

By Scott Kindberg
The Post-Journal
April 4, 2004

Lewellen's Legacy Lives On

Family, Ex-Players Talk About Ailing Coach's Influence

Mel Lewellen had already singled once during one of his at-bats in a recent 70-and-over softball game near his Venice, Fla. home.

But ever the competitor, the 80 year old wanted more.

So when he hit a high bouncer in the infield a few innings later, he took off for first base, just like he'd done thousands of times during thousands of games over the past-quarter century.

"He lunged to first to beat the throw," said Scott Lewellen, Mel's oldest son, "and he ended up falling face first."

Before you knew it, Mel's teammates rushed over to help him up and brush him off.

"He was out," said Scott Lewellen, a teacher and varsity baseball coach at Maple Grove Junior-Senior High School, "but he gave it the old college try."

Mel came back two days later and played again, as always. But this time he could only go two innings.

"This week, he decided not to play," Scott Lewellen said. "That tells me a lot."

What it means is that the legendary former basketball coach who posted a 387-152 record during his 28-year career at the old Bemus Point High School and later at Maple Grove, is facing his toughest opponent yet, pancreatic cancer, diagnosed shortly after Mel's birthday, has the lead and he can't stop the clock.

Since the first of the year, he's lost 45 to 50 pounds and, although his weight has held steady this week, he has little appetite and has even voluntarily surrendered his car keys and his driving privileges.

"The doctors are hesitant to put a timetable on it," Scott Lewellen said. "Generally, it's weeks to months, whatever that means... These diseases are pretty insidious."

As word has spread locally about Mel's condition, a few of his former

players, some of whom he coached in several sports have shared their high school days with their mentor.

John Woodfield, one of seven Woodfield brothers to play for Mel, was a guard on the 1975-76 Section 6 championship team that finished 22-1, the first Chautauqua County school in the modern era to win that many games in a season. "He always knew what to tell you in the clutch," Woodfield said. "When we were nervous he knew what to say to settle you down. He really knew the game.

Mark Sleggs, a senior forward on that team, concurred. "He probably learned more from his losses than probably from his wins," said Sleggs, now a math teacher at Southwestern Central School.

Sleggs recalled how Mel, still smarting from a 63-49 loss to Portville in the sectional semifinals in 1975 came back at the start of the 1975-76 campaign and told the team that the Red Dragons, led by John Hillenbrand, would not trail in any game that season.

He was nearly correct.

While outscoring their opponents by a nearly 2-to-1 ratio the Red Dragons were 18-0 during the regular season; blitzed through the playoffs, including a 46-32 win over Portville - revenge? - in the sectional title game and defeated Bennett in the super-sectional opener, 72-63. Their only loss came in the super-sectional finals when Niagara Falls prevailed, 50-40.

"He was somebody you had a lot of respect for," Sleggs said. "You wanted to do well for him and you wanted the team to do well for him."

Bob Gustafson, Bemus Point Class of '65, played three years of basketball and four years of baseball for Mel. In his senior year, Gustafson's teams didn't lose a game in either sport en route to an amazing 31-0 record.

"What I got out of it most and what I try to do with my coaching (in track, basketball and football) is teach the team concept," Gustafson said. "What can you offer to a team? That was just as important (to Mel) as the big star."

As much as Mel taught the nuances of the games he coached, he also taught his players life lessons.

"There's nothing wrong with being competitive, but at the same time, there are other measures of a man," Sleggs said. "The public did not see those (with Mel). Some of us did. I would say those are going to be the things that those of us who played for him are going to remember."

Long before the age of political correctness, Mel didn't mince any words.

"He wasn't afraid to speak his mind," Sleggs said. "He didn't care if he was wrong, he was going to say what he felt.

The differences in Mel's public and private persona may have been the result of how he grew up.

One of three children born into a missionary family, Mel spent the first eight year of his life in India before he moved to the United States. But by the time he was 16, he grew tired of the constant moving, left home with his parent's blessing and enrolled at Houghton High School with the provision that he eventually attend Houghton College.

"That was the deal he made (with his parents)," Scott Lewellen said.

Mel's initial college experience didn't last long, however. He chose, instead, to enlist in the U.S. Navy in 1942 when he was 18. Upon completion of his Naval obligation, which included service in the Pacific Theater, Mel returned to Houghton four years later to finish his bachelor's degree. He ultimately received his master's degree in health and physical education from the University of Kentucky where he learned basketball from Hall of Fame Coach Adolph Rupp.

"He's a Kentucky fan, blue and blue," Scott Lewellen said. "He lives and dies with Kentucky basketball still."

Mel arrived in Bemus Point in 1951 and remained there until his retirement in 1979. During that span, he won four Section 6 championships and had three undefeated seasons.

Wendy Lewellen, Mel's daughter and a cheerleader in her high school years, literally grew up watching her dad coach.

"I think he's kind of an example of a coach that wants to win," she said. "And if you want to be successful, you have to be a little bit obsessive. I think that kind of describes him. It was the primary focus of his life. I don't think you can dabble in being a (successful) coach.

That kind of success earned Mel, who also coached other high school sports, induction into the Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame in 1998.

"It does make you reflect," Scott Lewellen said of his father's accomplishments. "That's what we're trying to get him to do."

One memory that surely tops Mel's list is the dinner held in his honor in 1995 by 70 former players and managers.

"It was nice to see the impact he had when we had that reunion," Gustafson said. "It was a huge turnout, a reunion of the quality of athletes (the school) has had and he was a big part of that."

To commemorate Mel's 80th birthday in February, a number of friends and family sent cards and letters to his Florida home, a drive spearheaded by Wendy.

On the card he sent, Sleggs described how his former coach had lived the "four L's of life."

He lived, he loved, he learned and he's left a legacy," Sleggs said. "I think he's left a legacy with his family, he's left a legacy with the students and the players he's coached, and I think, even down in Florida, he's left a legacy with his friends and people he's known. You look at the man's life and he's done all four things."

Scott Lewellen, his brother, Dave and Wendy take turns calling Mel during the week. Scott will visit his father during spring break next week.

"As it gets closer, anyone would start to reflect (and ask) 'What haven't I said that I should say?'" Scott asked rhetorically.

Maybe Sleggs, who has coached varsity boys basketball and girls soccer at Southwestern and varsity boys basketball at Panama put it best.

"The test of time for somebody like (Mel) is if you look at the doctors, the successful businessmen, the people that went into education maybe because of him," he said. "He's got quite a legacy in terms of the people who have played for him. That, to me, is the true measure of the man. The wins and losses and sectional titles are really nice, but with somebody like Mel, it really goes beyond that."

Scott, Wendy and Dave Lewellen are proud of their father's accomplishments, past and present.

Wendy recalled how Tara VanDerveer, now the coach of the Stanford women's basketball team, would ask Mel basketball questions when she spent her summers at Chautauqua Institution.

"She used to ask him everything he knew about basketball," Wendy said. "She has actually given him credit. I kind of like to think he contributed to her knowledge of basketball."

Scott, meanwhile, has talked of his dad's love for softball and the many leagues he's played in since moving to Florida upon his retirement.

Because Mel's season typically ran from October to the end of March, it has been difficult for Scott, a teacher for 30 years, to see his dad in action. Mel's softball schedule and Scott's school vacations have rarely coincided.

"I did see him play one game way back," Scott said. "He had the game-winning RBI with a triple in the bottom of the seventh inning. He was the hero of the game."

Then Scott couldn't resist giving his dad a little good-natured dig.

"He asked me after the game, 'What did you think about that?'" Scott recalled. "I said, 'Well, Dad, if you could lose 30 pounds it might have been a homerun.'"

The thing that Scott maybe didn't realize then, but most assuredly does now, is that his father had figuratively "touched them all" years before.

Just ask Mel's former players from a high school near the shores of Chautauqua Lake.