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Battle Creek Pennfield Honored In Legends Program

EAST LANSING, Mich. – March 7 – In an effort to promote educational athletics by showcasing some of the great teams of past years, the Michigan High School Athletic Association instituted a program called “Legends Of The Games” in 1997.

With MHSAA championships in 1979 and 1981, Battle Creek Pennfield will be honored during Saturday’s Finals, with a ceremony that is expected to begin at approximately 3:30 p.m.

Several members of Pennfield’s teams are expected to be in attendance to receive commemorative plaques and a banner to display at the school during the ceremony.

(The story that follows was written by MHSAA Publications Director, Rob Kaminski, for this year's MHSAA Girls Volleyball Finals Souvenir Program.)

There were 11 players on the 1981 Battle Creek Pennfield girls volleyball team, but those 11 might as well been 11,000 by the time the 1981 MHSAA Class C Girls Volleyball Finals rolled around. At Pennfield back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, volleyball was more than a team thing; it was a community effort. So one can imagine what it was like when Pennfield advanced to the final round for the third straight year, this time set to take place at its own gym.

To this day, it is a scene that those involved with both the 1979 and 1981 titles fondly remember.

“Our fans were the best; always encouraging us and pushing us to be the best,” recalls Angie Glenn, a standout front row performer from 1978-81. “We always felt like we had the school’s and community’s support.”

Teammate Shelley Vonk's lasting memory of that day in late March of 1981? “It was crowded.”

Even the driving force behind the frenzied atmosphere in Pennfield’s gym that day remains somewhat awed by the scene, as Coach Vicky LaRouech says, “Having the championship at our own school in front of a packed house is something that will always stand out.

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“Also, the exciting come-from-behind win over Berrien Springs to get our team to the finals,” LaRouech added.

Ah yes, the semifinal vs. Berrien Springs.

Pennfield breezed through its district in 1981, winning three matches by a combined score of 90-25. Things weren't much tougher in the regional, where the Panthers disposed of Hanover-Horton and Pewamo-Westphalia in two games per match, setting up the dream of a lifetime - an opportunity to play for an MHSAA title in front of the home crowd.

The trouble was, the one obstacle standing in the way of a third straight finals appearance was Berrien Springs, which had defeated Pennfield in the 1980 MHSAA Finals.

This time the two powers clashed in the semifinals, and it was then that the Panthers were forced to display their championship mettle and rally in front of the standing-room-only throng of more than 1,000 -- many of whom craned their necks to peer in from the hallway.

Two-time defending champion Berrien Springs (the Shamrocks had also won in 1979 when Pennfield won the Class B title) seemingly was unfazed by the pro-Pennfield crowd, jumping on the Panthers for a 15-7 decision in the first game, before Pennfield struck back with a 15-4 win in Game 2.

However, the momentum turned again as Berrien Springs cruised to a 13-8 lead in the third and deciding game, ready to dash Panther hopes of a second title in three years.

Slowly, Pennfield clawed its way back, eventually tying the game at 13. At that point, the teams battled through six consecutive sideouts until the Panthers broke through for two straight points and the win, the final point coming on a kill by Sue Hodges.

“I didn't see the ball,” Hodges would later tell reporters. “I had tears in my eyes and I just swung my hardest and hoped I hit it.”

With Berrien Springs put aside and the 1980 loss to the Shamrocks avenged, Pennfield was on the brink of another volleyball championship, with Burton Atherton providing the competition in the final.

Whether emotionally spent from the excitement of the semifinal or just outplayed, Atherton stunned Pennfield in the first game of the title match, taking a 15-13 decision. All that seemed to do is wake the Panthers up, as they roared back to take the next two games and the championship, 15-2, 15-3, the final point coming on a tip by Mary Kay Jenkins.

Not only was it the second title in three years for Pennfield and the first time a school had won the MHSAA volleyball crown in two different classes, but it was just the second time ever that a school had captured the girls basketball and volleyball championships during the same year.

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Not surprisingly, five athletes played on both teams: Angie Glenn, Shelley Vonk, Mary Kay Jenkins, Julie Wogomon and Marci Clements.

A bit more rare was the fact that the basketball team was also coached by LaRouech, who earned numerous coach-of-the-year accolades and also an appearance in Sports Illustrated's "Faces in the Crowd" feature during that memorable 1980-81 school year.

The '81 crown capped stellar careers for Glenn and Wogomon, the only two members of that squad to also play for the 1979 championship team.

Playing in Class B during 1979, Pennfield cruised to the championship at Grand Rapids Junior College with a 15-13, 15-9 win over Livonia Clarenceville in the semifinals, and a 15-6, 15-10 win in the final over Saginaw Eisenhower.

"I'll always remember that championship for the confidence and poise with which the team played," LaRouech said. "The first one is so very exciting.

"And, to coach both the basketball and volleyball championship teams in the same year is just a dream come true."

Expected to be in attendance for the awards ceremony are (List accurate as of March 7 -- All last names are from playing days):

- Vicky LaRouech, Head Coach
- Sharon Borsum Dickerson, 1979
- Angie Glenn, Front Row, 1978-81
- Sue Hodges Haan, All-Around, 1978-81
- Shelley Vonk Toren, 1980-82
- Julie Noel, All-Around, 1979-82
- Tami Bammer Cowham, Back Row, 1980-81
- Kathy Coplin Budrow, Back Row, 1979-82
- Lisa Millsap Holder, All-Around, 1980-83
- Marci Clements Smith, Back Row, 1981
- Mary Kay Jenkins Pessetti, Setter, 1980-83

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