

Closing the book on a memorable year

Posted By BERNIE PUCHALSKI

Another year has passed and it's time to reflect on the year that was in the local sports scene in Niagara.

It was a year of ups and downs, triumphs and losses and the emergence of future stars who will make the region proud for years to come. So without further blather, here is a look at 2009 and the athletes, coaches, organizers and teams that made it memorable.

Team of the year: As usual, this is the hardest category to declare a winner. This year's finalists include: OFSAA champions in volleyball (Eden), soccer (Governor Simcoe) and golf (St. Francis); the Varsity League football champion Sir Winston Churchill Bulldogs; and, the Ridley College boys basketball team that topped the field at The Standard High School Basketball Tournament.

My nod goes to the Sir Winston Churchill football team that dominated the league like no other in recent memory. In winning their third straight title, the Bulldogs were untouchable in three playoff games.

Male athlete of the year: Since starting the tradition of this column, this year has presented the easiest choice ever for the top male athlete.

The runaway winner, no pun intended, is long-distance runner Mohammed Ahmed.

Ahmed started his year with a gold in the 3,000 metres and a bronze in the 1,500 metres at the OFSAA track and field championships. Next up was a gold medal and a new record in the 5,000 metres at the Pan Am junior championships in Trinidad and Tobago.

But the 18-year-old St. Catharines Collegiate alumnus wasn't done yet. Off to the University of Wisconsin on scholarship, Ahmed improved in every race, capped by being the first "true freshman" across the finish line at the NCAA championships. His 30th-place showing earned him All-American status.

It was already a momentous year for Ahmed but he concluded 2009 by returning home to capture the Canadian junior title at the national cross-country championships in Guelph.

Honourable mention would go to wrestler Evan MacDonald who returned from a two-year injury absence, moved up a weight class, and won the Pan American senior championship. Later in the year, he decisively defeated 2008 Olympian Matt Gentry to qualify for the world championships.

Female athlete of the year: The clear winner in this category is Olympic silver and bronze medallist Tonya Verbeek, who won a bronze medal at the world wrestling championships. Wrestling without pressure or expectations, Verbeek continues to pad her hall of fame resume.

Honourable mention would be fellow Brock Wrestling Club member Jessie MacDonald who won the prestigious German Grand Prix.

Coach of the year: This category comes down to a pair of high school coaches.

Port Colborne football coach Chris Cairns guided his team to a Varsity 2 championship after the Blue Bears opened the season with a pair of losses. Cairns always seems able to achieve success with the smallest assistant coaching ranks in high school football.

Eden volleyball coach Albino Pereira has now guided his teams to four straight OFSAA AA titles. Pereira spends countless hours building the program and taking his team across the province to make it battle-tested when OFSAA gold is on the line. Pereira is the winner based on his amazing track record of success.

Sportsperson of the year: Another category where there's an easy winner.

Tournament chairman Dave Matthews guided the Canadian Tour Championship to a great week of golf at the St. Catharines Golf and Country Club. Battling cancer, Matthews put up a brave front to a disease that would take his life less than a week after the event ended. Matthews spoke from the heart about how private golf courses needed to do more for the communities around them. What an incredible guy!

Shooting stars (local athletes under the age of 20 who have bright futures ahead of them): At the top of this list are: the aforementioned Ahmed; Notre Dame hockey player Riley Sheahan; NCAA Division 1 scholarship basketball player Lauren Buschmann; hockey player Arielle O'Neill; and, Sir Winston Churchill football receiver Max Cameron. Cameron might be the best receiver ever from Niagara.

Top sporting events of 2009: The Canadian Tour Championship was obviously a highlight for any golf fan. It's hard to believe Canadian Tour players can be so good and be so far away from playing on the PGA Tour.

For sheer drama, it's hard to beat championship night at the Standard High School Basketball Tournament. Seeing Ridley College defeat St. Francis in front of a packed gym for its first title since 1963 was worth the price of admission. Oh yeah. Lucky me gets in free to sporting events.

Biggest sporting surprise: The biggest surprise of 2009 would have to be Ridley College's impressive showing at the Standard basketball tourney. Close behind would be Port Colborne's run to a Varsity 2 football title and Evan MacDonald's quick return to the elite level of Canadian wrestling.

Biggest sports disappointments: Among this year's are: Vineland golfer Adam Short's awful second round at the second stage of PGA Tour qualifying that likely cost him a shot at a breakthrough year in 2010 on the Nationwide or PGA Tour; the early exit from the playoffs by the St. Catharines Falcons; and, Governor Simcoe, top-seeded the past two years, failing to make it the finals of The Standard basketball tourney.

Most exciting sports moment of 2009: The Niagara IceDogs defeating the Ottawa 67's in the first-round of this spring's OHL playoffs was full of drama, big goals and huge saves. It was a short but exciting playoff ride for Niagara's passionate fans.

Good ideas: the St. Catharines Golf and Country Club's decision to host the Canadian Tour Championship; the City of St. Catharines deciding to build an artificial turf field; and, the choice of Si Khounviseth as the coach for the z women's basketball team.

Bad ideas: I would be the prototypical Monday morning

quarterback if I questioned the Niagara IceDogs management for using its first-round selection to choose Lucas Lessio, a player who hadn't committed to playing in the OHL, or the decision to trade scorer Matthew Sisca to the Guelph Storm for a 2010 draft pick and a junior B player, none of whom is able to help the scoring-challenged IceDogs this season. But that would mean being a Monday morning quarterback so I won't do that.

But while I'm on the topic of quarterbacks -- or football for that matter -- nothing boggled the mind

more that the Niagara Region High School Athletic Association's decision to base football leagues on school populations.

With 26 teams playing this season, the sport is at the height of its popularity and didn't need fixing.

The decision was passed without determining if the leagues would play three-down football or four-down football. I can't wait for the Lakeshore Catholic versus Grimsby

matchup and the program-killing aspects of that game. How long will it be before the so-called Renegade League starts up again to get away from a NRHSAA constitution that doesn't get high school football? Who could blame schools for wanting to take their ball and go home?

Looking ahead to 2010: The Winter Olympics is looming on the immediate horizon and the thrill of gold medals won in Canada is sure to spark some flag waving. It's too bad local curler Kim Moore or local hockey player Brienne Jenner aren't along for the ride.

Favourite live sporting events in Niagara: Niagara IceDogs games are great but take too long to complete. Please ditch some of the pre-game festivities. A scorer's table seat for Brock men's and women's basketball games is always a treat. Helping to coach daughters Tess and Alex in house league basketball is a rare combination of pleasure, frustration and the desire for them to score their first career baskets. Is it really too much to ask for one stinking basket? High school football on a warm fall day is always a delight but playing a round of golf with my 86-year-old father still tops the list.

Best-kept sporting secret in Niagara: Given we've been including this category in our year-end columns for the past several years, it would be fair to say many of the secrets have gone the way of Tiger Woods' secrets. But for my money, the best-kept secret is still golfing after 6 p. m. in the Niagara Region.

The courses aren't busy, it's not as hot or sticky, and that shank off the first tee doesn't look nearly so bad when the only spectators are two frogs and a Canada Goose.

Why I love my job moments of 2009: The answer is four words; golf course media days. Although they have declined dramatically in recent years, there is still a tradition out there to invite the media to a round of golf to promote an upcoming tournament or showcase renovations. As I played Cherry Hill for the first time this summer, I felt pretty fortunate. And going 11-over-par on the first five holes did little to change that thought. OK, maybe just a little.

Why I hate my job moments of 2009: Brian Kilrea is a hall of fame member and legendary OHL coach but no one bothered to mention to me what a grump he was to interview. I tossed him some softball questions and rather than answer them patiently like he's probably done 1,000 times, the legend proceeded to tell me how stupid and ridiculous my queries were. If I wanted that response, I would have time travelled back to high school and visited some of my old teachers.

"You'll never amount to anything Puchalski," is a phrase I never tire of hearing.

Sporting New Year's resolutions: To be the best sports editor and reporter I can be with the resources I have. To try and stay focused on the positive and not let the uninformed naysayers get me down. To continue to enjoy my job and all the wonderful friendships I have made in covering sports in this great community. To be fair, honest and accountable in what I do. To admit my mistakes and learn from my errors.

And finally, to cherish every day I have on this planet because one never knows when your time is up. God bless all of you and have a great 2010.