

Region Lacrosse Teams Honor Ailing Coach

Area lacrosse teams to honor lacrosse pioneer Dennis Stewart of Lake Braddock.

BY REED S. ALBERS
THE CONNECTION

For Lake Braddock senior defender Steven Puffenbarger, lacrosse practice is missing a familiar sound: the booming voice of assistant coach Dennis Stewart.

"He yelled at me throughout freshman and sophomore year, he never said anything good to me," Puffenbarger said.

Puffenbarger used to take Dennis' criticisms hard, wondering why he was the source of his ire.

During his sophomore and junior seasons, Puffenbarger finally realized why he had been getting an earful.

"I thought he hated me," he said. "He really just wanted me to be the best that I could."

Stewart, 50, was set to begin his fifth season at Lake Braddock, but on Sept. 25, 2009 he had a massive stroke, putting his coaching days on hold.

"Coach Stewart has been a big part of the Lake Braddock program," Puffenbarger said. "To not have him around is a big change."

Stewart's brother, Peter, said the stroke affected his brother's brain stem and he's lucky he survived. He cited statistics that show 95 percent of patients who suffer a stroke of this severity die within three weeks.

The rehabilitation process has been long and arduous, but has yielded some results. Peter Stewart said his brother is learning to communicate with sign language and "has been wowing doctors" for the past month and a half.

"They didn't think that he would be able to have any cognitive thought," Peter Stewart said. "He's doing fantastic and he's been going through rigorous physical and speech therapy daily."

Stewart's struggle has played on the minds of Lake Braddock's players and coaches since September.

The team has dedicated its 2010 season to Stewart and will wear stickers, featuring a lacrosse player and Stewart's initials, on their helmets, said head lacrosse coach Steve Price.

When others in the tight-knit Northern Virginia lacrosse community found out about the stickers, the movement spread.

"The whole Northern Region decided that they were going to wear the stickers," Price said. "A

To Help

More information about the Finish Hard Foundation can be found on the soon to be launched Web site www.finishhardfoundation.org.

few other schools out of state and colleges will, too."

Lake Braddock's cross-town rival West Springfield is one of the teams that jumped at the sticker idea.

"We're definitely planning on wearing them," West Springfield head lacrosse coach Scott Settar said. "Dennis is close to our neighborhood and is a friend of our program."

College players at Ohio State University and Denison University, programs where Stewart once coached, also will don the



COURTESY PHOTO

Dennis Stewart, middle, suffered a stroke on Sept. 25, 2009. Stewart has been a major player in the local lacrosse scene, holding various coaching jobs in the region.

stickers throughout the 2010 season.

The Stewart family has started the Finish Hard Foundation, named after a phrase Dennis Stewart repeatedly uttered during lacrosse practice. Peter Stewart said the foundation's goals are "to help Dennis when he gets out of the hospital, and to help raise stroke awareness."

Price isn't surprised by the outpouring of support for Stewart from the lacrosse community.

"He's well respected across all lacrosse programs," Price said. "When he walks into a room, everyone knows him."

Stewart's history with Northern Virginia lacrosse began in the 1970s when the sport took hold in this area.

Dennis Stewart was one of Price's first players when he formed the Lake Braddock lacrosse team in 1975. The midfielder played in the first lacrosse game between two Fairfax County public schools in 1977.

After high school, Stewart played at

Drexel University from 1978-79. He returned to Lake Braddock in 1983 where he spent three seasons as an assistant coach.

Stewart coached Bishop Ireton's lacrosse team from 1987 to 1993, but left for the college coaching ranks. He was an assistant coach at Denison University in Granville, Ohio, from 1994 to 2001. In 2002, he joined Ohio State University's lacrosse staff and stayed there until 2005.

Stewart returned home to help his brothers Peter and Patrick form a local youth lacrosse organization, TripleEDGE lacrosse, and take on a role as assistant coach at Lake Braddock.

Peter Stewart said he's not sure when, or if, Dennis will return to coaching, but the family is optimistic he'll encourage kids to "finish hard" soon.

"It's hard to say right now if he'll coach again," Peter said. "But eventually, yeah, he'll be back, that's the way we see it."

"We've dedicated the season to him."

— Steve Price

Football Hall of Fame Ceremony

The Fairfax County Football Hall of Fame will be honoring three new inductees on March 14, at 4 p.m., at the McLean Hilton Hotel

The 2010 class includes Dallas Cowboys tight end and former Vienna Youth player Jason Witten, Nick Hilgert of Robinson Secondary and Richard Herman of Fort Belvoir Youth Sports. Awards for high school and youth football players from the area will be handed out as well. To learn more, e-mail bpowe1@aol.com or call 703-273-3216.

Golf Tournament Registration

Western Fairfax Christian Ministries (WFCM) will be conducting its Annual Golf Tournament at Chantilly National Golf Course on Monday, April 19 at 11 a.m. Corporations, foundations, business owners, community groups and individuals are invited to participate in the community-sponsored golf event which will provide for the growing number of neighbors in need in Western Fairfax County. The event will include prizes and great food. The registration fee is \$175 per player. The fee will cover

carts, range balls, lunch and dinner.

To participate, register at wfcma.org/events.php or contact Jen Adkins, WFCM business manager, via e-mail at admin@wfcma.org. For more information, contact Dan Whitaker, Golf Committee chair, via phone at 571-201-4091.

Submit Youth Sports Headlines

The local youth winter sports seasons are ending and the Connection doesn't want any child's accomplishments to go unnoticed.

In order to have youth sports items

printed or posted on the Web, send news to sports editor Reed S. Albers at ralbers@connectionnewspapers.com.

Synchronized Swimming Clinics

The Northern Virginia Nereids Synchronized Swimming Club will host its fifth annual introductory clinic on Saturday, March 20, at Audrey Moore RECenter in Annandale. Nereids coaches and athletes will introduce girls aged 7-15 to the graceful, powerful Olympic sport of synchronized swimming. For details, visit <http://nvnsynchro.com>.

WEEK IN SPORTS