

Athletic legacy over a century in the making

By Sean Sweeney, Correspondent
Sentinel & Enterprise

Updated: 2017-12-21 04:33:50.587415

At Christmas, spending time with family is important. They are the ones you can most count on.

And for many years, local sports fans have counted on and grown enthralled by the youth of the area -- some whose families have been entrenched in the region for several generations -- as they ply their athletic trades.

We can never forget about the great Dubzinski family of Gardner, whose coaching lineage has lasted three generations. There's the wonderful West Fitchburg Keenan clan. The DiGeronimos. The Spinellis. The Kellys.

There's also the McCalls (James' baby daughter Alisha is just as fast as her old man), the Scotts, the Conrys, the Pierces, the Thibodeaus (Jeff Thibodeau's children Alyssa and Tyler are on the St. Bernard's girls' varsity and boys' JV basketball teams, respectively), the Goode clan, the Proctors of Lunenburg -- you name it, because I could go on and on and on.

Simply put, if John Connolly wrote about them in the 60s, you can bet your bottom dollar that Jim Clark, Steve Kendall, and Bill Gilman wrote about the next generation in the 90s. Twenty-plus years later, another generation of athletes are coming up rather quickly for this typist to add to their family's lengthy athletic deeds.

That being said, I want to talk with you about another sporting family in this area, one that has helped five local schools -- not just one -- achieve great amounts of sporting success over the last century-plus.

You read that right.

A. Century. PLUS.

When Oakmont Regional's Curtis Coulson stepped onto the gridiron for his first varsity action this past fall, he joined five generations' worth of interscholastic athletes from the same bloodline, an old Irish clan that settled in Fitchburg back in the early 1870s.

Coulson is descended from William J. Sweeney, Sr. and his wife, Mary (Kelley) Sweeney, and is a sixth-generation Irish-American on that side. William's father, Patrick, emigrated from Louisburgh, County Mayo with his brother John to Worcester in June 1844; a sister, Winifred, would follow and settle in Clinton after marrying a man named John Gordon.

Patrick would marry fellow Irish emigre Mary Houlihan in 1848, and William arrived on the scene in 1852. A sister, Mary, followed, along with five additional siblings that did not marry or have children. Mary married a man named Finneran--not to be confused with the Finnerons--and she stayed in Worcester all her life.

After moving north in 1871 and settling in the Patch, William and Mary (Kelley) Sweeney ended up having 12 children from 1874 to 1897, including former Fitchburg Parks Commissioner Charles F. Sweeney (Sweeney Avenue in Cogshall Park is named for him). Charles's younger brother Thomas B.

Sweeney is Curtis Coulson's great-great-grandfather, and Thomas played baseball for Fitchburg in his senior year of 1903.

Charles's son William C. Sweeney -- it should be noted here that there were two Sweeneys named William at this generation, William C. and William J., first cousins born about 18 years apart -- played for St. Bernard's in the late 1930s.

Thomas's grandsons -- Curtis' great uncles, the Morrissey boys Billy, Tom, John, and Michael -- were all stand-out athletes at St. Bernard's in the late 1950s and 1960s. Tom Morrissey went on to score 107 points for Fitchburg State hockey in the early 1970s. Most of the Morrissey kids have left the area, with the exception of Curtis' paternal grandmother, Kathy Morrissey Coulson.

But that's not all.

Sticking with that particular generation, Phil Sweeney -- a grandson of William and Mary's eldest son William J., Jr., and Annie (Farrell) Sweeney, through second youngest son Paul T. -- played basketball for the Bernardians in the late 1960s and helped St. B's win Central Mass. in 1969. His second cousin Mark Sweeney -- grandson of second eldest brother John, youngest son of Martin -- was a stand-out at Notre Dame of South Street during the Crusaders' early 1970s Central Mass. title runs. Mark's older brother Kevin Sweeney, who now lives in San Diego, ran two years of track for St. Bernard's in the mid-1960s.

The next generation -- the fifth generation born in America -- saw Phil's children Tara and Mark Sweeney as well as Sweeney first cousin David Souza help lift Fitchburg High to greatness during the early 1990s: Tara was a starter on the 1989-90 FHS girls' basketball team that won Central Mass., while David was on the 1991 Super Bowl champion football team. Mark played soccer -- the goalkeeper on the 1993 team which posted a still-school record 12 wins -- and basketball; Tara played softball, too, and David also played basketball and baseball.

Quick aside: Another Sweeney cousin of this generation ran spring track for FHS for about a week in 1994, and he won a heat in the 100-meter dash (14.1 seconds) before he decided he was better writing about sports than playing them. True story.

Curtis' fourth cousin, Christian Clark -- David's nephew-- played football for Gardner and was involved in the Wildcats' most recent run of true gridiron success (2010-13). Seeing his name on the roster during his freshman season made this typist incredibly proud.

And there are loads more in the local sports pipeline, so to speak: we're expecting Christian's brother Steven Lemieux (football) and first cousin Jillian Souza (softball) to perform at the high school level within the next half-decade or so. Curtis has younger siblings, too, and there are some other youngsters -- descendants of William and Mary through their daughter, Gertrude, for instance, still living in the area -- in their single digits who may suit up when they get to their mid-teens.

And don't get me started on all the connections to the Sweeneys, such as the Farrell side, with Jeff Hammond and his sons, Ryan and William -- my fourth cousins -- up at Notre Dame, because I could really ramble about them, too.

In related news, I'm an amateur genealogist, and I have a problem.

One of the things I've noticed in the first two weeks of basketball games that I've covered: most teams are valuing the ball more than in the past.

I'll explain.

In many games at this level, I've watched teams cough up the ball between 25-30 times during the course of a 32-minute basketball game. I've seen some girls' basketball teams recording upward of 47 turnovers in a game. Unreal.

But so far in 2017-18, turnovers are down. St. Bernard's had an impressive nine turnovers in its 66-50 win over North Middlesex last Wednesday; St. John's had 14 on Sunday. Teams are turning the ball over, yes -- it happens when you have good defense in front of you -- but the less than 20 average we've seen so far this season has been a pretty good number...

Two names to file away for future reference, Fitchburg fans: Zack Scott, and Jeremiah Paulino.

Scott, of course, is the son of FHS assistant Jeff Scott -- speaking of families and genealogy -- and nephew to Jack. He's been at Fitchburg practices since before he could walk and knows the game and what the Raiders run like the back of his hand.

Paulino, a sophomore, is a quick, shifty street ball player who can attack the rack like no one's business. He also has solid awareness of what's going on around him, and has picked quite a few stray passes out of the air, much like a shutdown corner. Both are killing it at JV for FHS Hall of Famer James McCall.

My thought is that both will spend most of this season with McCall -- Fitchburg's varsity is full of juniors and seniors -- but will get the opportunity later this season to dress and sit with the varsity. Not necessarily getting minutes, per se, but to watch and learn.

And remember, my thought and reality don't necessarily match up all the time, so I could be totally wrong on that last paragraph...

Second-year Fitchburg boys' track coach -- and FHS Hall of Famer -- Cindy Donelan must feel like the luckiest woman in track and field, especially with all the talent at her disposal inside The Grutch.

During her first year, she had the venerable quartet of CAKE -- Charlie Jackson, Angel Figueroa, Kobe Saddler, and Eli Ashmore -- running the 4x200 to great success. This year, the first leg is pretty interchangeable, with Landon Tucker (LAKE?), Sal Figueroa (SAKE?), and Jackson available.

Last Sunday, Donelan had Tucker run the 4x200 first leg, and the quartet set a new school standard. Friendly competition on a team makes everyone better. I expect that record to fall numerous times this winter, regardless of who starts...

WPKZ's (105.3 FM/AM 1280) Scholastic Sports Zone is on hiatus for the next two Sundays and will return Jan. 7, 2018...

Good to get out to the Civic Center again. I've barely covered hockey for the last six or seven winters -- the cold seeps into my knee joints and I can barely walk afterward -- but covering North Middlesex and Groton-Dunstable last Saturday and the local doubleheader Wednesday reminded me why I love (and truly missed) the sport...

That said, expect me at the Civic Center every Wednesday and Saturday -- except not until after the holidays -- for the foreseeable future. Walking is overrated anyway...

One last note before we wrap up the column for the holiday: During last Friday's Fitchburg-South boys' basketball game at The Grutch, the Fitchburg student section did "Silent Night" as the Red Raiders played the Colonels. The kids remained silent as FHS poured in its first four baskets of the game, but exploded into cheers at point No. 10.

Unlike Taylor University's students -- who originated the Silent Night tradition at the NAIA school over two decades ago -- the kids didn't dress up in costume, nor did they sing Silent Night toward the game's conclusion.

Then again, in a double overtime scenario, I'm sure singing Christmas carols weren't high on their to do list.

Merry Christmas, and see you next week.

Close Window

Send To Printer