

Legends Of The Games



Gary Shook, Osego

Battle Creek St. Philip has become a fixture at the MHSAAA Girls Volleyball Finals, with 21 trips to the Semifinals and 10 titles

The 10 Lower Peninsula Class D Girls Volleyball championship teams from Battle Creek St. Philip High School will be honored through the Michigan High School Athletic Association's "Legends Of The Games" program at ceremonies prior to the Class A championship match of the 2003 Girls Volleyball Finals at University Arena in Kalamazoo on March 15.

In its sixth year, the Legends program promotes educational athletics by showcasing some of the great teams of past years. Members of the St. Philip teams in attendance will receive commemorative plaques and a banner to display at the school during the ceremony.

The story that follows is a compilation of memories from various accounts, recalling St. Philip's claim to excellence in volleyball that prior to this year's tournament has produced 1202 wins, 299 losses and 91 ties, 10 L.P. Class D championships, five runners-up finishes, and six other Semifinal appearances.

Many a team has claimed, "We're rebuilding" going into a season, but Battle Creek St. Philip volleyball teams never uttered those words. Instead, the Tigers – sometimes referred to around the Battle Creek area as the Big Red Machine – just reloaded. A net result has been 21

Semifinal appearances in 27 years of Michigan High School Athletic Association-sponsored girls volleyball tournaments.

While volleyball officially became a sport at St. Philip in 1974, its origins could actually be traced to three years earlier, when Kellogg Community College men's and women's coach Mick Haley had three young St. Philip students on his Junior Komets team. When the three students -- Patti Guerra, Sue Haan and Mary Jo Smith - entered their freshman years of high school in 1974, they were seasoned volleyball players who were able to jump start the program under head coach Linda Anderson Ratti, who would stay on in 1975 as an assistant.

Becky Emrich became the coach in 1975, bringing a wealth of volleyball knowledge, the experience of playing for two national junior college championship teams and instilling an overwhelming desire to strive for championships. Sheila Guerra, an educator at St. Philip for more than 30 years, began coaching in 1976 as the junior varsity and junior high school coach. The rest is history.

Emrich's 1976, 1977 and 1978 teams all reached the MHSAA Semifinals, advancing to the Finals in 1977 before losing to Flint Holy Rosary. In 1979, the Tigers broke through for

their first of 10 MHSAA championships, defeating Leland. Emrich retired from coaching after her brief stint at St. Philip, yielding to Guerra.

What a ride awaited St. Philip. Guerra produced a 862-183-46 record and nine MHSAA titles from 1982-97.

"I think of all the girls over the years and we've been blessed with many fine coaches, great fans, an abundance of talent, great determination and a few lucky breaks," said Guerra. "The right people, in the right place, at just the right time, all combined to produce a winning formula."

An often heard slogan of Big Red teams has been, "Anything is possible to those who believe, help us to believe in ourselves and each other."

Here's a look at the 10 St. Philip MHSAA championship teams:

1979 - After four years of hard work, coach Emrich's team broke the ice, defeating Leland, 12-15, 15-9, 15-13. Seniors Julie Flees and Cathie Petrucco were the dominating forces, joined by Monica Dobbertien, Betty Haan, Shari Haan, Theresa Hayes, Martha Hurst, Tina Penny, Kim Reece and Amy Sherwood. These individuals set the stage for future teams.

1983 - Mindful of losses to Leland in the 1980 and 1982 Semifinals, the Tigers were hungry, eventually reaching the

The Sheila Guerra (left) coaching era at St. Philip ended with a 10th MHSAA championship in 1997. At right, the 1979 team that started it all.

MHSAA Finals against Dryden. St. Philip lost the first game, 15-9, and was down 14-8 in the second game before roaring back to win, 16-14, and cruised in the third game, 15-5. Angela Albrecht, who later played four years for Haley at Texas, led the way. Emerging from the roster was coach Guerra's daughter, Vicky, Kelly Adams, Kathy Bond, Jenny Campbell, Kelly Daum, sisters Mary and Therese Martin, Katie Schulte and Sue Sokolowski. Each played key roles in the comeback.

1984 - That returning group began the year as it had ended in 1983, providing the ingredients necessary to wear another MHSAA crown. At season's end the Most Valuable Player award was presented to the entire team. And, why not? They'd won 64 matches and lost just six, including a 15-1, 15-10 romp over Dryden in the Final.

1985 - The first volleyball team in the Lower Peninsula to earn three MHSAA titles (Portage Northern would accomplish the feat hours later in Class A), all-state seniors Bond, Guerra and Therese

Martin led the way to a 15-1, 15-10 title win over Ottawa Lake - Whiteford.

"It was a fitting way to end a career," recalled Vicky Guerra, her full legacy at St. Philip yet to unfold.

To win three in a row and four in seven years had the school talking dynasty - like River Rouge in boys basketball in the during the 1960s, or UCLA in college basketball in the mid-1960s and early 1970s, or the Pittsburgh Steelers in pro football in the 70s. In volleyball St. Philip had reached that level.

However, eventual two-time MHSAA champion Concord moved into Class D the following season, beating St. Philip in the 1986 District Final and 1987 Semifinal. In 1988, the Tigers finished runner-up to Pottersville.

1989 - Reaching the semifinals in 1987 and Finals in 1988 kept St. Philip's program on the prowl.

"From Day 1, this team dedicated itself to winning a state championship," Coach Guerra recalled.

They would match the 1984 team's win total of 64, and Carrie Adams, lefty hitter Eileen Crane, Beth Crawford, Cathy Culp, Kim Dalimonte, Rachel LewAllen, Shannon Lucas, Amy Nelson and Sarah Parker encouraged each other with a team approach. That attitude produced 15-10, 15-6 wins over Pottersville in the Final, avenging the title-match loss to the Vikings one year earlier.

1992 - Which St. Philip team was the best? Arguably, this one was. Its 66-7-4 record was mostly accumulated against larger, top-ranked schools. St. Philip had to overcome adversity, also, losing setter



photo courtesy of St. Philip HS



photo courtesy of St. Philip HS

Courtney Smith to a knee injury four weeks prior to the MHSAA Final. Senior captains Kim Dalimonte and Beth Crawford, and junior middle Megan Reetz, more than made up for the void. Dalimonte filled Smith's shoes, and junior Jessica Dull also contributed as the Tigers downed Dryden in the Final, 16-14, 15-2.

1993 - Reetz led St. Philip over Dryden again, 16-14, 15-12 in another classic Final matchup. Dull provided the balance for an attack that included Jodie Brasseur and Madeline Chadwick, Emily Lindow, and Jessica Neve; blended with super sophomores Jennifer Heisler and Mary Ann Staib. The ball was really rolling for St. Philip, youth was stepping up and the run was not over.

1994 - Three freshmen made the varsity - Megan Markovich, Sarah Reetz and Brooke Formsma, a precise hitter who would be a first team all-state selection four straight years. While Formsma carried much of the St. Philip's attack, seniors Dull and Liz Geiger were complimented nicely by juniors Breea Formsma, Kara Markovich, Heisler and Staib.

"Many people seemed to think there was no chance for this young and inexperienced team, but it was full of 'Fighting Tigers,'" recalled Dull. They defeated Rochester Lutheran West in the Final, 15-6, 15-9.

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Angie Albrecht (left) and Mary Martin put up a block against Leland in the 1983 MHSAA Final.

Jenny Heisler and St. Philip were flying high in 1995, winning a ninth MHSAA title, this time over Maple City Glen Lake.

right combination. We had been there before and knew how to win a state championship."

1997 - In a fitting conclusion to Guerra's coaching career, the Tigers earned a 15-6, 15-9 Final victory over Center Line St. Clement. "I felt like I was on top of the world during the championship game," said Kelly Fitzgerald, a sophomore middle amid seniors Brooke

Formsma, Chadwick, Megan Markovich and Sarah Reetz; juniors Teresa Bess and Katie Staib, and sophomore Whitney Starring. In addition to the 10 MHSAA championships, St. Philip finished as the runner-up five times and was ousted after reaching the Semifinals six times. Vicky (Guerra) Groat, Sheila's daughter who played from 1983-85, now coaches St. Philip, in her fifth year. The Tigers turned in runner-up efforts under Groat in 1998 and 2002, and are looking to become the only high school program to wear the crown in every decade of volleyball's MHSAA sponsorship as a tournament sport. "Our continued goal is to constantly renew our commitment to excellence; to bring prestige to St. Philip; to be our best and have fun doing it; and, to fly yet another state championship flag."



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1995 - Brooke Formsma, Megan Markovich, Sarah Reetz and sophomore Mary Chadwick joined the battle-tested seniors Heisler, Staib and Kara Markovich to beat Maple City-Glen Lake, 15-8, 15-1 and become the first Lower Peninsula volleyball team to serve up four straight championships (Portage Northern would share the honor hours later, winning Class A, while Brimley with five Open Class titles from 1981-85 had already turned the trick in the Upper Peninsula). "Seniors and sophomores," recalled Heisler, "it was the right mix,

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Sarah Reetz helped the Tigers close out Sheila Guerra's coaching career with a title over Center Line St. Clement in 1997.

GLORY DAYS

Scheduled to be present at the ceremony are (as of March 5):

Head Coach Becky Emrich – 1975-79
Head Coach Shelia Guerra – 1980-97
Former A.D./Principal Mike Low
Assistant Coach Carl Olsen
Assistant Coach Joe Zuk
Teresa Bess – 1994-1997
Mary Buckingham – 1980-1983
Eileen Crane – 1987-1990
Kelly Fitzgerald – 1996-1999

Breea Formsma – 1994-1995
Brooke Formsma – 1994-1997
Elizabeth Geiger
Victoria Guerra – 1983-1985
Shari Haan – 1979-1981
Bettie Haan – 1979-1981
Theresa Hayes 1979-1981
Jennifer Heisler – 1993-1995
Sarah Kalinosky
Shannon Lucas
Megan Markovich – 1994-1997

Beth Miller
Amy Nelson – 1988-1990
Sarah Parker – 1987-1990
Tina Penney – 1976-1980
Kelly Reece
Kim Reece
Megan Reetz – 1989-1993
Sarah Reetz – 1993-1997
Susan Sokolowski – 1982-1984
Mary Ann Staib – 1993-1995
Katie Staib – 1997