

Running into the Hall



Though he wasn't a distance runner, Don McFarland made Ephrata cross country a statewide success

**BY STEVEN SMITH
of the Journal**

EPHRATA – Don McFarland is living a very different life than he did when he was a teacher and coach at Ephrata High School.

These days, McFarland's summers are filled being a volunteer wilderness ranger in the Pasayten Wilderness Area. He spends much of the season living in a tent in the area located along the Canadian border at the farthest north reaches of the Wenatchee National Forest.

"I started doing it back when I was a poor teacher," said McFarland, who spent nearly 40 years teaching in the Ephrata School District. During the time, McFarland began the cross country program at EHS, guiding it to league, district and state championships.

And for his efforts, the longtime Tiger mentor will be one of the first 13 inductees in the inaugural class of the Ephrata athletic Hall of Fame. As one of four coaches (along with Dave Johnson, Marty O'Brien and Chuck Panerio), McFarland will be honored on Hall of Fame weekend Sept. 27-28.

The wilderness ranger life is actually a little tame compared to how the 76-year-old McFarland spent his early adult life – he was a

smoke jumper, one of those guys who leap from a plane into forest fires. But the job also put him on another path – McFarland was introduced to the sister of one of his jump partners.

Since that meeting, Don and Chris McFarland have been married for 54 years and have two adult children, Joel and Kari. Both kids ran for their father at Ephrata High.

As the head cross country coach for the Tigers, and the man who first brought the sport to the school in 1971, McFarland tasted success that eludes so many coaches in their careers. His teams won 10 league titles, 11 district crowns and were state champions four times – the boys won back-to-back in 1987 and 1988 while the girls were the best in the state in 1984 and again in 1997.

And McFarland developed hundreds of solid runners, with the two best – Greg Metcalf in 1984 and Staci Hunter in 1997 – winning individual state championships. But the one thing that might be the most astonishing about all this is that McFarland wasn't a distance runner in his school days.

"I didn't run cross country – barely heard of it," he said, noting that he was a hurdler and mid-distance runner. "I had to write up a proposal and present it to the school board. I caught a lot of flak about it."

But McFarland was trying to bring the new team to the school after "three burley guys came to me and said they didn't feel like playing football – they wanted to run and wanted to know if I would be willing to coach," he recalled.

The board decided to give the new sport the okay but not much more. The first teams wore old Ephrata basketball uniforms, and the team traveled in a district station wagon to meets. McFarland didn't get paid for the first few years as the coach but he did have five guys ready to go running in 1971.

And the initial running course for meets in Ephrata was a little brutal, up Beasley Hill to the radio towers at the top. It was part of the learning curve McFarland had to ride to become one of the top coaches in state history – that part was carved in stone in 2000 when he was inducted into the Washington State Cross Country Coaches Association's Hall of Fame.

"I had to go to a lot of summer coaching classes because I had a lot to learn," he said. "I knew that first group of kids pretty well and I

loved coaching (he was also an eighth-grade basketball coach). They approached me in such a way that I knew they wanted to do something different. When they called me coach, I was hooked – I just wasn't sure the school board was going to go for it."

And McFarland always made sure to have good assistants to aid his cause. One of the early ones was one of his former runners, Michele (Ratigan) Webb, who went on to be Ephrata's athletic director – his last assistant, Ed Hamlett, became the Tigers' head coach when McFarland retired in 1997.

Competition was tough to find in central Washington in the early years because not a lot of schools were running cross country at the time, and success eluded the Tigers for more than a decade. "I recall running against Eastmont, Othello – there just weren't a lot of schools. It took a few years for the cross country program in Ephrata to gain respect and set the kind of standards that would attract the athletes," he said.

But that started to turn in 1984. With Brandi Evans finishing second (something she would do four times in her prep career) and with three others in the top 25 (Brenda Donehower sixth, Denise Whallon 14th, Julie Flint 21st) the Tiger girls captured the state A team title, sending the program down the path to future successes.

The boys team came completely together in 1987 when, led by Metcalf's championship run, they swept the league, district and state titles. Running at Fort Warden State Park in Port Angeles, Metcalf won in a time of 15 minutes, 24 seconds, four seconds ahead of the runner-up, Nathan Davis of Northwest Christian (Spokane).

"Greg had a lot of nervous energy and a strong cardio-vascular system. He never got tired and he never really understood how to run slow," said McFarland. "Really, it wouldn't have mattered who coached him because he was going to be successful. He had all the tools to be a great runner."

Then came the final season, 1997, and a freshman named Staci Hunter who led a senior-dominated Tiger girls team to the state title to send McFarland out a winner. Hunter (the only EHS runner to be a two-time state cross country champion) dominated the field in the first-ever state 2A finals, winning at 18:56.4, roughly 39

seconds ahead of second-place Lana Noble of Connell.

"Staci was a natural runner. She had the stride, the temperament – she was built like a runner," McFarland recalled. "The kids that year were so mentally tough and they wanted to please me. That always helped."

And given that he coached in an era when athletic success at Ephrata was the norm, with coaches like Johnson, O'Brien and others who were all guiding teams to success, McFarland said it ended up being easy for him to be successful as well.

"I had a lot of support from the other coaches. We talked about our teams, we supported each other – it was a lot of fun because we were all winning," he recalled. "We were out there for each other and we took nothing for granted. We put a lot of work into it and it all paid off."

And that hard work is why McFarland will always be one of the first in the school's Hall of Fame.

"I was happy to get the call, elated, but I was also happy for my program. It's not many coaches who get to build what we did from the ground up and see it through to success," McFarland said. "We had a great reputation in the state among the other teams and we represented our school very well."

"Partially it was the success. The other part was how we conducted ourselves, how well the kids turned out," he added. "I think about how I'd run things past Dave and Marty and the other guys – it was all part of why we succeeded. What we did was more than just winning."

The McFarland File
Ephrata High School Cross Country Team
League Titles – 10

Boys: 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1997

Girls: 1984, 1985, 1993, 1994

District Titles - 11

Boys: 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1997

Girls: 1984, 1985, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1997

State Championships – 4

Boys: 1987, 1988

Girls: 1984, 1997

Individual Champions - 2

Boys: Greg Metcalf (Class A) 1987

Girls: Staci Hunter (Class 2A) 1997



It took several years, but coach Don McFarland's Ephrata High cross country teams would eventually start hoisting trophies for their championship victories. At right, McFarland (far right) and his 1985 boys team showed off their district title hardware — above, the 1997 girls team with McFarland (right), assistant coach Ed Hamlett (left) and individual state champion Staci Hunter (top of the podium) were the first-ever state 2A girls winners, one of four state team championship teams McFarland coached.



Additional article regarding cross country team and Coach McFarland can be found in the "Tigerville News" newsletter which was developed in preparation for the Ephrata High School 100-year reunion in 2014. See: November 2012

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