: Gary and Barb Lefford accepted for their daughter, a talented softball player at Falconer Central School, Erie Community College and Ashland University.

Gary Lefford recounted his daughter's accomplishments on the diamond, including the time she was affectionately called "Hoover" by a pair of U.S. Olympians who were playing Heather's Buffalo-based touring team.

The reason for the nickname?

They couldn't hit anything by her.

"I feel the (Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame) should be used as an incentive for our young people," Gary Lefford said. "They, too, could be (Hall-of-Famers) one day."

Ulrich: Trevor Hitchcock, a former Fredonia State All-American track and field athlete, accepted for his coach.

"In every situation he always gave all of himself, because there was never any other option," Hitchcock said. "He pushed and encouraged us to be the best we could be."

Ulrich, who coached the Blue Devils from 1974-1998, produced 68 All-Americans, five national champions and 27 New York State Collegiate Track and Field Conference men's championships and 35 SUNY championships.

Schuster Morrison: John Crawford, the former Fredonia Central School swim coach, accepted for his record-setting diver, who earned all-state honors in high school and was an All-American at the University of Miami.

Crawford recalled how he received an unexpected knock on the door one day from Mike Tramuta, who was touting the diving talents of Schuster Morrison when she was still in junior-high school.

"(Tramuta) said, 'You're coming with me. I have an eighth-grade diver at Fredonia High School,'" Crawford said. "And so, the relationship began."

The rest is history.

Gawronski Tickle: A decorated softball and soccer player, Gawronski played both sports at the highest levels during her years growing up in Dunkirk and finally at Union College where she is regarded as one of the finest student-athletes in school history.

A resident of Encinitas, California, Gawronski Tickle has worked for the United States Olympic Committee and currently employed by Advanced Biologics as a sales and marketing project manager in Carlsbad, California.

Gawronski Tickle credited her parents for helping her reach her goals.

"My dad only missed one game in my college career," she said. "That's 223 games you got through."

That's dedication."

Hoard: The radio voice of the Cincinnati Bengals and the Cincinnati Bearcats football and basketball teams, Hoard has also made stops in Syracuse and Pawtucket, Rhode Island during a career that spans three decades. It was capped last year when he was named the Ohio Sportscaster of the Year by a group of his peers.

In a humorous talk, Hoard poked fun at his athletic prowess, for following teams that have yet to win a championship and for his on-air gaffes during his first professional radio broadcast for the Syracuse minor league baseball team.

As he wrapped up his talk, Hoard grew serious.

"We are all a product of how we were raised and I'm so lucky to be from Chautauqua County," he said. "No matter where my travels take me, this will always be home."

Rappole: A wildly successful cross country coach at Maple Grove Junior-Senior High School, Rappole has also made his mark nationally in age-group races he has entered over the years, including becoming a two-time Masters national champion in 2015.

"I ran with the kids, loved the kids and I had great captains," Rappole said. "The captains would get the younger kids to show up and start running, and they just kept getting better and better.

"It had little to do with my coaching."

The host of family and current and former runners in attendance would no doubt disagree with that assessment.

Before Rappole left the podium, he turned to Beebe and offered some parting words.

"I know you won your ring in Green Bay," he said, "but you won our hearts here (when you were) in Buffalo."