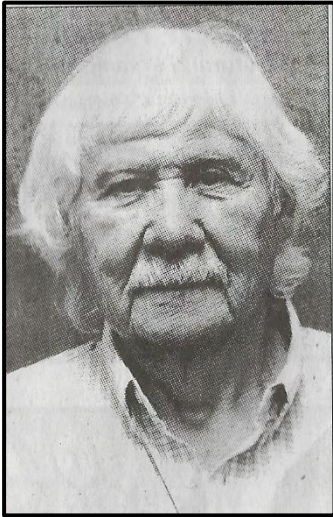


# From Farm Boy to State Champion



**Jay Stierwalt rides all-American football mention and state wrestling title to spot in inaugural Ephrata Hall of Fame**

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

EPHRATA — Jay Stierwalt was a state championship wrestler. He was recognized for his prowess on the football field and he had the strong arm of a javelin thrower. And yet, it all might not have been.

Stierwalt was lacking two things he needed to play sports at Ephrata High School in the 1950s.

“You need a dollar for insurance and you needed a jock strap,” said Stierwalt. “I didn’t have either.”

A self-proclaimed “poor farm kid,” Stierwalt got a boost from a coach to get the buck and the jock, which started his path to becoming an Ephrata pioneer. On Sept. 28, Stierwalt will be among 13 former Tiger athletes and coaches to be inducted as the very first class of the EHS Hall of Fame.

At age 78, Stierwalt will be the oldest athlete in the first class and second oldest inductee he

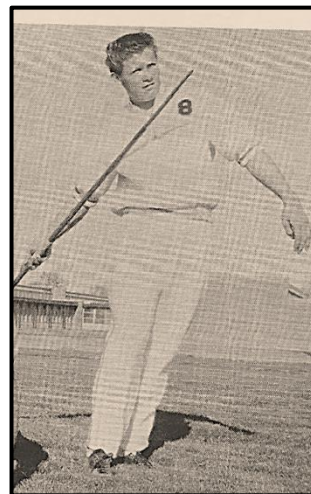
is topped only by former Ephrata High track coach and community supporter George Smethers (84).

“When I played, I gave it everything I had. I wasn’t fast but I was strong and I was always ready to go,” Stierwalt said. “Guys used to tell me I was one of the best athletes they ever saw come out of the school — I don’t know about that. I did have a few accomplishments and I did the best I could.”

A native of Oklahoma, Stierwalt was a small child, the youngest of 10, when his family came to Ephrata in 1943. “We came because there was no work back there and they needed orchard workers in central Washington because of (World War II), he recalled. It was in grade school that he met his wife, Sue — they dated all through high school, got married after graduation, raised two children and have been married for 58 years.

After high school, Stierwalt did play a year of football at what was then Eastern Washington State College — he would eventually work as a commercial painting contractor in the Spokane area where he and his wife live today. He retired in 2003.

According to Sue Stierwalt, one of the couple’s best friends, former Tiger three-sport standout Jerry Hartman, got them to start dating while in high school. It seemed like a natural fit, she said, “because he sat behind me in class, and I’d lean to the side so he could cheat off my paper.”



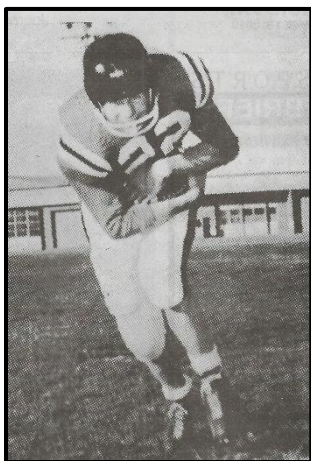
Stierwalt was the school’s second-ever state championship wrestler, capturing the 175-pound title in his senior year (1959) at the state finals in Moses Lake. He was also one of the top fullback-linebackers in the region and capped his athletic career by competing on the Tiger

track team as a thrower. But he said that when he started playing his games, it wasn’t for glory.

"I was a farm boy, a hay seed. I played football for something to do."

He was a four-year athlete at Ephrata, playing two years of varsity football – as a senior, he scored nine rushing touchdowns from the old single-wing formation that saw the ball snapped to any of four players in the backfield. Stierwalt's abilities on the gridiron made him one of three Tigers that would be named as an honorable mention selection to a 1959 All-American high school football team.

He would wrestle to a 10-4 record in his junior year of 1958 and finish second in the state at 168 pounds, then move up to 175 and won it all in 1959.



It was a time when the game of football was transitioning, going from the days of leather pads and helmets to plastics, he recalled – the league Ephrata played in included Quincy, Moses Lake, Eastmont, and Wenatchee. It was also a time when amateur wrestling in Washington

state high schools was relatively new, so there was just one state tournament with no classifications – the Tigers, who had meets against Soap Lake back in the day, would often be facing powerhouse programs like Moses Lake, Arlington and Sedro Wooley.

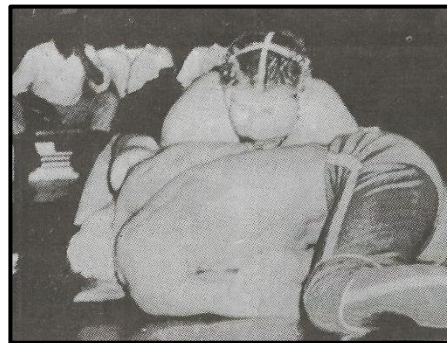
It would be an Arlington grappler, Gary Way, that he defeated in his final wrestling match to win his state title.

He kind of hurt himself before the match when he came over to talk to me," Stierwalt said, "He came to me before the last match and was thrilled, said the worst that could happen was that he'd finish second in the state. I told him that's what he was going to get, then I went out and beat him.

"The match was actually close. In the last couple of minutes, I just decided to kick it up a gear," he continued, "My coach asked me what I was waiting for and I told him I did what I had to do when I had to do it."

The coach in his senior year, Roger James, was trying to promote the sport in the area, so much so that he came up with a plan. James wanted to get the north central district tournament in Ephrata, so he had his team wrestling in exhibition matches in an attempt to make it happen, a move that would never be allowed today under rules of the state athletic association.

The plan ended up working – the Tigers would finish second in both the district and the state team scoring that season.



It was just a simple thing. The sport was new and we wanted to be included," he recalled. "People around town, most of them didn't know what we were doing until they saw us wrestle.

"Wrestling was the same as football – it was something to do in the winter when we weren't working the farm," Stierwalt said. "It was all so new, so we just wrestled a lot, anywhere we could. We were still learning it."

When asked if he had been considered a good athlete, Stierwalt shrugged off the reference, "I was a big strong farm kid. That's what most of us were and yeah, I guess we were pretty good."

Sue Stierwalt said that sports were "just natural to Jay," but he also downplayed that notion, "It wasn't that natural when you worked on the farm. It was tough – we were poor. My father was an alcoholic and he never saw me play but my mom came to a few of my football games."

"Now a days, kids have to go to camps to learn how to play the games. For me, camp in the summer was tossing around hundred-pound bales of hay," Stierwalt said. "This is a great honor for me, but there were a lot of guys here like me, a lot of good athletes. Some of us just had to work a little harder to be good."

