

Athlete Hall of Fame Inductee



Jeff Plew: “The Franchise Player” starred for Tigers in three sports early in the 1980s Decade of Dominance.

**By STEVEN SMITH
of the Journal**

EPHRATA – In the decade of the 1980s, there were dozens of top-flight athletes passing through the halls of Ephrata High School. Some could run like crazy with a football, or shoot jumpers from the top of the key, or hit and run and throw the baseball better than the rest.

But in 1983, in the early days of the Ephrata Tigers’ Decade of Greatness, there was only one to be called “a franchise player.”

That was Jeff Plew.

A three-sport athlete. A multiple-time selection to the all-Caribou Trail League, in all three sports. A local kid who would go on to have a solid collegiate baseball career. All of that described Jeff Plew.

And on Sept. 28, his alma mater will present him with one final honor. On that Saturday night, the 54-year-old Plew will be among the first 13 inductees into the new Ephrata High Hall of Fame.

“It’s a pretty neat deal,” said Plew, who now lives in Richland. “Most of the high schools down here have their Hall of Fame walls up but I’d never seen one in Ephrata – this was a surprise to me. Obviously, I’m very excited to be among the first group of people to be honored.”

Plew was one of the true early standouts in the decade, a time that saw Ephrata teams win 38 league, 33 district and 10 state championships. His greatest success came from 1981 to 1983 when he played for coach Dave Johnson on three straight league, district and state title winning baseball teams.

Since his playing days, Plew has spent 30 years in the Lamb-Weston foods organization, where he currently works as the director of quality for global business.

Getting into Ephrata sports was almost custom-built for Plew. The son of retired teacher Denis Plew, the youngster grew up around Ephrata Junior High, where dad helped coach in the school’s interscholastic program.

“I got to watch all the athletes as I grew up, so I was always interested in sports from a very early age,” Plew said. “My Dad kept all of us interested in being athletes. He was a huge influence on me.”

And it was that kind of influence that Plew passed along to his three sons, Colton, Stetson and Dillon. The youngest, Dillon, ended up having the most success in the game – after three seasons with Washington State University baseball, the youngest Plew was picked in the 40th round of the Major League draft by the Houston Astros in June.

Plew’s best year was in 1982-83, his senior season – it began when he played football for coach John Kinnard. On a team that relied mostly on the running game, Plew was a receiver, a wingback that caught 31 passes for 384 yards and four touchdowns, and ran for 168 yards and three scores, numbers good enough to make him an all-league first team selection.

For Johnson, Plew was the shortstop, the heart of the infield defense. He was a .529 hitter in 1983 with 38 RBI, 28 runs scored and 10 doubles and he would go on to play in the annual All-State baseball series.

Plew knew nothing but success in Tiger baseball, making it to the varsity as a sophomore and playing in the state title victory over Charles Wright Academy in 1981. He started at shortstop for three years and was a key member of the Tigers’ championship wins in 1982 against North Mason and in the spring 1983 against Ridgefield.

His baseball coach, Dave Johnson, said Plew was the first piece in a decade-long stretch that saw the best shortstops in school history play the position.

"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. "(Coach Marty O'Brien) 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.

"Jeff was a great guy and a great shortstop – he hardly ever made an error, he hit over .500 his senior year. He could run, he could throw, he was a great fielder," the coach continued. "Jeff was coachable, a leader, never gave us any problems. Doug and Jeff and Gary were all superb athletes and superb individuals."

Prior to the start of his senior basketball season, Plew was given the "franchise player" moniker in the Grant County Journal and lived up to it for coach Marty O'Brien. He led the team in scoring that winter, scoring 457 points (an average of 20.8 per-game) while grabbing 100 rebounds and recording 42 steals in 22 games – in one midseason stretch, Plew exploded for 169 points in nine games.

"A franchise player? I never felt like that was me. We had a great coach in Marty O'Brien and he did so much to promote Ephrata athletics," Plew recalled. "But he also never gave us the time to soak that kind of stuff up. No one on any of our teams thought they were better than the next guy.

"It just happened that the team would set me up as one of the scorers, so I could take the shots."

But for all the success on the baseball field, which eventually led him to a playing career at Eastern Washington University, Plew said there was one disappointment for himself and his fellow senior basketball players. In two varsity years, O'Brien's squad that featured Plew failed to win a district title – in the final year, the Tigers were out of the tournament in two games.

"A couple of things went wrong. The other teams got smarter and they switched their defenses against us," he said. "We probably should have dreamed up some new plays back

then. I just couldn't score – I was getting the same shots I'd always gotten but they weren't falling."

On the other hand, Plew said one of the most magical moments that he still recalls is the state A baseball title clash with Charles Wright his sophomore year, a game the Tigers had to come from behind to win. Playing in the Kingdome for the first time, Johnson was forced to change his starting defense because his regular second baseman, John Beierman, was ill.

"Rick Sage had to play second. No one figured we had a chance to beat Charles Wright," Plew recalled. "We needed a run to win it, so coach Johnson brought John in, who wasn't 100 percent healthy, to run for us and he scored. It was just one of those things – you play right, you get the breaks.

"After that, I just wanted to be there every year."

Two more years and two more state baseball titles followed, along with a lifetime of memories. For Plew, it was all part of the path that led to his nomination and eventual induction this fall to the Hall of Fame.

"I was blessed with so many great coaches my whole life. I got so much knowledge from them," he said. "It was all just part of my makeup as I went through high school.

"I learned to have a good work ethic, a good attitude and a passion for what I did," Plew concluded. "I excelled at three sports, and was part of three state championship teams, and yeah, we had great teams. I was just lucky – I got to be there at the start of the tradition in Ephrata."