

The highlights and lowlights of '09

YEAR IN REVIEW

Posted By BILL POTRE CZ

Another year has come and gone. It's amazing how time flies when you're working -- I'm mean, having fun. The sports department of a newspaper is often referred to as the playground of the newsroom and with good reason. Covering sports can be exhausting, infuriating, boring and annoying. But most of the time it's a blast and a job I wouldn't trade for any other at The Standard.

So, without further ado, here are some of my thoughts on 2009.

TEAM OF THE YEAR

There is no clear winner this year. The local junior hockey teams (Niagara IceDogs, St. Catharines Falcons and Thorold Blackhawks) don't even come close to qualifying. There were some notable performances at the high school level with Eden (boys volleyball), Governor Simcoe (boys soccer) and St. Francis (boys golf) all capturing OFSAA championships.

Deferring to sports editor Bernie Puchalski, our resident football expert, my nod goes to the Sir Winston Churchill Bulldogs who captured a championship with a dominating season, despite some well-publicized off -field distractions.

MALE ATHLETE OF THE YEAR

Mohammed Ahmed of the St. Catharines Collegiate easily outdistanced the field. Ahmed had a phenomenal season highlighted with a pair of medals at the OFSAA track and field championships and a gold medal and new record at the Pan Am junior championships. Ahmed, who is now attending the University of Wisconsin, placed 30th at an the NCAA championships and also captured the Canadian junior title at the national cross-country championships in Guelph.

FEMALE ATHLETE OF THE YEAR

Tonya Verbeek, who won a bronze medal at the world wrestling championships.

COACH OF THE YEAR

Tough to discount Albino Pereira, Eden's resident volleyball guru, who has led the Flyers to four straight OFSAA gold medals. Pereira is as dedicated as they come. It's no accident Eden has done so well in the sport under his guidance.

SPORTSPERSON OF THE YEAR

It's hard to think of anyone else but the late Dave Matthews, who acted as tournament chairman for the Canadian Tour Championship at the St. Catharines Golf and Country Club this summer while bravely battling cancer. Matthews died less than a week after the tournament, but his bravery and inspiration live on.

SHOOTING STARS

(Locally born athletes under the age of 20 who have great futures ahead of them.)

Riley Sheahan. The Denis Morris graduate and former member of the St, Catharines Falcons is off to a fine start in his NCAA career with the Notre Dame Fighting Irish. All indications are that the talented centre will be a first-round pick in the 2010 NHL draft. The sky is the limit for Sheahan, who has been compared to Rick Nash.

UNSUNG HEROES

Athletes get the glory, but there are so many volunteers behind the scenes in all sports. I'm particularly partial to the trainers and equipment people on hockey teams who work long, lonely hours and get so little in the way of recognition. Guys such as Tom Purcer and Larry DesLaurier with the St. Catharines Falcons and Aaron and dad Dan Rothwell with the Thorold Blackhawks. Well done, gentlemen!

TOP SPORTING EVENT OF 2009

Not to blow our own horn but it's tough to beat the finals of The Standard Boys High School Basketball Tournament. This year's final had a great angle with former tournament most valuable player Walt Szpilewski guiding the underdog Riley College Tigers to an exciting win over the St. Francis Phoenix. Way to go Walt!

BIGGEST SPORTS SURPRISE

The Niagara IceDogs advancing to the second round of the OHL playoffs after a so-so regular season. The IceDogs topped the Ottawa 67's in the first round thanks to great goaltending from Jeremy Smith and a whole lot of guts and determination. If ever a team over achieved, it was the 2008/09 IceDogs.

BIGGEST SPORTS DISAPPOINTMENT

The St. Catharines Falcons appeared to have all the makings of a Golden Horseshoe champion team. Things were looking so good there was even talk of the Falcons finally capturing that elusive Sutherland Cup. Instead, the Falcons were knocked off in the semifinals by the Niagara Falls Canucks. Running a close second was another quick exit from the playoffs by the St. Catharines Junior A Athletics lacrosse team. It's been a lean last few years for the A's.

MOST EXCITING SPORTS MOMENT OF 2009

The IceDogs' run in the playoffs; Ridley's win at The Standard Tournament.

GOOD IDEAS

The IceDogs hiring Randy Ladouceur as an assistant coach. The former NHL defenceman has done a fine job with the IceDogs and is as classy a guy as you'll ever want to meet. A job in the NHL surely awaits in the near future.

BAD IDEAS

The Niagara IceDogs drafting Lucas Lessio with their first pick in the OHL draft. Lessio, by all accounts, has the talent to be an impact player at the OHL level, but, for some reason, was hesitant to make a commitment to the IceDogs and is playing Tier II. The IceDogs finally admitted defeat and dealt his rights to the Oshawa Generals. This was one gamble that did not pay off. Running a close second are more interlocking games between the Golden Horseshoe, Western and Mid-Western Conferences of the Greater Ontario Junior Hockey League. There seems to be little to gain by having teams travel so far during the regular season. Why go through the expense? Just for variety? It's time to put an end to the interlock. It's simply not worth the time and expense and the numbers in the stands prove it.

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2010

The race for the Golden Horseshoe title is wide open. The St. Catharines Falcons, Thorold Blackhawks

and defending champion Stoney Creek Warriors all have legitimate chances to take home the crown. The semifinals should be as competitive as they have been in years.

FAVOURITE LIVE SPORTING EVENTS IN NIAGARA

The top level of competition in the area is the Ontario Hockey League. The IceDogs do a good job with their in-game presentation, but, please, start the mid-week games at 7 p.m. The games are long enough and the 7:30 start makes for a late night for all. It's amazing how much difference 30 minutes can make. Saturday games start at 7 p.m. and so should all others. On a personal note, watching my son Ryan play novice hockey is a treat, particularly when he scores, which he's done quite a bit this season. It was also a blast to coach him in senior rookie ball, where he quickly took to the sport and excelled as a lead-off hitter and second baseman. If I only had his speed!

BEST-KEPT SPORTING SECRET IN NIAGARA

For \$8, you can't beat junior B hockey. The level of play in the OHL is obviously better, but there's something very special about watching young players work their way up from the bottom.

WHY I LOVE MY JOB MOMENTS OF 2009

Any time you get paid to watch a sport, it's a bonus. I've tried to remember that every time I cover an event. After 25 years of going to the Thorold Arena, it can become a bit monotonous, but it sure beats working! It's also gratifying to follow players from the grass-roots level all the way up the NHL. Players such as Nathan Horton, Dwayne Roloson, Dan Paille, Matt Ellis and Zenon Konopka all got their starts in the Golden Horseshoe and all are more than willing to discuss it wherever I hook up with them.

It's also special to work with dedicated pros such as boss Bernie (by the way, Bern, about that time off), Gentleman Jim Wallace and the others who help us out in sports. We often spend more time with our fellow reporters and editors than we do with our families so it's important to have a good relationship. I feel fortunate to consider Bernie and Jim friends as well as co-workers.

WHY I HATE MY JOB MOMENTS OF 2009

Working with Bernie and Jim. Just kidding!!! It's always annoying when approached while working at an event with a complaint. Imagine a client walking into an accountant's office and badgering him or her about the way a job was done.

There is a time and place to complain, but the arena or ballpark isn't one of them. Hockey parents also can be a pain. God forbid any sort of negative comment from a reporter or coach make their way into print.

Hockey parents can't seem to understand that their little Johnny isn't perfect and needs to be able to accept criticism in order to improve. Being approached and belittled by OHA refereeing supervisor Bob Morley after I'd written an article critical of the officials was unprofessional. Seems Morley doesn't mind dishing it out, but certainly didn't take kindly to his officials being criticized. I guess officials are used to having the last word.

SPORTING NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

To continue to strive to help The Standard have the best local sports coverage imaginable. As well, I'd like to become more positive, both at work and at home. A pessimist sees the glass half empty. An optimist sees it half full. I don't even see the glass. A more positive outlook is No. 1 on my list for 2010.

Thanks to all for a great 2009. I can't wait for 2010.