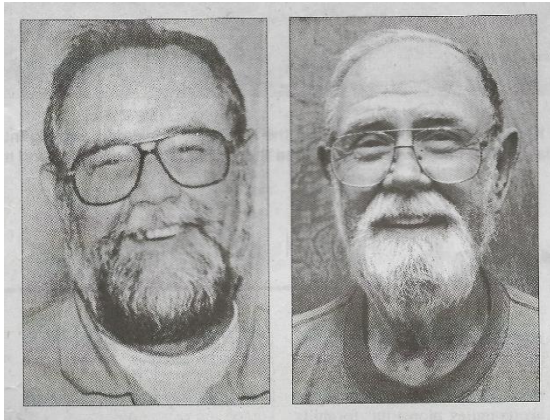


From the track to the Hall



George Smethers has served Ephrata athletics in many different capacities

**BY STEVEN SMITH
of the Journal**

EPHRATA – In the 84 years that George Smethers has been alive, he has carried many titles.

Husband and father, Teacher and coach. Statistician, historian, manager.

And on Sept. 28, Smethers will add one more title to the list, Hall of Famer.

Smethers will be among the first 13 inductees into the inaugural class of the new Ephrata High Hall of Fame, having been chosen for his body of work both in and out of the school's athletic department. The first group will be honored during the EHS Hall of Fame weekend Sept. 27-28.

"I honestly don't know why they chose me," he said, "I guess because I keep volunteering. It's a great honor."

Smethers is a native of Cosmopolis, a small town near Aberdeen – he graduated from Weatherwax (now known as Aberdeen) High School in 1953. He played football and basketball for the Bobcats as well as throwing the shot put and discus for the Aberdeen track team.

His first job out of high school in timber-rich Grays Harbor County was in a Hoquiam veneer

plant, which convinced him that a career in education would be better – he attended Grays Harbor College and Western Washington State College (now university). But his first teaching job, in Fort Yukon, Alaska, was before he finished his degree work. "I was broke and they needed teachers," he laughed.

After a year in Alaska and having gotten his teaching certification, Smethers and his wife, Jeanette, set out looking for their next stop – they returned to Washington state, where he took teaching jobs in Bay Center, Sedro Wooley and South Bend. The last school was where he offered his track expertise as an assistant coach, and the Indians won the first-ever class A state team title.

Then they made the move to Ephrata, "but we weren't going to stay more than two years. There weren't any trees around," Smethers laughed. Together the couple raised five children in the community and they'll celebrate their 65th wedding anniversary in October.

In a real sense, the 55 years of Smethers' life spent in Ephrata has been lived in two acts – the first 32 revolved around his career as an industrial arts teacher and coach, the part he retired from in 1990. When he got to town, he got into coaching football, wrestling and track at Ephrata Junior High.

That lasted until the fall of 1972 when tragedy struck the school with the death of long-time track mentor Ray Cross. The loss left track coaching jobs to be filled – Smethers stepped forward to take over the girls team, and the move proved to be the right one.

"No one else was going to take the job, so I volunteered. I just didn't want to see the girls program go down the tube," he recalled.

In the spring of 1973, the Tiger girls team, led by school-record setting sprinter Deb Agranoff and multi-evens specialist Marsha Kinney (who would win five state titles in three years), would "win" the state girls track team title – except they didn't. According to reporting at the time in the Grant County Journal, the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association didn't recognize girls track as a state title-eligible sport that year.

In a Journal story published in May 1990, when Smethers retired, he said the WIAA's decision "still makes me angry." But in recent years, the WIAA has recognized the girls championship, and a banner hangs on the wall at O'Brien Court that honors the title.

"It was the first state championship at the school, and the only one we had for a few years," Smethers said. "There were no classifications for the girls back then so we were beating much bigger schools."

There were 15 girls on his first team – 12 qualified for the state finals and eight would place in their events, with five gaining state individual championships. Kinney won the long jump, Agranoff the 100-yard dash – Dodi McAlpine was first in the 880-yard run, Susan Schuh captured the 440-yard title and the foursome of Agranoff, Kinney, Schuh and Lisa Lybecker were winners of the 440-relay.

Each of the four girls on that relay team were different religions and each had different religious medals," Smethers recalled. "They kissed each other's medals before every (relay) and they did it one more time at state."

But as good as he said all of his athletes were, Kinney was the best he coached, Smethers said. Kinney will join her mentor as one of the 13 inductees to the Tiger Hall in September.

"She had natural ability, she worked very hard at it and she was coachable – she would listen to what we told her. I'd say she was the best I coached," he said. "She was a great person and a great athlete. All of those girls were great to work with."

Kinney said she still remembers the day Smethers approached her in a hallway at the school to tell her he was the new girls coach and admits she wasn't quite sure what to make of the situation.

"I never was very close to Ray Cross, but I was shocked when (Smethers) told me he was our coach," she said. "But we never had a cross word with him, there was never a negative comment – everything was always positive and we did very well with him as our coach."

Retirement took Smethers out of the classroom nearly 30 years ago, but it didn't keep him away from the track, or from Tiger athletics, for that matter. He kept volunteering at prep track meets around the area, doing enough that he began working as a meet manager – his star attraction over the years has been the annual Ray Cross Memorial meet each March.

He has worked meets all around central Washington, including Ephrata, Quincy, Othello and Connell. "I like putting the meets together. Track isn't my favorite sport to watch but it's been part of my life since the seventh grade and I love it," he said.

He has also done time at Ephrata High as the official statistician at Tiger home wrestling meets, a task he gave up a few years ago, and as a volunteer stat keeper for Ephrata basketball. Though he doesn't do the latter in an official capacity, his time and efforts are always welcome, said EHS boys hoop coach Brandon Evenson.

"Where to start? George is a great supporter of athletics at Ephrata – his details on the history of track and basketball are amazing," Evenson said. "I am always excited to see him and his wife at games. They're great fans of the athletes and the work the kids put in."

But the coaching, managing, all the states – it all might pale in the light of what has been his passion project for many years. Smethers has compiled a complete history of Ephrata High track and field, covering every athlete that has competed in school history – it's a work that covers decades, has reached seven volumes and is moving into an eighth at this time.

Smethers is also researching Tiger wrestling and recently began a basketball search.

"When I took over both track teams as the head coach in 1975, I couldn't find records for the boys. I started looking through old newspapers, talking to people, whatever I could to find records," Smethers recalled. "I'm getting near the end for wrestling, and I'm hoping that I'm around long enough to finish basketball."

"If that one takes as long as tracks," he laughed, "I'll be an old man."

Additional article regarding Smethers in "Tigerville News" newsletter which was developed in preparation for the Ephrata High School 100-year reunion in 2014. See: **April 2013**

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