

## Ontario icon Eric Grove leaves a hole as big as his heart

I had just pulled into my parking spot at Ashland High School when my phone started to buzz.

I was there to watch a district championship girls basketball game after spending the morning at a wrestling meet so I was in the middle of a nonstop kind of day.

On the other end of the phone call was former Ontario junior varsity coach Tim Henige. I hadn't heard from him in a while and thought he wanted to chat about the tournament trail area teams were on. So, I answered joyfully.

But he was on the other end to deliver some terrible news.

"Grover died," Henige said with a shaky voice.

"Wait, Grover. Eric Grove?" I asked.

"Yeah, man," Henige replied.

We ended our conversation quickly because Tim had to make some more phone calls to Grover's friends, and there were a lot of them.

I sat there for a while unable to move. My nonstop day came to a complete halt. I couldn't believe it.

I had just received Twitter updates from him the night before as he kept me updated on Ontario's tournament game against Huron, much as he did throughout the entire season as the "Voice of the Warriors" was always proud of his team no matter what the outcome of the game ended up being.

I turned to Twitter to show my support for one of the gems in this world. Grover was the man. Every time I stepped into the O-Rena, I had to make my way over to give my friend a pat on the back for a job well done announcing the game with his booming voice. We always talked hoops and how life was going outside of our jobs. And he never failed to offer me a bag of popcorn.

Grover was just that kind of guy. Always caring for others and making sure everyone else felt special before himself. I am here to say, Eric Grove was a special, special man.

The guy bled Ontario blue and gold. He was a Warrior through and through. The pride he took in announcing Ontario football and basketball games is a kind of pride that not many people feel in their lives. He wanted to be in the press box on football Friday night or at the scorer's table at his special place, the O-Rena.

In the summer of 2020, I invited Grover over to my house for a conversation about himself, his passion and, of course, we talked about sports. Usually, with these kinds of conversations, I try to limit them because then I have to go back and transcribe tape, but with Grover I lost track of time. It was easy to do. We were having so much fun just talking about how passionate we are about our jobs and how lucky we are to live in a great community and follow amazing sports in Richland County.

At that time, COVID was still new and very scary so we were kind of in limbo with everything. Grover talked about how much he was enjoying some of the downtime but admitted he couldn't wait to get back to announcing some Ontario football.

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That is how Grover made people, specifically Ontario athletes, feel special. If you have ever been to an Ontario basketball game, you know what I am talking about. The way he announced the starting lineup for the Warriors sent chills up and down your spine. How couldn't you want to be a Warrior and have your name called like that?

Grover loved Ontario and Ontario loved him back. After the 2020 school year, Grover was awarded the State Award, which is presented by the Ohio High School Athletic Association through nominations for individuals who show dedication and passion to high school athletics. Grover fit the bill perfectly.

Now, a giant hole sits in the hearts of many. His obituary had a statement that will sit with me forever. It reads: "A big man known for his big heart, he was always helping someone. His kindness and giving nature will remain a legacy for those whose lives he touched."

Nothing could be more true. Grover treated you with such dignity and respect that it made you want to be a better person. It made you want to go up to someone and make them feel just as special as Grover made you feel. That is his legacy. Kindness and the desire to brighten a day.

And even in death, Grover continues to give. At the request of his family, they asked to not send flowers but to make a memorial contribution to Ontario Athletics. Absolutely incredible.

I am sure there is a plan to honor Grover and I am sure it will be an amazing tribute, but it is one that will fall short. Nothing could ever live up to what he deserves. Not even this column.

So, this one is for you, big guy.

"Now introducing the newest member of heaven, Eriiiiiiiic Grooooooove!!!"

Rest easy, buddy. And when I see you again, I'd love a bag of popcorn.

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## **NIL endorsement deals could save high school athletics**

An unprecedented change could be coming to high school sports.

On Tuesday afternoon, the Ohio High School Athletic Association announced 14 referendum items its member schools are set to vote on throughout April. The last thing I am going to do is bore you with a complete list of all 14. Instead, there is one that I wanted to address, and it caused a huge buzz across social media on Tuesday.

Member schools will vote on Issue 12B, which addresses Name, Image and Likeness endorsement opportunities. The referendum states:

Issue 12B is a Name, Image and Likeness proposal that mirrors changes made at the collegiate level in the last year. This proposed addition would now allow student-athletes to sign endorsement agreements so long as their teams, schools and/or the OHSAA logo are not used and provided there are no endorsements with companies that do not support the mission of education-based athletics (casinos, gambling, alcohol, drugs, tobacco).

In other words, if member schools vote to pass Issue 12B, high school athletes can seek to make money off their NIL as long as they do not use their teams, schools and/or OHSAA logo and they do not partner with companies that do not shed a positive light on kids and athletics.

It follows what the NCAA passed early last year, allowing college athletes to sign endorsement deals and make money off themselves.

After tweeting that Issue 12B will be up to the OHSAA member schools, you would have thought World War III started.

"It is a ridiculous idea!"

"Another dumb advantage!"

"Horrible idea. Now your really good athletes will try in school even less now."

"Horrible idea at the high school level. We already have enough competition issues with parochial vs private schools this will just further the divide."

"Just cancel school sports altogether. This isn't the spirit of high school sports."

And those were just a few. But that last one got me thinking. Here is my take:

NIL deals might just save high school athletics.

Hear me out. High school athletics are dying. It's a simple fact and true. Sport participation is down across the state. We have more and more teams going to 8-man football because schools can't find 11 kids interested in playing.

Some schools aren't able to field junior varsity basketball teams. Some schools had to cancel programs altogether because so few kids were interested in the sport. Kids are playing video games at a higher rate and aren't interested in things that are difficult. Some want to make Tik Toc videos to try to make

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money. They don't want to be a part of a team anymore. They don't care about representing their school for community pride anymore.

Maybe being given an incentive like an NIL deal would increase the interest in sports again. Maybe those kids would put the Playstation controller down and pick up a baseball or softball and work on being good enough to make a company interested in supporting them.

It wouldn't hurt.

The biggest threat to high school sports is club organizations like AAU. The kids who believe they are above high school athletics are playing AAU or club sports and bypassing playing for their schools.

Kids are flocking to AAU and club teams in search of that elusive Division I college scholarship. Money.

Maybe with NIL deals, kids will flock back to high school sports teams in search of endorsements. Money.

But with the NIL opportunities, local businesses aren't going to be interested in giving an endorsement deal to a kid who only plays for a club team no one has ever heard of except for parents and college coaches. Those teams aren't getting the newspaper coverage. They aren't in a spotlight in front of a broad audience. Those athletes are in a much smaller niche that doesn't reach the masses.

A high school team, however, is. They are in front of audiences and can appear on radio and TV shows. They will be featured in newspaper features and in game stories every Friday night.

And those will be the types of kids local companies will want to support with a possible NIL deal. So it may bring kids back to having some school pride in representing their hometown team in their respective sports.

That could be a huge win for high school sports.

If this passes, there is a concern that all the top-tier athletes are going to go to private schools where they can make the most money off their NIL. And I ask, aside from the money aspect, what is different? Athletes are already moving to the private schools that put them in the biggest spotlight. They are already going to private schools to be on the best teams. It has been going on for basically the entire existence of high school sports.

So, with the NIL opportunities, more will follow suit? They were going to anyway. I don't see NIL making that big of an impact.

At the end of the day, there aren't many high school kids who will sign endorsement deals. Especially big-money ones. But there are high school kids who could make money hosting a skills camp or by speaking engagements. Small things like that here in Richland County are the most likely.

But who knows? Maybe a small business would pay athletes \$100 to record a quick commercial or social media ad. And what high school athlete wouldn't want to be a part of that?

And who are we to tell other people how they can and cannot make money? If someone is willing to pay for a quick little endorsement, who are we to say they can't do that? That just seems wrong to me in so many ways.

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Listen, if it raises the interest in high school sports again, I am all for it. I have sat in gyms and watched as the best athletes in the schools sit out of their high school season so they can save themselves for their travel teams. I've seen kids who have phenomenal pitching arms tell their high school coach they don't want to pitch for the team so they can save their arms for summer ball.

If an NIL deal can get them on the mound or on the court or on the pitch or simply suiting up for their high schools again, I am all for it.

Maybe it will save high school athletics.

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## **Chuck Ridenour was, is and always will be a legend**

SHELBY — Walking into the Shelby High School gymnasium just felt a little bit different Wednesday night.

The Whippets were set to host Mansfield Senior in what was sure to be one of the best Richland County games of the early season. I pulled into the parking lot at 5:30 p.m. and could hardly find a parking spot. It seemed like everyone was there. Coaches from all over the area spanning from Buckeye Central to Lucas strolled in to catch the action.

Football coaches, former referees, heck, even the refs from the JV game popped a squat in the front row. Everyone was there.

Well, not everyone.

There was one person missing, and it just didn't feel right to have a game of this magnitude and not see the late Chuck Ridenour, a 40-year veteran of the Shelby Daily Globe, in his normal spot right behind the scorers table with his camera around his neck and his signature four-color pen and a pad of paper in his hand pulling double duty as he had pretty much since he started working in journalism.

Chuck passed away on Dec. 23 after a courageous battle with various health issues. He was 61.

He leaves behind a wonderful wife, Pam, and children Charlie and Brooke along with grandchildren Addison and Mason as well as his mother, Carol, three siblings and numerous other relatives.

He also leaves behind a giant extended family spanning Shelby athletics. Chuck was universally loved by every single Shelby athlete as he devoted most of his life to promoting the great student-athletes who passed through the halls of Shelby High School. And it wasn't just the high school athletes. Chuck was always at youth events at the YMCA and youth leagues all over town.

During his calling hours on Wednesday afternoon, I overheard his daughter say, "I guess I never realized that all small towns don't have a sports reporter." Chuck was one of a kind in an ever-changing journalism world. Recently, most papers steered sports reporters away from youth sports and are cutting back on a lot of other aspects the job used to entail. But Chuck powered through all that because he saw the value in it. He knew that a parent sure would love to see their child's picture from a t-ball game in the paper or would really appreciate one for a scrapbook down the road.

It didn't matter that youth sports were nearly a seven-day-a-week thing. Chuck was always there.

Shelby school board president Scott Rose said it best: "I don't ever remember going to a sporting event at any level and not seeing Chuck there."

Now that he is gone, there is a giant void that will never be filled. No matter how hard anyone tries to fill the shoes of Chuck Ridenour, it's an impossible task. I was asked a couple of times if I was ready to fill the void and I always responded with, "There will never be an individual who could fill Chuck's shoes." And I firmly believe that.

The guy was an absolute legend. He became sports editor at the Daily Globe in April 1981, meaning he held the position for 41 years and seven months. But he had been involved in the paper for much longer

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than that as he worked in the composing room during the summers for five years previous to that and even delivered the Globe as a paperboy back in the day. In high school, he used to type up game stories on his grandmother's typewriter and throw them in the slot at the Globe office.

If that doesn't scream legendary, I don't know what does.

He was involved in the North Central Ohio Soapbox Derby for more than 25 years, expanding his reach to the youth trifold. I mean, the dude bowled a 300 game before. Freaking legendary.

But if he was here to tell you, none of those accomplishments even compared to the honors he received from Shelby High School for his work.

He was honored with the Ohio High School Athletic Association Media Service Award through their Sportsmanship, Ethics, and Integrity Program in 2020 and was honored with the Charles C.W. Williams Sixth Man Award by the Shelby basketball team 2017. All of those awards were on display during his funeral.

But the most legendary thing about Chuck is even though he was proud of the awards and was thankful beyond belief to receive them, he never once let it define him and his work. He didn't take it easy after receiving those honors. Instead, he worked harder to make sure he lived up to them. That is a rarity these days. And something I will always take away from my relationship with Chuck. Work hard. Let humbleness define you.

And never let them see you sweat.

During his final months, Chuck never let anyone see him sweat. As he battled his health issues, he never once wanted anyone to feel sorry for himself. His wife would ask him how he is feeling today and he would always respond with, "I am fine," even though she knew he wasn't. She would ask him how he was breathing today and he would always say, "I am breathing pretty good," even though she knew he couldn't.

Stubbornness? Maybe. Chuck was an old buck. Pride? Definitely. No one wants to be vulnerable.

But most of all, I think Chuck just didn't want to be an inconvenience for the ones he loved. He wanted to be the one to provide strength and poise for his family. And to his last breath, he was just that. He showed his family how to fight. How to hang on and give it everything he possibly could to stick around for a little bit longer.

He fought like a true champion. A true legend.

Now, a community and family tries to recover. But there will be plenty of smiles as they remember what a gem Chuck was.

On Wednesday night, Shelby held a moment of silence to remember Chuck. Most players wrapped their wrists in white tape and scribed "CR" on it to honor the guy who has covered them their entire high school careers.

There will no doubt be more tributes pouring in. There is one I would love to see and I am positive there have already been talks about it. The brand new Whippet Athletic Complex is the pride of the town. Atop the home stands sits one of the best press boxes in Richland County. What better way to honor

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one of the best sports writers to ever pick up a four-color pen than to put his name on it? Chuck Ridenour Press Box has a nice ring to it. Maybe in black, red, blue and green letters? Or just straight red or grey would be perfect.

No matter what, the Shelby community and school district will do Chuck plenty of justice because he definitely did the youth of the community justice for more than 40 years.

"How do you honor a guy who gave so much to this place for more than 40 years?" Rose said during our conversation before the game Wednesday night.

It is a fair question. No matter what, it will never be enough.

Because Chuck Ridenour was a legend.



Headline: Strongsville-Walsh Jesuit aftermath shows, yet again, HS soccer community needs to chill out before it's too late | Opinion

Date: Nov. 8, 2022

In a TikTok world, a lengthy video isn't required for viral content.

With the conclusion of the Division I girls soccer regional final between Strongsville and Walsh Jesuit on Nov. 5, all it took was 98 seconds of footage.

The match was tied, 0-0, approaching the end of regulation. On a chip ball into the left side of the box, a Strongsville attacker got a touch for a shot on target and drew contact from the Walsh goalkeeper seeking to make the save. The center official awarded a penalty kick. The Mustangs converted the PK, which proved decisive in a 1-0 win.

It wasn't so much about soccer intricacy, though. It was what happened from there.

Kyle Goodwin, who I've seen up and down the road over the years doing his laudable OhioSportsNet work as a videographer, posted a video on YouTube of the call, PK and ensuing scene.

At the full-time whistle, a Walsh coach approaches the officials, shakes one's hand and is so visibly upset that, within seconds, he has to be removed from the immediate area by others on the Warriors' touchline.

A man in a Walsh Jesuit pullover is then seen being restrained by another official and a bystander as he verbalizes his frustration toward the center official. Two more men attempt to diffuse the situation before a police officer runs onto the pitch to get the first man to vacate the area.

While the officer joins in, behind him a woman and two other men walk across the track, clearly in the officials' direction.

Finally, as the video ends, the first man says something to the woman, and the police officer and others mercifully distance them from the officials, walking the opposite way off the track.

As of viewing it again the evening of Nov. 7, Goodwin's video had more than 16,000 views. That total nearly doubled from the afternoon that same day.

It makes no difference whether you're a partisan or not — and these two sides aren't remotely near my coverage area.

It is nonetheless a talking point for all of us invested in Greater Cleveland high school soccer.

For 20 years among our [REDACTED] coverage area ranks, you and I have met in this common space and debated high school soccer nuance. Sometimes we agree. Sometimes we don't. So be it.

But on this, there cannot be gray area.

This is a blight on all of us — not just Walsh Jesuit — with a scene so disturbing and embarrassing it makes one shudder in disbelief.

You can understand temperatures running high in real time locked in a nil-nil match with your season on the line.

But physical restraint? Police?!

If we don't find a way to relax as a community, the next time — and there will be a next time — it's going to escalate and become a national story to unequivocal dismay.

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Maybe these people with this animosity are upstanding beyond this — and we are all guilty of doing and saying stupid things while angry in our lives. But sensibility went out the window here.

After last week's admittedly obvious opinion there's a 0% chance in-match official heckling will change a call, so what's the point, I was going to focus on youthful exuberance and where the line may fall following a questionable in-match incident last week.

Not anymore, because another incident of "Adults Gone Wild" occurred. Great.

There is less incentive for student-athletes to set an example for their communities when adults can't get their own act together.

Yes, it happens far too often in other sports, too. But I know deep in my heart from experience, it is different in soccer. There is something about our sport that brings out venom in people.

By the way, it's a shame for Strongsville. This is the second time in five years the Mustangs have been cast in a controversy not entirely of their own doing other than being there. Of course, it was 2018 when Strongsville was part of that D-I state semi debacle with Twinsburg in which touchline chaos led to a 12th player inadvertently getting on the pitch late in a match before it was noticed.

As far as the call itself that led to this mess — in real time? That's a PK. Given the angle of the center official, what he sees from behind is the keeper going through the attacking player, not necessarily a save attempt. Contact is drawn in the box and that's that. With the benefit of video you can slow down to half- or quarter-speed, maybe there is an argument otherwise.

The irony is, though, the call in and of itself is almost irrelevant now. Because the reaction was so visceral and the aftermath was so haunting.

This nonsense is going to continue to drive too many sensible people out of our sport unless and until we unite and say, "Enough."

It's already disenchanting a generation of current and potential officials — and who can blame them?

It's already led to too many people who believe the purchasing power of a ticket or having a child in the side means they can act a fool with no legitimate consequence.

It's already led, to be fair and coming from someone who isn't its biggest proponent, to being likely one of the reasons we're seeing the fall "club effect" as prevalent as it is.

Forget tactical looks, set pieces, in-match adjustments, marking, defensive-third shifting or anything else about soccer.

Forget even about what is a PK and what's not.

Too large of a segment of our high school soccer community needs to chill out.

Because next time — and again, there will be a next time — there won't be enough deterrent.

And it's going to lead to someone's best Mike Tyson impression to the outrage and disgust of the rest of us, but one that will tarnish the game for the duration not just because it happened, but because we didn't do or say enough to proactively stop it.

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Headline: 'The Streak' for Hawken girls swimming is a complicated topic — especially whenever it may end | Opinion  
Date: March 1, 2022

Feb. 25 following the Division II state swimming meet in Canton, there was a moment that may have flown under the radar but carried particular significance given current circumstances.

Hawken was awaiting its turn to walk to the podium and accept its 24th straight girls state team title, and runner-up Hathaway Brown began to vacate the podium after receiving its trophy.

The teams lined up single-file to congratulate the other on their success.

The respect is genuine. So are the friendships in and out of the sport.

The Hawks' run of consecutive state team titles in girls swimming even has its own moniker: "The Streak."

As I watched that line of congratulatory high-fives, knowing just how close HB came to snapping "The Streak" for our longtime ██████████ coverage area standard-bearer, it sparked what could be an uncomfortable yet accurate premise:

Whenever "The Streak" does reach its organic conclusion — next year, five years from now or 20 years from now — I'm not sure any of us are prepared to have an open and honest dialogue as to what that moment actually means.

Because as much of an incredible achievement it has been and will continue to be, the legacy of "The Streak" is complicated.

For Hawken. For its neighbors and contemporaries. And for us.

The positives abound of course, but so do the cumulative effects.

Not all of those effects have been good — which is not necessarily Hawken's burden to bear, by the way, but it's true.

During the course of "The Streak," the Hawks' average margin of victory at the state meet over those 24 team championship performances has been nearly 154 points.

All-time, there have been 744 top-four finishes in individual events or relays by ██████████ coverage area schools in state swimming and diving. Of those 744, 345 of those have been accumulated by the Hawken girls.

Think about that for a second. One program has 46.4% of the area's top fours at state in an entire sport.

With that comes the distinction of being a nationally renowned powerhouse. It is an honor to have a program that good at their craft in our backyard.

Not all wind up there obviously, but at minimum, great swimmers and their families consider Hawken when their time for high school swimming arrives.

Many of the very best performers we have ever seen locally in the pool — Alyssa Kiel, Brittany Strumbel, Carrie Bencic, Crile Hart, Fiona O'Donnell-McCarthy, Jessica Eden, Sarah Dorenkott, Sarah Koucheki and so many more — have contributed to continuing "The Streak" while plying their trade at Hawken.

As well it should be, that success of the girls swimming program is one of the draws for the school.

When you have success to that extent, though, it creates an expectation.

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You're expected to win a state title in a runaway. You're expected to be several seconds faster than most of your neighbors.

You're expected to be great at a sharper trajectory.

You're expected to contribute to that standard and meet it yourself.

You're expected to put in more hours and more work than anybody else in part because of that standard.

That's enticing, but that's also quite a lot of pressure — and how fair is that extent of expectation and pressure?

By and large, the Hawken girls I've covered over the years handle that responsibility with remarkable poise.

But it's also a lot.

And if we're really dissecting this, let's call it as it is: With that extent of success comes some resentment.

Trust me from almost 20 years of experience with this: Not everyone wants to hear about Hawken and how well Hawken is doing all the time, despite the fact the Hawks deserve all the plaudits they earn and then some. Hawken probably falls into that category at times as well. Those student-athletes just want to go about their business like everyone else.

Other programs want to earn their own way and be judged on their own merits — and that's great.

Swimmers at those schools get faster and have their own successes — and that's great.

That should be applauded and recognized — and it is.

There is swimming beyond Hawken, after all — and that swimming can be pretty good.

The problem is there's one program that sets the bar so high that if said bar isn't matched or approached, there are differing definitions of what success is.

This year at state, I have not been as concerned about whether or not Hawken could continue "The Streak" since Jerry Holtrey's last year in 2014. That was indisputably a transition year, with Hart as a freshman and Claire Doerr as a sophomore, but the Hawks were able to do enough around them to send Holtrey off in the manner a legend deserves.

Back in that era, Dayton Oakwood and another ██████████ coverage area power in Gilmour, with all-time area greats in Macie McNichols and Kiley Eble, were chasing hard. Now? It's a non-area force in HB.

Hawken fended off HB this year in part because it had one of its premier senior classes in history with Division I recruits in Eden (Ohio State), Tori Culotta (Notre Dame) and Maggie Mallett (Miami, Fla.). And even with that, even with their noted depth, the Hawks were still 27 points away from "The Streak" concluding.

So what happens next?

Eden, Culotta and Mallett have donned a Hawken swimcap for the last time. The Blazers are young and stacked with returning talent.

Does improvement in the Hawks' very solid returning talent, an incoming freshman class, potential transfers, etc., offset all of that in 2023?

If it doesn't, and HB does snap "The Streak" next year, we need to be careful in respecting the journey to this point.

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Hawken will still be a standard-bearer program. The girls in the current era are still going to put in their optimal effort and will continue to make area swimming and their school proud. Taking something other than first as a team and logging a boatload of 'A' final swims like usual is in no way, shape or form "disappointing."

But there will be those whose argument leans that way because of the sustained national-caliber standard that has been achieved.

"The Streak" has done a world of good.

It has led 24 straight senior classes and teams of girls swimmers at Hawken to dig out their very best and exit that season or high school as a champion, forever ingrained in their program's lore.

It has been one of the many reasons Hawken is such a well-regarded institution.

It has inspired younger generations to leave their imprint when their turn came along.

It has raised the game — albeit in some facets, perhaps unfairly — of every other program locally.

The comprehensiveness and the exceptionally high standard sustaining "The Streak" carries with it, however?

That's a different conversation altogether.

And that conversation will be especially difficult — with its varying and complicated layers, for all of us — when that single-file line of congratulations on deck in Canton at Branin Natatorium goes in the opposite direction.

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Headline: Paulette Welch's death is sad reminder of HS sports' unsung heroes' value | Opinion

Date: Feb. 22, 2022

Every so often, it needs to be reinforced where our priorities should be in the realm of high school sports.

Feb. 18, I was at the Division II Cleveland State District swim meet downtown at CSU's Busbey Natatorium for another year.

Here I was so engrossed with the usual run of 'A' finalists from [REDACTED] coverage area, which usually between individual events and relays is a number over 100, and whether or not there should be concern area-wise with the Hawken girls and the team title race. A deep and skilled Hathaway Brown was in direct pursuit of the Hawks there and will be at state.

The minutes after a meet are chaos, trying to locate exiting student-athletes on deck with whom you want to speak for your story or a Twitter video interview.

And in the midst of that annual chaos, that aforementioned reinforcement suddenly arrived through a four-word text:

"Paulette Welch died today."

It stopped me in my tracks.

Suddenly, the inner workings of swimming and diving and the road to Canton didn't matter as much.

For those who aren't aware, Welch was a longtime sports information director for Notre Dame-Cathedral Latin and also did work for other area schools, including University.

Chances are, your school has its own Paulette Welch, someone who helps coordinate information and events in some form to help disseminate to a broader community.

Welch was highly supportive of our work at [REDACTED] — and I'm certain that sentiment is shared by my colleagues, at other local media outlets and within our area high school sports landscape.

If I was missing a preview form or all-star nominations from a coach, the email went out and was answered within minutes, and the issue was usually solved within a day.

If there was a headshot required for a [REDACTED] player of the week, consider it handled.

If there was a box score in football or basketball, presented in a time-saving format, consider it sitting in our inbox.

If there was an NDCL story or content that needed to be shared with the Lions' faithful on social media, consider it done.

In good times, and yes in the occasional negative moments, too, she was a positive presence, ensuring any matter would be resolved.

I have spent many afternoons and evenings in Munson Township on NDCL's campus over the years for a football game, soccer match or other event, exchanging pleasantries with Welch before zeroing in on my work.

We also shared quite a few memorable interactions on Twitter.

I'll never forget the night I was covering an area boys soccer match a few years ago and overheard a conversation. One person was trying to tell the other the reason their side moved up an OHSAA division was because they were "too good" for the lower division.

"Yeah, we were winning too much in the other division, so they moved us up," the person said, slightly paraphrasing.

Obviously, that's not how it works.

I tweeted about it to let off some annoyance, and within seconds, Welch responded with multiple face-palm emojis. It made me laugh, and I moved on with my night.

I also want to note publicly, whenever I've had my Twitter laments about people taking our copyrighted stories and pictures and sharing it how they see fit — illegally making it available for free elsewhere — Welch was consistently supportive.

In short, Welch was one of those people who made things just a little bit easier, the type of person and type of people we all need around to make high school sports function in the way that it does.

While we lament her death, I believe it should also be a reminder of the value people like her have for us.

If you're around a given sport or school long enough, there's certain people you see, time after time and year after year.

The ticket takers. The concession workers. The public-address announcers. The scorebook keepers and team statisticians. The scoreboard operators. The athletic trainers. The maintenance workers and custodians. The security guards and police officers. The information runners. The rink attendants. The hurdle crew. The timers. The officials. The administrators. The coaches.

The proverbial list goes on.

In many of those cases, you can't really classify them as a close friend per se, someone with whom you frequently interact outside of high school sports.

Yet there's an appreciation and a commonality within that shared experience, knowing what they do, no matter how trivial or thoroughly important it is, makes your day go more smoothly.

Since we're amid hockey and swimming right now, for which I've had a deep personal connection having covered both for much of my [REDACTED] career, 16 years for swimming and diving and 22 for hockey, instances spring to mind.

At the Baron Cup every year, the same PA announcer handles those duties at Brooklyn. When you hear his voice, with that familiar "Good afternoon, hockey fans, and welcome to the John M. Coyne Recreation Center," or that certain inflection for "icing" or "man advantage," it's a reassurance in a way.

In swimming, for district meets over the weekend, there was a need for timers on the blocks at CSU as the usual backup in case the automatic system malfunctions. The calls for timers were answered within minutes by volunteer parents and attendees, ensuring the meets could start punctually.

As part of this high school sports dynamic, every year we celebrate milestones, achievement, longevity, parents, senior student-athletes and more.

Maybe it would be advisable if we set aside more time at our schools seasonally to recognize the more unsung heroes of event management and implementation as well.

Because without those people, really where would we be?

I'll miss sending those emails to Welch and seeing those replies, not to mention of course seeing her at NDCL and elsewhere and our interactions with a shared purpose and sense of humor to it.

CL

DI C 06

Our high school sports community feels lesser than today without her.

My deepest condolences are extended to her family and to the school communities she served so admirably at NDCL, US and beyond.

May her memory be a comfort, and may her selfless work continue to serve as an example of how the toil of unsung heroes amid high school sports is appreciated and never goes unnoticed.



## Mentor-Riverside showdown is what area football should be (9-2-22)

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Dave Bors was spent.

The Riverside coach was exhausted, drained physically and emotionally from the Beavers' 7-6 loss to Mentor on Sept. 2.

But the magnitude of the moment wasn't lost on him.

"This," Bors said, glancing around Jerome T. Osborne Stadium, "was awesome. This is how you describe it when people who aren't from around here. It's THIS."

Bors wasn't describing the heartbreaking nature in which Riverside lost the game, missing a 25-yard field goal as time expired. He was talking about everything else on this night.

The pregame tailgating that saw fans arriving to Mentor's campus shortly after 3 p.m.

The capacity crowd of more than 6,000 fans screaming at the top of their lungs with each and every play.

The action-packed game full of bone-jarring and snot-bubbling hits.

The "IT" that makes Northeast Ohio football the grandiose spectacle it is.

Prior to Sept. 2, the last time Mentor had played another Lake County school in a regular season game was 2010. Everything about Sept. 2 screamed that it's a shame it doesn't happen more often.

"This was one of my favorites as far as game atmospheres go," Mentor senior safety Jacob Snow said. "Two really good Lake County football teams, the stadium is packed, all eyes are on us, other teams and coaches from around the area are here watching. ... When you step away from it all, it's kind of surreal."

Granted, there are reasons other teams from Lake County aren't blowing up the phone of Mentor AD Jeff Cassella to play the Cardinals, one of the biggest Division I teams in Ohio. Enrollment numbers make it an iffy roll of the dice — Mentor's just that big of a school.

But, dang, Sept. 2 was something to see.

And you'd be hard-pressed to find someone who missed the opportunity, as fans were waiting for the gates to open at

5:10 p.m. — 20 minutes before gates opened and 15 minutes before Riverside's buses even showed up.

"We wanted to get a good seat to see everything," said early arriver Mike Lovick, who with his wife Karen were waiting at the gate when it was unlocked. "It's going to be a great night, especially when we win."

More about that later.

Mentor coach Matt Gray noted the rarity of fans beating the teams to the field. But even he noticed a difference on game day — game WEEK — for that matter.

"There was a different buzz all week," Gray said. "That's not something you get every week. You could tell it wasn't a normal Friday."

Ditto for the atmosphere over in Painesville Township, where "Beat Mentor" T-shirts were printed and passed out. Riverside senior linebacker Jason Ryan said there was so much hoopla around the school — "Get to the game," students ordered each other — that school work wasn't always easy.

THIS was a big game. So big Cassella said the presale ticket sales of 2,800 (as of 3 p.m.) had already doubled the 1,400 in paid attendance from the Week 1 game against visiting Canton McKinley.

It didn't matter if you spent \$7 on an adult ticket or a \$5 student ticket, you got your money's worth. And then some.

Riverside's front seven on defense owned the game. Mentor's running game that piled up yards the first two weeks had very little room to operate. Twice the Beavers turned away the Cardinals at point-blank range when the Cardinals and first-and-goal situations.

Sean Kerwood boomed field goals of 45 and 38 yards to give Riverside the lead going into the fourth.

To Mentor's credit, a late fourth-quarter drive resulted in a 10-yard touchdown run by Mitchell Waite for a 7-6 lead with 1:25 remaining.

JK

DI 03

## Mentor-Riverside showdown is what area football should be (9-2-22)

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Riverside wasn't going away. Mikey Maloney was masterful in guiding his team into field goal range, with a clutch pass to Ethan Ross putting the Beavers in position for the win.

Kerwood's third and final field goal attempt of the night was wide right. But let's be honest — without Kerwood's two earlier field goals and his booming punts to flip field position, Riverside isn't in position to win the game anyway.

"The outcome, yeah it stinks," Bors said. "But when you step away from the emotional part of it, this is everything you hoped you'd see."

On multiple levels.

From Mentor's point of view, the Cardinals showed they can come up with late-game magic after being turned away time and time again throughout the night. Their persistence paid off.

In Riverside's case, the Beavers showed they belonged when many observers thought they were crazy for barking up Mentor's tree.

In terms of Northeast Ohio football, proof was provided there's nothing like it.

"If you took a poll of people before the game, this is what they would have wanted to see, aside from the outcome for our side," Bors said. "This was tremendous. THIS is the way it's supposed to be."

JK

DI 603

## OHSAA got the 'wow' factor that it wanted (6-4-22)

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COLUMBUS — Makayla White climbed the awards podium on June 4 and stood tall as her eyes scanned from left to right, flashing a new personal record for a smile at the Division II state track meet.

It was not White's first time high atop an awards podium, nor her first time high atop a podium at a state track meet. But it WAS her first time doing it at Jesse Owens Memorial Stadium on the campus of Ohio State University, so she was going to soak in every single ounce of the atmosphere she could.

The 2022 state track and field meet made its triumphant return to Jesse Owens this year after two COVID-affected years, one (2020) which wiped out the meet altogether, and another (2021) that was split into three meets at Columbus area high schools.

Many — if not most — running in this weekend's state meet had never run in such a venue.

The magnitude was lost on no one.

And I mean NO ONE.

"This one is crazy," marveled White, a star-studded, multi-sport athlete at Hawken ticketed for Yale University on a track scholarship. "To be back where it's supposed to be is amazing."

At a recent meeting at the Ohio High School Athletic Association, executive director Doug Ute noted the importance of moving the state track and field meet back to Jesse Owens after two years away.

One thing stood out in his — and the OHSAA's — decision.

And it was confirmed by anyone and everyone in attendance this weekend at the state meet.

"Our No. 1 priority is we want that 'Wow' factor for our student-athletes," Ute said. "We want that 'Wow' factor when they pull up. They should. They deserve that."

It's not the OHSAA's fault that COVID ripped through the international landscape and canceled the 2020 spring season, nor was it the organization's fault a year ago when persistent protocols to limit the spread of the virus forced the governing body of interscholastic sports in Ohio to put

state meets at Hilliard Darby (Division I), Pickerington North (Division II) and Westerville North (Division III).

The OHSAA could have (would have?) been justified with sticking with that model, placing state tournaments at three local high schools rather than renting out Jesse Owens at a much-higher price tag. After all, let's be honest, many (most) of the OHSAA's decisions in the last year or so have been financially driven.

Except this one: Moving state track back to Jesse Owens, where it belongs.

"It's going to be more expensive," Ute said of the move. "But yeah, our kids deserve that. There's nothing comparable."

A point very difficult to deny, seeing everything unfolding this weekend, including the steady stream of student-athletes getting their picture in front of the Jesse Owens statue right outside the stadium.

Once inside, it's just a game-changer.

"Oh my gosh, this is amazing," Perry senior Javin Richards marveled.

Richards is no stranger to big meets nor state meets. He was a two-event state champion last year at Pickerington North. He knows what it's like to run at Jesse Owens, having done so as a freshman.

He knew what he was missing the last two years.

He was glad to experience it again this weekend.

"I love it here for a multitude of reasons," he said, his eyes darting around the venue jam-packed with screaming fans at the race being run at the time. "There's a huge crowd..."

He paused.

"Everywhere."

He paused again as his eyes scanned the landscape, taking it all in in his final high school race before heading to Utah State on a track scholarship.

JK

DI 603

## OHSAA got the 'wow' factor that it wanted (6-4-22)

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"Everyone cheers from you from a different direction," he said. "It's an amazing environment."

Last year's set-up for state track worked. Dividing the meet into three meets at Hilliard Darby, Pickerington Central and Westerville North served its purpose. It gave the state's student-athletes a meet it wouldn't have had otherwise.

"We were just happy to have a state meet," White said.

But Ute and the OHSAA were right in the assessment that the track athletes needed — and deserved — to be back where it belonged - at Jesse Owens - even if it meant biting a bigger bullet financially.

"We came in here on Thursday and I was like, 'Wow,'" White said.

OHSAA - mission accomplished.

## Two decades of memories glean wealth of gratitude (8-1-22)

Tears streamed down the cheeks of the little boy as he rolled over in his hospital bed and stretched as hard as he could to reach the ringing telephone on the table next to him.

Only a few days had passed since the boy underwent hours of surgery to remove a tumor from the lower-left side of his brain. The stitches were still fresh, muscles across the base of his skull – severed to remove the mass – had not yet begun to heal and the cords from his IV drip entangled his arm.

But he stretched ever so hard to reach the phone, no matter how much it hurt, because he wanted to prove he could do it.

The year was 1975, and that 7-year-old boy was yours truly.

As I cruised down U.S. Highway 6 en route to the first day of high school football practice at Chardon High School on Aug. 1, memories came flying back to me as I passed my family's old dairy farm in Rome. The day marked the beginning of my 21st year at XXXXXX, and as I progressed toward Chardon, I recounted the highlights over the past two decades.

I did so with a heart full of gratitude, grateful for what a wonderful ride it's been and energized at the mere thought of the journey that awaits me as I head into Year 21.

It seems like just last week that I was met at the door at 7085 Mentor Ave. — I didn't have a key card yet — by then-sports editor Scott Kendrick and greeted with a cake at my desk that had the words, "Welcome John" written in icing.

Time has flown. That happens, they say, when you're having fun. It's hard NOT to have fun with the experiences provided over the past two decades. That's not to say my first 11 years in the business weren't fun, but... well ....

In my first 11 years in the business, spanning stays at two other newspapers, I covered a total of three playoff football games.

In my first 20 years at XXXXXX, I've covered 16 state championship games alone. Not playoff games. State CHAMPIONSHIP games, 10 of which resulted in gold trophies.

I've seen two Mr. Footballs (Mentor's Bart Tanski and Mitch Trubisky) one Mr. Basketball (Mentor's Justin Fritts), one Ms. Basketball (Chagrin's Halle Thome), one athlete who went on to be an Olympian (Lake Catholic's Matt Ludwig), another who vied for the Olympics (Euclid's Jessica Beard), two Gatorade volleyball players of the year (Lake's Abby Detering and Gilmour's Kathryn Randorf) and a future NFL running back (South's Kareem Hunt), not to mention countless state champions in other sports.

When asked the best and most dominating of any athlete I've seen yet at XXXX, none of the above make the cut, surprisingly.

That distinction goes to former Gilmour star tennis player Lauren Davis, who won an undefeated state championship as a freshman in 2008, winning every match in straight sets, withdrew from Gilmour in December and turned pro at the Jim and Chris Evert Tennis Academy in Florida. Pretty sure I won't see that kind of dominance again in my lifetime, at least on the prep level.

So yeah, it's been a fun ride when you consider those types of kids and teams.

But the position of a sports writer at XXX is so much more than covering games. It's relationships. Maybe that's why the past 20 years have gone so quickly, because the memories of the people — whether it be athletes, coaches, statisticians or fans.

Such as:

- The old "Breakfast Club" as we called it at wrestling tournaments — myself, John Ingram, Darrell Erdman and Mark Kriwinsky. No work started until the kibitzing was complete and the coffee mugs were empty.
- Parents such as Carli (Stefancic) Montagner, who was a senior I covered my first year out of college and I got to cover her daughter Riley the past four years as she became Madison's all-time leading scorer.
- Playing cards at the state tournament with former VASJ coaches Dave and Mike Wojciechowski and their staff, and then seeing another former VASJ coach Babe Kwasniak lead the program to greatness while also finding out that his

JK

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## Two decades of memories glean wealth of gratitude (8-1-22)

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father — Papa Kwas — went to Steubenville Franciscan University and KNEW my mother.

\* Sharing and trading photos of deer via our trail cameras in the woods with the likes of Kenston football coach Jeff Grubich, longtime Lake Catholic volleyball coach Rich Severino and the Landies brothers from Chardon — or getting asked in pregame warmups by former Kirtland All-Ohioan Joey Grazia what I shot that morning on the golf course.

- All those state volleyball tournaments with coaches such as Erik Poje, Jamie Field, Paul Force (back when he coached volleyball at North), the Prots girls (Jamie and Joni), Bill Behrend and Mark Royer.

- “Smokin’ Joe” Miller, the superfan/stat guy from Mentor who I still see at Lake County Captains game.

\* All the fans at games who let me lean on the wall or fence with them as I drink coffee and miss highlights of the game while bending their ear.

\* All the coaches, statisticians and athletic directors who put up with my incessant text messages and phone calls while resisting the temptation to strangle me for interrupting what little free time they actually have.

I could go on and on, but the point is — relationships matter. THAT is what has made the “job” at XXXXXX feel nothing like a job, but rather a privilege.

As I jumped back in my car and headed to my next stop on Day 1 of fall practices, I thought back to 1975 again and my stay at University Hospital in Cleveland as a first-grader with a brain tumor.

I recalled a name I’ll never forget. Wendy Nowak. I wish I could remember her face or her voice. But I have her signature in my “get well” book that she signed for me when my hospital room was just a few doors down from hers as we both fought the same brain tumor battle.

Hers was inoperable, I remember.

I made it. As I left the hospital the summer of ’75, I was told she wasn’t going to be as fortunate, and I am still as sad today as I was then that Wendy Nowak wasn’t going to get the chance to do someday what I was going to get to do.

Which is do something I love, like being a sports writer.

So with 20 years in the books at XXXXXX, I look forward to Year 21 and beyond with a heart of gratitude for the opportunity in front of me, for the athletes I cover and for all the relationships that have come with it.

Those experiences and memories are a treasure chest to me, and I will never take them for granted.