

John Swogger

Left mark on Altoona basketball, former players

By JIM LANE

Fierce competitor. Hard worker. Disciplinarian. Fundamentally sound.

Those are some of the traits that John Swogger's former players use to describe their coach, who is being inducted into the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame with the Class of 2006.

Over a span of 12 seasons, 1968 through 1980, Swogger was head basketball coach at Altoona Area High School. During his tenure, the Mountain Lions compiled a record of 238-77 and won nine District 6 championships.

"I was fortunate to come up under a coach like Coach Swogger," said Johnny Moore, who went on to an outstanding NBA career with the San Antonio Spurs. "I wasn't the biggest or strongest or most talented, but my ability, fundamental skills and work ethic were because of him.

"I'm eternally grateful for what he deposited into my life," said Moore, a 1994 Blair Hall inductee.

Swogger grew up in Wampum, Pa., played for legendary high school coach Butler Hennon and got his first coaching job as an assistant to Hennon. After three seasons and two state championships, Swogger left Wampum to become head coach at Mercer. In seven seasons, Swogger took Mercer to five state title appearances.

"We lost in the finals three years in a row, and I was beginning to wonder if I could win the big one," Swogger said. "However, the worm finally turned and we won back-to-back state titles."

Altoona went shopping for a head coach after a disappointing 1967-68 season and latched on to Swogger.

"Eddie McCluskey of Farrell told me to apply for the job," Swogger said. "I don't think I even knew where Altoona was, but I applied for the job and got it."

He rattled off names of then school board mem-



Coach Swogger (right), with assistant coach Art Taneyhill, brought excitement to Altoona Area High School basketball.

bers Chick Dillen, Paul Reynolds, Milt Neuman and Don Beichler, as well as the superintendent, Dr. Tom Heslop. All were instrumental in wooing him to Altoona.

"They treated me great," Swogger said. "I liked the junior high system - there were three at the time - and my next question was 'do you have a beagle club?' because I told them I wouldn't come unless I could bring my beagles."

When told there was a beagle club nearby, the Swoggers - John, wife Sally and their six children plus the dog kennels - packed up and came to Altoona.

That was the beginning of a new era in Altoona Area High School basketball. Swogger brought an intense and exciting style that created unprecedented interest in Mountain Lion hoops. Primarily known as a football power, AAHS basketball, under Swogger and his first

assistant, Art Taneyhill, gained new respect.

"I was in elementary school when he gave his first clinic," Moore said. "He stressed from the beginning that you needed a good work ethic to be successful. He also infiltrated the junior highs and everybody ran that fast-break system."

Swogger's teams of the early 1970s, with Billy Moore clearing the boards and Larry Betar as the point on the break, were exciting to watch.

"That was the epitome of what the fast break was supposed to look like," said Johnny Moore, who became the Lions' point guard a couple of years later. "They had a great rebounder, a great point guard and guys who could fill the lanes."

Swogger's fast break became known statewide, and the Lions were notorious for piling up big scores against quality opponents. The Jaffa Mosque was filled most nights the Lions were in town.

"That was exciting," Swogger said. "I think we won something like 44 in a row at the Mosque, and it was a great atmosphere. We probably beat some teams we

had no business beating."

Swogger's aggressive style included a tough schedule.

"I didn't care who we played," said Swogger, who upgraded the schedule with powerhouse teams from the WPIAL and Pittsburgh City League. "We went to Farrell, Sharon, New Castle and Reading because good competition makes your players better. And I think the fans enjoyed it."

Swogger loved to watch the Boston Celtics' fast break with Bill Russell, Bob Cousy and Bill Sharman, and said he knew he could teach his teams how to run it.

"We worked hard on defense," he said, "but I was an offensive-minded coach. We played 94 feet. Get the ball, get it up, and run, run, run."

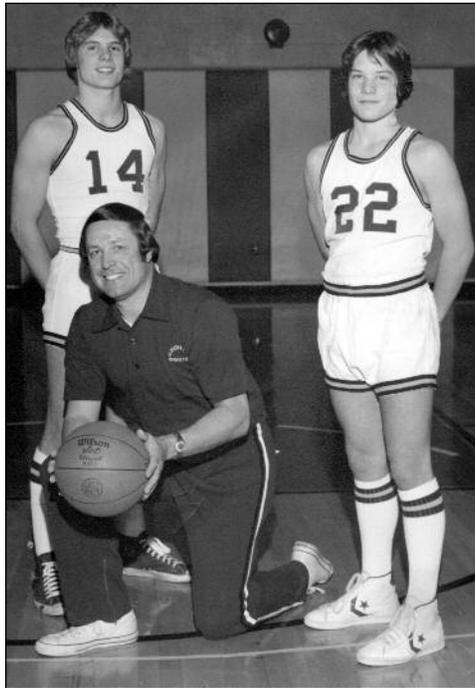
Even though he loved the fast tempo style, Swogger was known for keeping a tight rein on his players. Besides basketball, Swogger had success as a handler of beagle dogs and professional baseball player. He finished several champion beagle dogs and played a year in the Cleveland Indians farm system. He says his success in those endeavors made him push his players to be their best.

"Sometimes I wonder how the kids played for me," he said, laughing. "I never did anything to humiliate them. I wanted them to become the best players they possibly could be, and I handled them all differently.

"I think discipline and winning go hand in hand."

Larry McAleer was a guard on Swogger's teams in the early '70s. As a junior, he was on the team that upset PIAA favorite Penn Hills in the playoffs, and, as a senior, his team lost to Ringgold and Joe Montana in the playoffs at the Civic Arena.

"He was a disciplinarian," McAleer said. "He got the most out of every player. He was so fundamentally sound. He worked hard every day and was great at developing plans to win a game. He had an aura about him. It might not be a good comparison, but he



Coach and two of his sons - Matt and Johnny.

was like Bobby Knight at the high school level. He was demanding, well prepared and put his whole effort into winning."

Although his career at Altoona was full of many highlights, Swogger also suffered his share of disappointments.

"The Beaver Falls game," he said, recalling a playoff loss at the War Memorial, which prevented a trip to the state finals. "It still haunts me."

The Lions had a lead late in the game but let it slip away.

"I really wanted to win a state title for Altoona," he said. "Not for me, because I won a couple at Wampum and Mercer, but I wanted it for the community because it's such a great community."

Although he doesn't like to dwell on it, the alleged recruiting of Ricky Tunstall from Cleveland did not go over well with a lot of people in the community.

"Probably not a good move, and it probably wasn't worth it," Swogger said.

Following a 27-3 record and District 6 title, Swogger began feeling some burnout, and he retired after the 1979-80 season.

"Maybe I should I stayed longer," he said. "If someone on the board or administration had suggested that I gut it out for a couple more years, I might have, but I didn't."

Although he's been out of the coaching ranks for several years, Swogger, now 70, is still active. He's worked as athletic director and basketball director at the Summit Tennis & Athletic Club for the past 12 years, organizing and supervising leagues, and he still gives private lessons.

"I enjoy the kids, and I still love high school basketball," he said. "It's a part of me and always will be."

On his selection to the Hall of Fame, Swogger said: "I'm really honored. This is the icing on the cake."

Randy Allen, a member of the Blair Hall's Class of 2000, is ecstatic that his former coach is joining him.

"It's awesome," Allen said from his California home. "I love the man, I really do. He and his family mean that much to me."

Allen, who went on to an outstanding career at IUP after graduation from Altoona High, said Swogger has been instrumental in his life.

"When you're young and playing, you don't always realize what your coach is," Allen said. "But, the older you get, you realize how great a man he was, is, and always will be.

"He was a tremendous influence on me, and I have awesome respect for him," Allen said. "I have nothing but great memories of playing for him, but more importantly, what a privilege it's been to have him in my life."



Swogger bio

Sport: Basketball.

Hometown: Wampum.

College: Geneva.

Hall of Fame achievement: Coached Altoona to nine District 6 basketball championships.

Current residence: Tyrone