

Legends Of The Games

First MHSAA Volleyball Champions Honored In Legends Program

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There's something special about being the first in anything. It's especially sweet when you're the first at being first.

In an effort to promote educational athletics by showcasing some of the great teams of past years, the Michigan High School Athletic Association has instituted a new program called "Legends Of The Games," which will honor the Association's first girls volleyball champions at its 1998 Lower Peninsula Finals in Kalamazoo on Saturday.

The year was 1976 when the MHSAA initiated a tournament in girls volleyball, and the three champions of that season -- Dearborn Fordson in Class A; Parchment in Class B; and Flint Holy Rosary in Class C-D -- will be honored in ceremonies between the Class C and A title matches at University Arena on the Western Michigan University campus.

A total of 28 members of the three squads will be on hand to receive individual commemorative plaques and a banner for display at their respective schools during the presentation.

The 1976 tournament saw approximately 500 schools involved, with the Class C and D teams playing in a combined tournament. The finals that year were played at Schoolcraft College in Class A; Western Michigan University in Class B and Delta College in Class C-D. Eight teams qualified for the finals, with the quarterfinal, semifinal and final matches played on the same day. Games were timed in those days.

Perhaps the most notable achievement of the first three champions was that Flint Holy Rosary rolled to 92 consecutive victories while winning the 1976 Class C-D and 1977 Class D titles. Holy Rosary topped Kalamazoo Christian, 14-5, 13-8, in the 1976 tournament, and Battle Creek St. Philip the following season.

Head Coach Jo Lake, now athletic director and assistant principal at Grosse Pointe South High School, had coached the Wolverines to Class D girls basketball titles in 1974 and 1975; and softball crowns in 1975 and 1976. The volleyball titles also came back-to-back with many of the same faces in the lineup. The school has since closed, and the championship trophies reside in the elementary school.

Parchment carried a nine-player roster into the first Class B tournament, with five of the players being seniors. The Panthers lost just three matches in the regular season, finishing 30-3, and won the Kalamazoo Valley Association tournament.

In the final round of the MHSAA tournament, Parchment disposed of Sturgis, 15-0, 15-8 in the semifinals; and Tecumseh, 15-8, 15-11, in the final in the Gary Center at Western Michigan University.

"It was pretty exciting playing in the first state volleyball tournament, especially playing the championship match in our hometown and WMU," said team co-captain Lorrie Lynn, a middle hitter/blocker on the team. "It was so exciting to realize that we had won the state tournament, and to realize that we were the best team in the state in Class B. We had also brought the first-ever team state trophy back to our school, something our men's teams had yet to do, which made it even sweeter."

"Looking back now, I feel like we were the pioneers of a sort. After that season it seemed like volleyball became more and more popular, especially in this part of the state," Lynn continued. "It was gaining the recognition it deserves."

Dearborn Fordson had won a non-MHSAA state tournament in 1975, and in the first Class A MHSAA competition, the Tractors knocked off Royal Oak Kimball in the quarterfinals (15-10, 15-6), Grosse Pointe North in the semis (15-6, 15-4) and Ferndale in the finals (15-13, 15-5).

"Tri-captains Lynn March, June Scott and Joan Ferguson, excellent senior athletes in many sports, were extremely coachable," said Head Coach Joan Hitchner. "They were the catalyst for setting the team goals, and participated in most decisions. Their maturity, leadership and chemistry set a formidable example for the entire team, including the reserves. They were truly a remarkable group of young ladies...the finest I've ever coached!"

"I do remember the excitement and energy of everyone around me," noted utility player Sue Szajnecki of the championship match. "We knew something big was happening, but I don't think we really understood the extent of the honor."

"The Legends program is designed to remind people that today's interscholastic athletic program owes a debt to those who have come before us, especially those who were the first champions in a tournament" said John E. "Jack" Roberts, executive director of the MHSAA. "The program also serves to remind us that school sports are about the development of life skills and life-long relationships between players, coaches and communities.

"The Legends program gives us an opportunity to recognize those great achievements of the past, and to reflect on what is truly important in school sports."