

New class gets call to FHS Hall of Fame

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FITCHBURG -- With eight subtle words in 2013 -- "It is time for this to go home" -- longtime Fitchburg High assistant basketball coach John Cordio made the entire room reach for a tissue as he handed over one of the most precious heirlooms in Fitchburg High history: the ball given to Doug Grutchfield at the Academy Street Brickyard prior to the great man's passing in 2006.

For about eight minutes during the Fitchburg High School Athletic Hall of Fame's Ninth Induction Ceremony at the Great Wolf Lodge's White Oak Room Sunday, inductee Chris Woods -- the longtime track and cross country coach of the Red and Gray -- had the entire room reaching for their sides.

Woods, a 1976 Fitchburg High graduate, relayed a story about he and fellow inductee Giuseppe "Joe" Costa, the first great soccer player inducted into the FHS Hall, of the Class of 1974. Both had attended the University of Maine, and the two shared many a five-hour car ride to and from the Paper City.

"When you go to UMaine," he said, "you don't go home often."

The story centered around Costa's new eight-track player, and how the entire car ride to the Orono campus was about one cartridge -- the soundtrack to Saturday Night Fever -- and his impromptu singing of "Stayin' Alive" to his roommate on arrival that day.

"I can't turn the Bee Gees off fast enough now," Woods said to thunderous laughter from the full house.

Woods, inducted as a coach, inherited the gamut of running disciplines between his return to Fitchburg High School in the mid-1980's and his retirement from the Fitchburg Public Schools in June 2016. In what he called "the Golden years of track at FHS," Woods coached the Red Raiders for 89 consecutive seasons, where his student-athletes broke or established 150-plus school records.

"Those kids are why I am here today," said Woods, who grew choked up as he spoke of his father, the late Don Woods, while speaking in reverence of the great coaches who came before him in the legendary Erkki Koutonen and Ed Gastonguay, as well as athletic directors in the late Tom Crank, Grutchfield and Ray Cosenza.

Costa, who had to play gridiron football when he arrived at Fitchburg in the fall of 1970, became the first great soccer player in Red Raider history when the program began under Dick Lavers the following fall.

"Right from the start, I knew we were in trouble," Costa recalled of that initial foray into the sport for FHS, noting the difference in styles between the play of calcio -- world football in his native Italy -- and the kick-and-run play in the early 1970s in America. "But I'm proud to be a part of the great legacy of Fitchburg High School; I remember having pride wearing our uniform."

Costa scored a school-record five goals in a game against Wachusett Regional, as well as a wonder strike to earn FHS's first point in this sport against archrival Leominster in the fall of 1973. 1970's-era

Fitchburg Sentinel sportswriter Ken Albridge had written, "If there was an all-star team for soccer, Joe Costa has to be on it."

Costa also relayed a story of how he had asked then-athletic director Jack Conway if he could also kick field goals for the football team; Conway had said he couldn't, as athletes weren't allowed to play two contact sports at one time.

"Mr. Conway," he said, "what if I don't get hit?"

Inductee Peter Stephens of the Class of 1958 gave thanks to those who coached him from his younger days through high school -- FHS Hall of Famers Al Secino, Voit Lassila, and John Oliva -- as well as spinning yarns of his time on Academy Street.

One of the stories the former Memorial Middle School principal and current School Committee member told was of his still-school record 97-yard touchdown pass to Dick Boutwell in a game against Hudson in 1957.

"It almost never happened," he said, noting the legendary coach Ed Sullivan had sent the pair to the bus at halftime. "We didn't go to the bus, though.

"It is a great honor to be elected, and I'm humbled to be enshrined," Stephens said.

Norbert Pickett of the Class of 1987 -- who was the school's all-time points leader in basketball for five-plus years with 1,301, all without a 3-point line -- openly spoke of a home life filled with domestic violence, and therefore turned to basketball as an escape.

"Shooting baskets took me away from what was happening at home," Pickett said. "There's a reason why I scored 34 points a game."

Pickett played on some pretty darn good FHS teams under Grutchfield, as well as still holding the school record for points in one game -- 61, scored in his final regular-season game against St. Peter-Marian.

Pickett spoke highly of his junior high school coach Mike Baltier, who joined him in the New England Hall of Fame two years ago, as well as fellow inductee Arthur Capone of the Class of 1949.

Capone, who was represented by his widow Becky, daughter Beth, and sons Glenn and Peter, played on the great FHS teams of the late 1940's, teams who never lost to Leominster on Thanksgiving morning.

Capone was also a youth coach following his time on Academy Street.

"Dad stressed community service to his children; he changed a lot of attitudes," Glenn Capone said, noting he had opened a church basketball team to kids across the city.

Chris Roy of the Class of 1997 joined backfield partner and Seventh Class inductee Ricky Morales in the Hall of Fame: Morales leaped to his feet as both Roy and fellow Ninth Class inductee Keith Leavitt walked to the dais to receive their plaques from Cosenza.

"With Chris and Rick in the backfield, it just wasn't fair," Cosenza said, noting Roy's football stats, including his 133-yard, eight-carry, three-touchdown effort in the 1996 Super Bowl win over Milford at snowy WPI.

Roy noted how his mother had sifted through five shoeboxes full of press clippings to help support his nomination.

Leavitt, the behemoth lineman of the Fitchburg High football teams of the mid-to-late 1990's, noted of how his connection to FHS started in the early 90s, when Cosenza mistook him for an eighth grader.

Leavitt was entering Memorial as a sixth grader at the time.

He also remembered the late Don Woods, Grutchfield, and Jack Jerszyk in his speech, as well as thanking his wife, the former Erin Cotton -- a 2001 Leominster graduate.

"I hope," he joked of his wife's high school allegiances, "that doesn't change the committee's decision."

Pamela Kirousis, daughter of contributor Stanley A. Goode, spoke of how her father -- who coached the Red and Gray football team from 1962-64 before becoming principal of Fitchburg High School -- earned his induction.

"The contributor role was more fitting," Kirousis said. "Stan loved coaching the Red Raiders."

Also inducted the Hall of Fame as part of the Ninth Class were the following: Ryan Howe (2007), Brandy Green (2000), the 1991 Central Mass. champion football team, and the 1960 state champion cross country team.

Howe is the first hockey player inducted, with a school-record 34 goals in one season and is currently second in program history for points.

Green was a pioneer in the pole vault and recalled practice sessions with her teammates.

The 1991 football team went 10-2 en route to Cosenza's first of three Superbowl titles.

In that year, Fitchburg beat Leominster for the first time since 1984 as well as ended a 1-17 streak against the Blue Devils, touching off an incredible run of success. The Red and Gray also won the Superbowl against North Middlesex in Webster.

The 1960 cross country team was inducted on the 57th anniversary of its accomplishment.

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