

He taught life and sports

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In a high school coaching career that spanned 26 years in St. Catharines, Jim Harrison was guided by a few simple principles.

"If your teams were prepared, they could do no evil," said the 2010 inductee into the St. Catharines Sports Hall of Fame. "I was going to make sure my teams were well-prepared and they knew they were well-prepared.

"If they lost, I felt I didn't prepare them or they lost to a better football team."

Harrison spent one year at Lakeport Secondary School, where he started the football program, before becoming the physical education department head at Sir Winston Churchill Secondary School in 1963. There, he coached basketball, football and track and field for 25 years until he retired in 1987. After retirement, the former captain of the Queen's University championship basketball team coached the special teams, running backs and quarterbacks at his alma mater for eight years.

The 77-year-old native of Thorold, who often coached Churchill teams no one else wanted, kept a bulletin from the Ontario Federation of School Athletic Associations on his desk during his entire career. To paraphrase, it stated: "Teach me for I want to learn, but teach me only what you know to be true. Otherwise, you will only confuse me."

He also stressed safe, high-quality equipment and uniforms that were the envy of other high schools.

"I got expensive uniforms and our kids were really well-dressed," he said. "The kids really loved it. They were going to want to put those uniforms on and they did.

"And they got good. We did our share of winning and people wanted to beat us. And I knew I was on the right track because kids kept coming out to practice."

Harrison was a strong proponent of KISS (Keep it simple stupid) and the philosophy to do no harm -- physically or mentally -- to his athletes.

"And if you're lucky, you might do a lot of good," he said.

Judging from the comments of past players, Harrison certainly did a lot of good on and off the field.

"He was a disciplinarian which, looking back on, was really good for the kids back then," said Brent Barker, who played for Harrison in the 1980s. "I don't think kids get that these days.

"You weren't in the army, but it was very regimented."

Harrison made his players be responsible and his co-captains were in charge of making sure players attended practice.

"You had to learn life lessons," Barker said. "He coached to win, but he was looking at the bigger picture trying to instill confidence and build character. I'm (in my) early 40s and when I look back at what he did for a lot of us, he molded us into what we wanted to become."

Harrison made you respect him.

"Whether you liked him or not, he made you look up to him," Barker said.

Dave Kerr, a lawyer at Chown Cairns who played for Harrison in the late 1960s and early 1970s, remembers one game from the junior team's undefeated season of 1969. After a 19-18 exhibition win over Ridley College, a 260- pound tackle stepped on a teammate's hand while getting on the bus.

"The fellow yelled out a certain word not permissible on our team. After the victory, coach had us do hills at Sir Winston and everyone knew why."

Kerr described playing for Harrison as a pleasure.

"He was an excellent coach, he was a very principled individual, honest and a no-fool-around coach who knew football from the inside to the outside and back to front. He was a student of the game."

Both Kerr and Barker fondly recall Harrison's desire to have his players look as well as they played.

"He made us proud to be Bulldogs. Our equipment was top-notch, all our helmets were painted gold and we had the best uniforms in those days," Kerr said.

Barker remembers going directly from football season to basketball season and playing in the consolation final of the Standard High School Basketball Tournament at St. Catharines Collegiate. Back then, all the players wore boxer shorts and they would hang out below their basketball shorts.

"We showed up at the Collegiate and he had white brief underwear with our numbers on them. He handed them out to the whole team and said: "These are what you wear under your basketball jerseys now." It was just one of those things he did because he didn't think we looked good"

Harrison is not sure why his coaching career was the complete opposite of brief.

"I often wonder that myself, but it's probably because I played so many sports myself and naturally fell into it." said the former senior baseball player in St. Catharines.

Today, Harrison lives in Vineland, a short drive from Twenty Valley Golf Course, where he golfs to an 18 handicap two or three times a week, weather permitting. He also does some impressive sketches.

He is honoured to be inducted into the St. Catharines Sports Hall of Fame.

"It's a shocking honour," he said. "I never even thought about it. I did a lot of work, but I never anticipated they would say thank you for it."

The thank you is well-deserved.

Today's story is the first in a series profiling this year's inductees into the St. Catharines Sports Hall of Fame. The induction ceremony will be held May 4 at 5:30 p.m. in the Starlight Room at Club Roma, prior to the sold-out fourth annual Niagara Peninsula Children's Centre Sports Celebrity Dinner. There is no charge for the induction ceremony and the public is welcome to attend.