

Legends Of The Games

Five-Time Champion Berrien Springs Honored In Legends Program

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.

Berrien Springs was the first five-time MHSAA Lower Peninsula Girls Volleyball Champions. For that feat, members of those teams were honored during the 1999 Finals

The Shamrocks won Class C titles in 1979, 1980, 1982, 1984 and 1985. At least 23 members of those teams are expected to be in attendance to receive commemorative plaques and a banner to display at the school during the ceremony.

As the 1978-79 girls volleyball season was about to begin at Berrien Springs High School, the team found itself without a coach. Several players knew who they would like to take over the vacancy. What happened after that became one of the biggest success stories in Michigan high school volleyball history.

"One day, several of us went down to Mr. Bermingham's room," said Tanya Scofield, a setter on the team, referring to Jim Bermingham, who was a teacher at the school. "He had been our junior varsity coach, so we literally begged him to coach the varsity team. If I remember right, we ended up promising him a lot, like how hard we would work and that we'd never complain, etcetera, before he finally agreed to take the job. Never in our wildest dreams did we think the season would culminate in a state championship."

For that matter, many never would have projected that over the seven-year period that Bermingham coached the Shamrocks, they would win five MHSAA championships -- the first school in the Lower Peninsula to do so -- and appear in the Class C title match six out of seven years.

The 1979 team was a veteran unit, starting five seniors and one junior. It posted a 30-5 record, and on championship Saturday on St. Patrick's day, the green-clad Shamrocks took the Class C title at Grand Rapids Junior College, besting Bad Axe in the semifinals, 15-10, 15-13; and Napoleon in the finals, 15-8, 15-12.

On the same day, a Class B champion was crowned -- Battle Creek Pennfield -- a school which would do battle with Berrien Springs in the final round of the tournament the next three years.

Never before 1980, nor ever since, have two MHSAA champions from the previous year met in the finals. The possibility of it happening, at least on paper, was unlikely. Berrien Springs returned only one starter from the 1979 team -- hitter Jackie Backus.

In the first title meeting at Chippewa Valley High School in Mt. Clemens, Pennfield captured the opening match, 15-12, leading at one point, 9-0. But the Shamrocks rallied to take the next two games, 15-6 and 15-2, and became only the second school in the history of the MHSAA volleyball tournament to win back-to-back crowns.

However, it was the Panthers' turn in 1981. Berrien Springs and Pennfield were considered by many to be the best volleyball teams regardless of class that season. This time, the battleground was on Pennfield's home court in the semifinal round. After winning the first game, 15-7, Berrien Springs' hopes of a third straight title were dashed as Pennfield posted wins of 15-4 and 15-13. Pennfield went on to capture the Class C championship.

The Shamrocks and the Panthers squared off in the title game for the second time at Battle Creek Central's Fieldhouse in 1982. It wasn't hard for Berrien Springs to be prepared for the rubber game of the match.

"We wanted Pennfield in the finals," said hitter Vickie Backus. "The added incentive made it easy to get ready. It was very rewarding because we reversed roles with them. We felt like we choked last year and our goal this season was to get there and have another chance."

And when that chance came, Bermingham left nothing to chance.

"I'm kind of superstitious to a degree," Bermingham said. "So we didn't wear the same uniforms to the finals that we did last year. I didn't wear the same suit. The players tried to wear the same pajamas that they wore two years ago. They decorated the doors at the hotel the same way as two years ago. We tried to change the bad things from last year and do the good things from two years ago again."

The "good" came in the Shamrocks' 15-10, 16-14 win over Pennfield in the finals.

"The first year was a surprise," Bermingham said. "And the second year we came back with a team that had no right to play with Pennfield that year. That was probably our greatest win. The one thing about last year was that you forget how losing feels when you're so successful. This year was really meaningful because we had felt the other end of it last year."

Three more trips to the finals followed. A runner-up finish to Burton Atherton (11-15, 15-13, 15-6) came in 1983 at Linden. Returning to Linden with a senior-laiden group in 1984, Berrien Springs landed in the winner's circle again, defeating Morenci, 10-15, 15-11, 15-13, coming back from a 13-2 deficit in the third game of that match.

The final championship came under Bermingham in 1985, with the Shamrocks taking measure of Newaygo, 14-16, 15-6, 15-8. Jeff Zimmerman then directed Berrien Springs to a sixth championship in eight years in 1986 after Bermingham, now a superintendent for Three Rivers Public Schools, stepped down from the coaching job.

This Legends of the Games group all point to Bermingham for their success on and off the playing surface during an incredible seven-year run, and in their lives. That sentiment was perhaps summed up best in the words of Diana Bixby, an all-around player from 1981 to 1984:

"Bermingham was an exceptional coach. I learned more life lessons from him than any other person. Not only did he know the game, but he could motivate us beyond the ordinary. He used to give these 'talks' during practice about winning 'states.' I used to get so excited I couldn't sleep at night.

"I hope my boys will have a coach half as good as Jim was."

