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Keeping Hoop Dreams Alive In Sherman Community, School Support Swanson as Dual Coach

SHERMAN – Virginia TenHagen was worried.

As the secretary to the principal of Sherman Central School, Mrs. TenHagen deals with students, teachers and administrators on a regular basis.

She gets to know them, talks with them about what's going on in their lives, shows concern for them.

"I mother everyone," she said.

One day not too long ago, Mel Swanson, a fifth-grade teacher, stopped by the office. TenHagen knew that Swanson's life – at least until the end of February – was as hectic as anyone's in the school.

"She asks me every day if I'm taking my vitamins," Swanson said. "She even bought some for my wife."

Mel and Mary Swanson can use them.

It's high school basketball season, and Mel, in addition to his responsibilities to his fifth-grade students, has traditions to carry on on the court, practices to run, games to coach.

And the memory of Frank Wasylink – the longtime boys coach, who died last fall – to uphold.

That's the way it has to be at Sherman, a community that loves its basketball.

"When Frank died, it was such a surprise," Mary Swanson said. "Then it hit us that there was going to have to be someone to fill those big shoes. It became obvious that there wasn't going to be anybody. ... Mel was concerned that the program continuity wouldn't be the same."

So Swanson, who has coached girls' basketball for 19 years, was asked by the school board to take the reins of the boys' team as well.

“This is not a permanent appointment,” school board president Herbert Rice said. “It’s to help us get through the transition period. ... The boys deserved a talented and experienced coach ... and he has the coaching credentials. ... We felt it was best to stay within the school and we felt it would lend more continuity to the program.”

Rice, whose daughter, Emily, plays for Swanson, stressed that the latter’s teaching was the highest priority. To that that end, the board granted Swanson an assistant varsity coach, Tim Hogenboom, who played for Wasylink in the mid-1980s.

Doug Neal and Geary TeWinkle, longtime coaches at Sherman, are also helping Swanson with the rigors of running two teams.

“I knew Mr. Wasylink and I had done basketball together for a long time, and I really wanted to help out with the situation we were in, and offer whatever experience I had to try and continue a program that he spent so much time building,” Swanson said.

Wasylink’s Legacy

Not unlike other rural schools in Chautauqua County, Sherman lives and breathes its high school sports. In this case, the residents of the village have a special love for basketball.

On most basketball nights, the gym – with bleachers only on one side – are jammed with fans.

It’s almost like a social event,” high school principal Jim Roraback said. “This is part of tradition. It goes family to family, sibling to sibling, from one generation to the next. I think it’s part of the social fabric.”

Added senior Patrick “Pete” Swanson, a guard on the boys’ team and Mel and Mary’s middle son: “You get out there and it’s like you can just feel everybody wanting to win. ... The people are out there sitting on top of each other. I wouldn’t trade it for anything. You can’t get that from any other sport.

Credit for that goes to Wasylink, who record 434 wins in 33 years before his untimely death last fall. Through his efforts, basketball wasn’t only a sport, it was a lesson in life, an opportunity to demonstrate unselfishness and teamwork. The Sherman farming community embraced such traits.

“He didn’t care about points,” said junior point guard Chris Ottaway. “It was the hustle he always cared about. He didn’t talk about individual players. It was always the team. When you’re out there now, you can always remember the little things he said.”

Justin Henning, another junior, remembers Wasylink counseling him last year.

“I had a bad temper,” Henning admitted. “I would get mad and wouldn’t play as well. He helped me keep my head ... and to think about the game.”

Not coincidentally, girls' basketball blossomed under Swanson's tutelage, giving the Wildcats a formidable one-two punch.

I think it's just we have a lot good athletes and we all like to work hard toward our goals," said junior forward Lesley Swanson, who is Mel and Mary's only daughter. "We know we have to work hard. ... We have a goal to shoot for."

And the memory of Wasylink is not far away for either team.

"One of the main goals for the guys is to play for Frank," Lesley Swanson said. "I had him in softball for a couple of years and he had some influence on me. He always told me to reach out for my goals. He's been a really good friend of our family. It's weird without him, but we have to move on a little bit, but we're thinking about him all the time."

Noted senior Charity Cole, a varsity player since the eighth grade: "This year is most memorable because of everything that has happened."

Community Support

Wasylink and Swanson haven't done it with mirrors.

The fact is, outside of the school in general, and the gym in particular, there isn't much for the youngsters to do in Sherman.

"There's no youth center, no bowling alley, no movie theaters, no shopping areas," said Swanson, who lives about a quarter-mile from the school. "The gym is the focal point of activities for our community people."

For that reason, kids and adults can be found virtually every night of the week using the facility, which can be reserved simply by calling the school or anyone who happens to have a key.

"I think the people in this town realize the special feeling they have for our school and they treat it with respect, Roraback said. "It goes back to the community thing. The school is an intricate part of society fabric here."

Added Swanson: "I think you'll find there aren't many schools that would allow that to happen."

In fact, it's not unusual for the three churches in the village to sign the gym out for youth-group gatherings.

"The only complaints we have is maybe, 'When can we get the gym open again?'" Swanson said. "We're now in the middle of a building program, and we're adding a new library, new music rooms and a new small gym, which will allow more activity for our community people."

“Coaches love to see you put forth the extra time,” Cole said. “It’s not so much that there’s not so much to do as it is the kids and the community support it and love to play it.”

That’s why kids like Henning first showed up at the gym when he was in third grade, watching the likes of then-star Rich Crane.

“When they did good (in 1986), I wondered if we’d ever do that good.”

Juggling A Full Schedule

Swanson is up to his eyeballs in basketball, while juggling the responsibilities of being a husband, father and teacher.

“It’s amazing because it seems it’s better than it’s ever been,” said Mary Swanson, who just completed work on her master’s degree in special education at Edinboro. “There’s a commitment that Mel and I made when he and I decided that it would be something he would do. ... With all the support he’s gotten from friends, it’s really gone smoothly.”

Still, Swanson’s schedule is mind- and body-numbing.

“He’s doing a good job,” Emily Rice said. “Every once in a while he’ll need to sit down (at practice) after being on his feet for five hours.”

Following is a typical day:

6:30 a.m.: Wakes up, gets coffee for his wife, does the morning dishes, makes 9-year-old son Ryan’s lunch, watches the morning news on TV and then heads to school.

8 a.m.: Arrives at school.

8:15 a.m.: School day begins. Teaches fifth-graders for seven hours.

3:15 p.m. School ends, but Swanson’s day is only half over. Back-to-back two-hour practices – one for the boys and one for the girls. And that’s on the days when there are no games.

On game days, usually Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday nights, the schedule is even more hectic.

If it’s a home game, Swanson will practice from 3: 15-5 p.m., run home for dinner and return to school during the early portion of the junior varsity game. If it’s a road game, it’s on the bus after practice.

Typically, Swanson’s day is 13 to 14 hours long.

“When basketball is going on, we catch dinner when we can,” he said. “When basketball is going on, there is not a lot of time for much else.”

Added daughter Lesley: "It's different in some ways, but we have to do more (at home) to help out."

Call it a home-court assist.

"Without them being so supportive there would be no way I could personally do that," Swanson said. "There's an endless number of people that have contributed. I'm on the prayer list at the Catholic, Baptist and Community churches. But it's not just me, but the basketball program and the kids."

What Lies Ahead

Swanson said he'll probably coach both teams at least through next season and make a decision then about his future.

But that's a long way away. Right now, he's focusing on making both teams as good as they can be this season.

"I hope we are able to realize we had a season where we played as competitively as we could, that night-in and night-out everybody was giving 100 percent," Swanson said.

Frank would have liked that.

