

# The Legacy of Dave Johnson



**BY STEVEN SMITH**  
**of the Journal**

EPHRATA – Dave Johnson wasn't planning to stick around Ephrata for too long. Young, single, the kid from Spokane – he was headed to the big city and bright lights of Seattle for his teaching career.

But in an odd twist, the Vietnam War messed that up for him.

"I had good credentials, I was strong academically, I had great references. I was headed for Bellevue or Seattle," said the retired Ephrata High baseball coach. "But one of the first questions they asked was 'what's your lottery number (for the Vietnam draft) – I told them it was 112, which meant I could have been drafted any time.'"

So, when he was offered the job in Ephrata, it started Johnson on a path that would lead to more than three decades of success. And that life will be rewarded once again on Saturday, Sept. 28, when Johnson becomes one of the first 13 inductees into the new Ephrata High athletic Hall of Fame.

A closer look at the first class of the Hall shows that Johnson, who coached Tiger baseball for

36 years, has his thumbprint on much of the inaugural group. It includes two of his former players (Jeff Plew, Gary Hagy), his very first state championship club (the 1977 Tigers), his former assistant coach and business partner (Marty O'Brien) and the coach who gave up the baseball team and became one of Johnson's mentors (Chuck Panerio).

"I don't know if it surprises me that we're all here – well, kind of. You see Marty and Chuck and Plew and Hagy and all those guys – they were very good coaches and athletes, and the 1977 team was very good, the first state championship for boys," Johnson said. "I thought we had a chance to get there because we've been around for a long time."

"I'm already in two Halls of Fame, so if you can't make the Hall at your own high school where you did all the work..." he laughed. "I was humble about it, to be selected. As far as my record and championships, it would probably be 'why wasn't he put in,' if I wasn't there."

Johnson being one of the first to get into the Hall of Fame at EHS should not come as a surprise. When he retired in 2006, he was (and still is today) the winningest high school baseball coach in the state.



His career record in 890 games was 687-201-2, a winning percentage of 77.2 percent. He recorded 20 seasons with 20 or more victories and appeared to be making it his personal mission to fill the school's trophy cases – his teams won 25 league titles; 20 district and 16 regional crowns; made 16 appearances in the state final four; played in 13 state title games; and captured eight state championships.

And with those numbers, Johnson is a member of both the Washington Interscholastic Baseball Coaches Association and Washington Interscholastic Activities Association (WIAA) halls of fame.

But it didn't start out all that well. Johnson showed up in Ephrata in 1971, along with longtime assistant, business partner and friend Marty O'Brien (who joked that Johnson was given the head coaches job because he got here first) – their first team was 7-10 for the season.

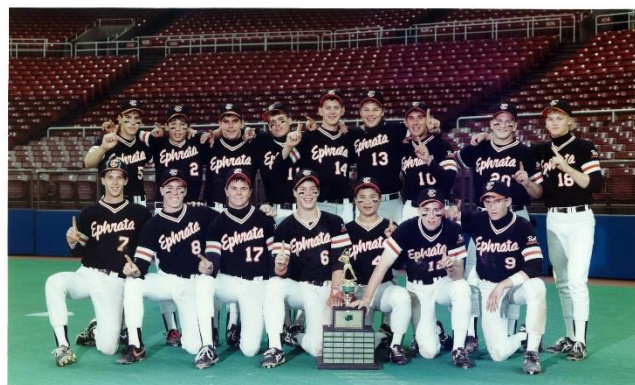
Johnson took over the program from Panerio, who was the head baseball and wrestling coach at the time. But there was a brief moment when that might have been in doubt.

"Chuck told me one time that he was debating if he should give up wrestling or give up baseball. I got hired on the basis of being either the varsity or JV baseball coach until he decided to drop baseball – it was great for me," Johnson recalled. "He was kind of a mentor for me in teaching and coaching – he was always 10 years ahead of me.

"He took me under his wing and we became friends. I was a bachelor that first year, so sometimes he'd take me home for lunch," he continued. "As a young coach, Chuck showed me that Ephrata could win – sometimes, the programs were hurting as far as winning league championships."

One year after he arrived, in 1972, the journey to greatness began. The Tigers won their first league baseball title under Johnson with a 15-8 record – in 1975 and 1976, back-to-back 20-plus win seasons, Ephrata was league, district and regional winners but came up short and settled for second in the state.

The best ever season for EHS, however, was just a year away – the 1977 team went 28-2 and won it all, the first state title for Ephrata boys in school history. Then came the 1980s, the Decade of Dominance at Ephrata High, and Johnson's teams were at the heart of the whole thing – eight straight league titles from 1980-87, a ninth in 1989; 10 district championships and eight regional crowns in 10 years; and state championships in 1981, 1982, 1983, 1985, 1987 and 1989.



**1989 STATE CHAMPIONS**

The 1990s saw a slowdown for his program – there would be just one state title when the 1999 squad (that featured his son, Bryan) won the 2A crown. His teams were able to dominate the new Central Washington Athletic Conference through the first six years of the 2000s, winning the CWAC each year from 1998-2006 and bringing home the final three state trophies.

While much of that success fell directly on Johnson's shoulders because of his role as head coach, he is quick to share the accolades with O'Brien and longtime C-squad coach Gary Archer. The three worked as a cohesive unit until the early 2000s.

"Marty was a great motivator – our strengths were so that we complimented each other so well, and when Gary Archer joined us, it all just worked," Johnson said. "So much of our success was because Marty mentally prepared our kids. Now I go down to the ballfield and our names are up there – one of the reasons I wanted to take care of the park was to honor him.

Johnson-O'Brien STADIUM			
TIGER BASEBALL TRADITION			
LEAGUE TITLES	DISTRICT TITLES	REGIONAL TITLES	STATE FINISHES
1972 1982 1991 2003	1975 1984 1994	1975 1987 2006	1975 2 <sup>nd</sup> 1985 1 <sup>st</sup> 2002 3 <sup>rd</sup>
1975 1983 1992 2004	1976 1985 1999	1976 1988	1976 2 <sup>nd</sup> 1987 1 <sup>st</sup> 2006 3 <sup>rd</sup>
1976 1984 1998 2005	1977 1986 2001	1977 1989	1977 1 <sup>st</sup> 1988 3 <sup>rd</sup>
1977 1985 1999 2006	1980 1987 2002	1980 1993	1980 2 <sup>nd</sup> 1989 1 <sup>st</sup>
1978 1986 2000	1981 1988 2004	1981 1999	1981 1 <sup>st</sup> 1993 2 <sup>nd</sup>
1980 1987 2001	1982 1989 2006	1982 2000	1982 1 <sup>st</sup> 1999 1 <sup>st</sup>
1981 1989 2002	1983 1993 2007	1983 2002	1983 1 <sup>st</sup> 2000 4 <sup>th</sup>





"Marty would come to me with these great ideas that he'd come up with and I'd think 'oh man, this is gonna be a lot of work,' and then it was a lot of work," he laughed. "But he motivated the kids, he motivated me and he motivated the parents. A lot

of what we did was Marty getting people to do things."

But success wasn't just limited to the Tigers – Johnson and O'Brien founded and operated the TBI Baseball Camps for more than 30 years. He and his wife, Vicki, have been married for 47 years and raised three kids (Kim, Bryan and Rachel).

But he and the rest of the coaches going into the first hall (Johnson, O'Brien, Panerio and cross country coach Don McFarland) got to accomplish the things they did because, even though they weren't planning to do it, they all stayed in Ephrata.

"The thing about the coaches who got selected is they were committed," he said. "Marty had 30-some years in the district, Don had more than 30 years, Chuck Panerio was here for a lot of years.

"I was there for 36 years, the head coach for 36 years. We were successful for many of those years, even before there were state playoffs in baseball. I had longevity, the commitment to Ephrata School District as a teacher and a coach – I think that had a lot to do with it."



## Coach Dave Johnson

Dave Johnson was a graduate of Shadle Park High School before attending Whitworth College. At Whitworth, he was a member of the Pirates baseball team while earning his history and political science degree. After college Dave took a teaching position at Ephrata High School where he taught history. While teaching, he was a head baseball coach and assistant basketball coach for 36 years. He owned and operated T.B.I. Baseball Camps for 32 years with business partner Marty O'Brien. The four-week, live-in camp was for kids ages 8-18.

Johnson ended his career as the winningest baseball coach in the state of Washington with 687 victories, and second in total state championships with eight. As a coach, he led the Ephrata Tigers to 28 appearances in the state tournament and outscored opponents 489-239. In 36 years, his teams won 25 league titles, 20 district titles, 16 regional titles, and placed at state 16 times.

Dave Johnson led by example through his work ethic, passion, and devotion to the community. Michele Webb, Ephrata High School Athletic Director, said, "Coach Johnson has taught many student athletes what the words, dedication, hard work, respect, integrity and discipline mean."

He was inducted into the Washington State Baseball Hall of Fame in 1988. For his efforts and dedication to the Ephrata Baseball program, he was honored by having the baseball stadium at Ephrata High School named after him and fellow coach Marty O'Brien.