

INDUCTEE PROFILE

McConnell inspired a future generation

BG standout first local girl to earn D-I basketball ride

By Scott Franco
Altoona Mirror

How long has Lori Elgin loved basketball?

You can trace it back to her roots as an elementary student at St. Mary's, a parochial school in Altoona when she was Lori McConnell. You can at least start the timeline there.

"Imagine looking outside from the gym at St. Mary's Hall, seeing this young girl dribbling a basketball but not asking her in because we were participating in a league for seventh and eighth graders only," recalls Bert Lear, who, along with Sonny Consiglio, coached the Lady Dutchmen at the time in the mid-1970s.

It was the beginning of the Altoona Parochial League for girls basketball, but McConnell was too young.

"That is how I met Lori McConnell," Lear, who is now in her early 90s and can recall with detail her encounter with McConnell, added. "The next year, Lori was a member of the team and won league honors and went to states."

She remembers Lear looking out that window from the building that still stands between Fourth and Fifth Avenue in Altoona.

"I remember I was sad, but I probably just went home and played basketball," she said.

From there for McConnell, it was success at the parochial level, the high school level at Bishop Guilfoyle, the college level at New Mexico and onward to coaching



Lori was a two-year starter at the University of New Mexico.

high school and college sports in Texas, Virginia, Tennessee and Alabama.

She and her husband, Jim Elgin, a football and baseball coach at Rhodes College in Tennessee and now Alabama, have both been coaching for many years.

Their passion extends to their son, Scott, who is also a baseball coach.

Elgin's trek has now taken a most wonderful detour back home to Blair County, where she will be inducted into the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame.

Consiglio, a retired teacher and coach in Blair County, is one of many who wrote letters to the Hall of Fame selection com-

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mittee to ask for Elgin's consideration, and remains one of her biggest supporters.

He will serve as her HOF presenter.

"What put Lori on a higher level than anyone else was her competitive nature," Consiglio said. "She gave 100 percent effort all the time. She played as hard in practice as she did in games. I can remember her diving for loose balls even in practice."

As Consiglio pointed out, girls basketball was just beginning to emerge locally at that time with fall schedules of a dozen or so games.

McConnell went on to become what he called an "outstanding player" for the Lady Marauders, graduating in 1980. In her junior year, the Guilfoyle finished 19-3, and in her senior year, BG went 24-2 and reached the PIAA western semifinals before losing to Pittsburgh North Catholic, a statewide power.

She is still a top 10 all-time scorer for the BG girls, and her 83-percent at the foul line ranks her in the top four all-time. She was named all-state her senior year (1979-80) and became the first Blair County girls basketball player to receive a Division I scholarship in basketball when she committed to the University of New Mexico. She also had drawn interest from Penn State.

Her high school coach at the time, Dave Adams, first saw McConnell as an eighth-grader during the 1975-76 school year.

"Lori was quick, explosive and strong," Adams remembered. "She was all over the floor. She had so much energy and never seemed to tire. She played much taller than her 5-foot-4 height. I used to tell her to back off on the intensity at practice so she would not get hurt. Her response was 'I can't.'"

Younger BG players like Chris (O'Connor) Lum and Lisa (Lightner) Georgiana, who graduated in the mid-1980s, grew up well aware of who McConnell was and what she meant to girls basketball.

"I do remember reading about (her games) in the newspaper," Lum said. "I remember Mr. Consiglio talking about it and thinking 'Wow, that would be pretty cool to do.' When I heard that Lori was being inducted into the Hall of Fame, I was



Lori (front, far left) started her basketball career St. Mary's Parochial School.

like, 'Finally.'"

Lum recalls what it meant to see McConnell show up at St. Mary's, where she and Georgiana both played in grade school.

"Our coaches (Lear and Consiglio) would invite Lori to our practices. She took time to help us, and we looked up to her," Georgiana, who played collegiately at Carnegie Mellon University and is in the CMU Hall of Fame, said. "She was not a hot-shot personality but confident and all business when it came to playing ball. It was all about fundamentals. We aspired to be like her."

Lum wound up with a scholarship to East Carolina.

"It was like having a superstar in the gym," she said. "We all wanted to be like her. One summer, when she was home (from school), she helped me with my workout."

McConnell got connected to New Mexico through a tie to the Sparr family of Alexandria, PA. Kelly Sparr of Juniata Valley High School played at Penn State Altoona and then landed at New Mexico.

"Kelly's dad (Ed) did a little recruiting back

here," McConnell said. "I took over the point guard position after she graduated."

McConnell was a two-year starter at New Mexico and averaged 7.4 points per game as a sophomore.

"I was mainly a distributor and a defensive player," she said. "We had some really big inside girls and some shooters, so that was my role."

Toward the end of her sophomore year, her mother's battle with cancer became worse, and McConnell made the difficult decision to return home in 1982.

"It was a tough time in my life," she said.

After her mother Betty died, she transferred to University of Texas at El Paso but because of a technicality from previously having competed in AAU, she was ruled ineligible.

"That was disappointing, but it was also



Elgin bio

Sport: Basketball

High school: Bishop Guilfoyle

College: New Mexico

Hall of Fame achievement: In 1980, became first Blair County woman to receive a Division I basketball scholarship when she accepted an offer to play at University of New Mexico. All-state selection at Bishop Guilfoyle in 1979-80. Became an assistant coach at University of Texas-El Paso before coaching both high school girls and boys basketball and winning a state girls basketball championship as a coach in Hoover, Alabama.

when my opportunity to get involved in coaching, as a grad assistant, started,” she said.

Following college, Elgin became a successful high school girls and boys basketball coach, as well as a high school golf and tennis coach. She won a state title in girls basketball at Hoover High School in Alabama, where she currently resides.

Her journey has allowed her time to think back fondly of her roots.

“I’m grateful for so many people,” she said.

Starting with her family.

Along with her mother, her father Bob has since passed away, but Lori said she received great support from older siblings Joyce, Julie and Bob.

“My parents were the best,” she said. “They taught me how to work hard, stay committed and be kind. They supported me and provided everything I needed to be successful. I was 11 years younger than Joyce, nine years younger than Julie and seven years younger than Bob, but that didn’t stop them from being my biggest supporter.

“I loved seeing them all in the stands when I was playing. My family and I have been through some hard times, losing our mom at a very early age, losing Joyce unexpectedly, and then our dad six months later, but my family has always been there for me and taken care of me.”

She wonders where her life would have taken her without basketball.

“I’ve had a lot of great things happen with state championships in basketball and golf, but there are two more special things in my coaching career, one being that my husband and I won the Hoover (high school) girls basketball state championship together,” she said. “He was my assistant, and I got to coach my son, Scott, from third grade leagues, AAU and even church league teams. I wouldn’t give those years up for anything.”

McConnell said news of her Hall of Fame induction has brought many emotions.

“I was surprised, honored and nervous all at the same time,” she said. “I didn’t tell my family right away, but when I did, they were all very excited for me.”



Lori was not only a distributor at New Mexico but a stingy defender.



The Elgin family, from left: Husband Jim, Lori, son Scott and future daughter-in-law Lindsay.