

INDUCTEE PROFILE

More than a coach

Tom Irwin mentored players into young men at BG

By John Hartsock

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In a stellar four-decade high-school football coaching career, Tom Irwin Jr. always stressed the intangibles much more than he did the Xs and Os.

While his coaching colleagues were diagramming plays, Irwin was motivating as only he could by appealing to his players' heart. His halftime and postgame pep talks made lifetime impacts during a sparkling coaching tenure at Bishop Guilfoyle and Hollidaysburg Area that earned him induction into the Pennsylvania Football Coaches Hall of Fame two years ago and will earn him enshrinement into the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame this weekend.

John Franco, who is establishing his own Hall of Fame coaching career at Tyrone Area High School, regards Irwin as his mentor and biggest coaching role model. Franco played high school football for Irwin at BG in the early 1970s, and coached with him for eight seasons in the late 1970s and 1980s before taking his first head coaching assignment at Altoona Area High School.

"Tom was one of the biggest reasons I got into coaching myself," said Franco, who has coached the Golden Eagles to two appearances in the PIAA Class AA state finals, including the state championship in 1999. "I was so impressed with how he used the coaching position to help so many kids. He's a man of great charisma, and he could always use that charisma to find out just what made his players tick."

At the same time, it was never all about winning for Irwin -- a consummate and humble humanitarian who served as



Tom, pensive on the sidelines, joins brother Mike and father Tom Sr. as the first family to have three inducted into the Hall of Fame.

teacher, father figure and spiritual guide for the young players who were under his charge.

"When I learned the importance of listening and taking care of each kid, and giving them something to go on after they graduated from high school, I believe I became more effective as a coach," Irwin said. "In high school athletics, that's what it's all about. You can still demand, but I wanted to create a relaxed atmosphere where the kids could have fun with the game. Making the kids realize how important they are, and getting the kids caring about each other, helps them to become successful as a team."

Those are objectives that Irwin,

who taught social studies, among other subjects, for nearly 40 years at Hollidaysburg and BG, always accomplished so well, according to Franco and current BG football coach Marty Georgiana. Georgiana played football for Irwin at BG in the late 1970s and was an assistant coach at BG under Irwin's watch from 1988-2003.

"Tom was a teacher, and that's what he did on the football field," Georgiana said. "It wasn't just about football for him. He tried to teach the players about life every day. Team prayer was a top priority with him, as was having respect for your parents, friends and associates. He taught (his players) how to think for themselves, how to make



BG's 1970 coaching staff included, from left: Tom, Tom Wiley, Lou Berardinelli, Dave Smith, Ron Fiochetta and Steve Williams.

decisions for themselves, and how to grow as people."

Irwin, who guided BG's 1987 team to a perfect 13-0 record, was a Hall of Fame person long before he was a Hall of Fame high school football coach.

"Tom really did a great job of building every kid up, no matter if they were the first-string quarterback or the last kid on the roster," Franco said. "He made every kid feel important — that was a big lesson I learned from him. Tom was so important to my coaching career, and I owe a lot to him."

As do so many others who will be on hand tonight at the Blair County Convention Center to watch Irwin join his younger brother, Mike, a former Penn State football standout, and their late father, Tom Irwin Sr., who played major league baseball with the Cleveland Indians, as members of the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame.

Irwin, who will celebrate his 66th birthday April 17, typically deflected the personal magnitude of his Hall of Fame enshrinements.

"I think I've been blessed with a lot of good people who have really helped me along the way," Irwin said. "I like to think of this (Hall of Fame) as an honor to them also. I think of how many really good players and coaches we've had over the years. There are no lone

rangers here. It's a humbling experience to know it's not you, it's a whole team approach."

Irwin's wife of 45 years, Lenora, has been the anchor of his personal team. Together, they raised five children who are now grown and successful. Tom and Lenora Irwin are the proud grandparents of 15.

"When I begin thanking people, I start with Lenora," Irwin said. "We met when we were 14 years old, and she's probably been the most influential person in my life. She's always kept me grounded and focused on what was important and where my priorities should lie."

Among Irwin's top priorities has been community involvement and reaching out to the poor, the afflicted and the oppressed. Irwin belongs to the Pennsylvania Prison Society and instructs classes at the Blair County Prison in which he helps inmates and staff resolve problems and assists inmates in preparing for life after incarceration.

One of Irwin's greatest current passions is his mentoring of disadvantaged

youngsters at the Evergreen Manors Housing Project as part of the Gloria Gates Foundation. It's a program that was started under the leadership of Altoona physician Zane Gates, another humanitarian and close Irwin family friend, in honor and memory of Gates' late mother.

It's the same type of positive and life-altering influence Irwin has rendered for the thousands of youngsters he's reached as a coach and teacher over his lifetime.

Irwin's presenter will be former BG player Chris Elliott, who is now an assistant football coach at Bethel College in Tennessee.

"I have learned many lessons from Coach," Elliott said. "The most important one being this: we should learn from our past, we need to plan for our future, but it is at this present moment that we must live."



Irwin bio

Sport: Football

High school: Altoona Catholic

Hall of Fame achievement: Amassed a coaching record of 238-133-6, including 213-121-3 in 33 years at Bishop Guilfoyle. Member of Pennsylvania Coaches Hall of Fame.

Current residence: Altoona