

Following his idol to the Hall



From Ephrata to college to the minor leagues, Gary Hagy worked hard to make the game of baseball his life's work

**BY STEVEN SMITH
of the Journal**

EPHRATA – Jeff Plew roamed the infield dirt between second and third bases at Tiger Stadium for three years as the starting shortstop at Ephrata High School.

Gary Hagy was watching him do it. And admiring what he saw.

“Jeff Plew was my idol,” said the 50-year-old Hagy, who ended up having several things in common with Plew. Both played shortstop at Ephrata for coach Dave Johnson; both went on to play baseball at Eastern Washington University; they were roommates in Cheney for a short time.

And on Sept. 28, both will join their former head coach as part of the inaugural Class of 2019 to the first Ephrata High athletic Hall of Fame. Hagy, who works as a lab technician for Moses Lake Industries, will be one of 13 inductees as the hall's first class, being honored that night during a banquet at St. Rose of Lima School.

Hagy was in the right place at the right time when he was in high school, attending Ephrata from 1983 to 1987 – that was right at the peak of the 1980s, the Decade of Dominance in Tiger sports. Before he was through, Hagy would play for three state championship teams, be named all-Caribou Trail League in the three sports he eventually competed in and be selected as an all-state player in baseball and basketball.

But Hagy, when he was contacted by Ephrata High athletic director Bryan Johnson, said he kept the news of his selection to the first EHS Hall of Fame in perspective.

“It really didn't hit me at first. I knew they were doing (a Hall) but I didn't know if I'd have a chance to get in,” he said. “It's very humbling, a real honor for me.”

Hagy would become a three-sport athlete but not until his senior year when he decided to play football – it was a well-time choice. In his very first game, a 21-6 win over Cascade, Hagy caught a 28-yard touchdown pass from his brother, Dale – he ended his grid career by throwing a pass of his own, a 65-yard scoring toss to Troy Zerb in the Tigers' 32-15 win over Lynden Christen to capture the 1986 state A football title.

“I played football in junior high but I wasn't very big so it really wasn't for me,” Hagy recalled. “(Bill) Betcher got Dale to play quarterback and I'd go workout in the summer catching passes for him. That made me want to try it.”

There was also Gary Hagy, the basketball player who played 81 games in three varsity years, scoring 1,222 points, an average of 15.1 points per-game. Again, he was three-times selected all-CTL – in the end, he was also an all-state selection as he was one of the main weapons in the Tigers' run to a fifth-place finish at state and chosen to play a state all-star game the summer after graduation.

“Yeah, the end of my senior year was a whirlwind for me. I played all-state basketball, I played all-state baseball (and was the offensive MVP),” he recalled, “then got picked by Dan White (Eastmont baseball coach) to play in a series against a Japanese team – we played two games in Tacoma, one in Los Angeles and two in San Diego.”

By the middle of his sophomore baseball season in 1985, Hagy had played his way into the starting job at shortstop – he stayed there until they handed him a diploma in the spring of 1987. He hit .436 in the first year and was key to the Tigers beating Toledo for the state “A” baseball title – he also drove in 27 runs, scored 32 times, had three home runs and stole 15 bases.

The numbers were nearly identical in his junior year (.453, 21 RBI, 28 runs) but while Hagy thrived, the team slipped at playoff time and missed the 1986 title game, settling for third place. The Tigers bounced back in 1987 to win the state title with their shortstop at the point – Hagy hit .458 in his senior year with 29 RBI, 36 runs and seven home runs.

For Johnson, Hagy represented the end of a decade (dating back to the late 1970s) in which Ephrata baseball was stronger at the shortstop position than at any time in program history. The coach added that he wanted to have Hagy on the pitcher’s mound at times, but had that idea shot down by assistant coach Marty O’Brien.

“In 10 years, we only had four guys play shortstop here – Doug Moore, Jeff Plew, then Lance Yount for one year and Gary Hagy for the last three years, and they were all great,” Johnson said. “Marty said that your shortstop was the main guy and they couldn’t pitch – they all could have pitched for us, they all had great fastballs, but Marty knew the shortstop position was that important to our teams.

“Gary decided to play football his senior year for the first time and he made the starting lineup – that’s how good an athlete he was,” Johnson continued. “He had a strong arm and was quick for being a big guy (6-foot-3). He was a good, coachable athlete – he hardly ever said anything but led by example.”

So, in three varsity seasons, Hagy found himself under the tutelage of three Ephrata coaching legends – Johnson for baseball, Betcher for football and O’Brien (also a 2019 EHS inductee), in basketball and baseball.

“Playing for all of them – they weren’t new to it, they had so much knowledge and experience,” he said. “At the time, I didn’t realize that I had it so good. I got to see guys that gave me so many advantages.”

Hagy came out of high school headed to Cheney, to Eastern Washington University, the

college his idol (Plew) had played for – he made that choice just before the playoffs in his senior year. Unfortunately, EWU baseball and wrestling got caught in a Title IX cut of men’s sports at the school and was axed three years after Hagy got there.

But a past performance, in the Japanese series game at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles three years earlier, paid off. UCLA coach Gary Adams, who had talked to Hagy about becoming a Bruin at that point, was still interested and brought the former Tiger to his team for one year.

At the end of that year, Major League Baseball came calling. Hagy was picked by the California Angels in the 10th round of the 1991 draft – the Angels sent him back to the Pacific Northwest, to the Boise Hawks of the Northwest League.

“I thought I had a chance to get drafted. I led (UCLA) in home runs and RBIs, and the scouts were talking to a lot of the UCLA guys that year,” Hagy recalled. “I even had sports agents wanting to sign me. I had hoped to get picked by the Mariners, but the Angels were also in the running.”

While he wouldn’t reveal how much his contract was, he did say his signing bonus “was a pretty good number.”

After a season in Boise, he traveled the country, playing in Iowa and California before getting dropped by the Angels – after a year of baseball in Corpus Christie, Texas, he signed on with the Cleveland Indians.

Three more years in the minors, playing for the Indians in Ohio and North Carolina, he was released by Cleveland and spent the final years playing two seasons with the independent Reno Chukars before calling it quits.

“I was 28-years-old and working a part time job while trying to play baseball. I finally came to the realization that I was no longer a major league prospect,” Hagy said. “It wasn’t an easy decision. They wanted me to stay but I had decided it was time to go home.

“I was actually okay with it. I had come to terms with the fact that it was over,” he continued. “I wasn’t getting better, and younger, more talented kids were coming along.

But as his baseball life was ending, he still had one last great catch. Hagy met his wife, Megan, in Reno as he was making the decision to retire

from baseball – the couple have two children, 15-year-old Gareth and 12-year-old Mya.

“Baseball was what I was supposed to do. I wouldn’t have met my wife and had our kids without baseball,” Hagy said. “When I played at Ephrata, we had such great teams. I’m proud to be able to represent them.

“I played three sports as a senior and we won two state titles. It was really all about the team at Ephrata,” he added. “I was a pretty good baseball player but we had lots of good baseball players here, a team full of them. It was a pretty cool thing.”