

Heart of a Tiger: Reflections on the 2023 Tiger Athletics Hall of Fame Celebration, Part 1

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. – One of my favorite campus events is our annual Hall of Fame induction ceremony. The Tiger Sports Hall of Fame was established in 1986 to honor former Fort Hays State University athletes, coaches, administrators, and community members who have made an extraordinary contribution to Tiger athletics.

What I love most is the authentic celebration of humble, extraordinary people who share stories of grit, humor, and, most of all, love – love of their sport, teammates, and coaches. It is a day when our honorees gather with family, teammates, and friends to smile, laugh, and, I guarantee, shed a tear. It is a day for gratitude, heart, and thanksgiving.

Here, in Part 1 of this two-part column, are the first four of eight stories that filled me with emotion and appreciation for the 2023 Hall of Fame inductees. The remaining stories will be included in my next column.

Tyrone Shepard's story is an inspiring tale of achievement and selflessness. Hailing from Seattle, Washington, Tyrone carved out an exceptional basketball career that left a lasting impression. Despite his undeniable talent, his humble approach and focus on teamwork set him apart from others.

Head men's basketball Coach Mark Johnson spoke highly of Tyrone's character and profound influence on the team. Tyrone's upbringing and high school basketball experience played a pivotal role in shaping him into the player and person he became. Raised by a mother who instilled values of hard work and caring for others, Tyrone understood that success went beyond personal achievements; it was about winning as a team.

Tyrone's calm demeanor and level-headedness earned him the respect and admiration of his teammates. In fact, his popularity drew in large crowds, leading to the first-ever advanced sellout in Fort Hayes State basketball history during his 2006 season.

Tyrone's selflessness and team-oriented mindset were evident in every aspect of his play. Despite having talented teammates and playing on a deep roster, he never complained about minutes or shots. Coach Johnson recalled a remarkable incident during senior night when Tyrone offered his starting spot to a teammate - an act that showcased his incredible leadership and willingness to put others before himself.

Tyrone's story serves as a reminder of the true essence of team sports. It highlights how selflessness, humility, and a strong work ethic can propel individuals and teams to exceptional achievements. Tyrone's journey is an inspiration to future athletes, demonstrating that true success is built on camaraderie, teamwork, and unwavering dedication to a shared goal.

Jim Belch's journey through the wrestling world is an inspiring testament to dedication and passion. Hailing from Goodland, Kansas, Jim's achievements as a wrestler and coach profoundly impact those who know his story.

As a two-time All-American and a prominent figure in Kansas wrestling, Jim's success on the mat showcases his unwavering commitment to the sport. But his influence didn't end there. Transitioning into coaching, Jim dedicated 33 years of his life to mentoring student-athletes at various schools, including Atwood, Wellington, and Lawrence High School. His coaching prowess was unparalleled, becoming the first Kansas High School coach to achieve 300 dual wins and setting a standard of excellence for others to follow.

Jim's journey serves as a powerful reminder of the transformative power of mentorship, camaraderie, and a shared passion. Not only have individuals been positively influenced by Jim's guidance, but an entire community has been uplifted by his presence. His story stands as a testament to the lasting impact one person can make when they pour their heart and soul into something they love.

Another touching story introduces Richard and Tawnita Augustine, who served as coaches for the Fort Hays State women's gymnastics team in the 1980s. Their impact on the program and the athletes they coached profoundly led to multiple All-American performances and top-five finishes in the NCAA Division II.

The sport of gymnastics was strong in Kansas when the Augustines started with the program, but over time, the shrinking number of local high school programs led to the need to recruit from across the nation. The Augustines reached out far and wide to build FHSU into a national championship contender by the mid-1980s with athletes from all over the United States, including Hawaii, New York, Alaska, Pennsylvania, Oregon, Maryland, Texas, Oklahoma, Iowa, Illinois, Nebraska, and Kansas. By the program's last year in 1990, FHSU was the only school remaining in Kansas with a women's team.

What resonated most for me about their story was how they epitomized the ethic of care for which our campus is known. The long-lasting influence of the Augustines was so evident as they shared with pride their continued involvement to this day in the lives of all the Tiger athletes they coached and loved as a close-knit family they built around their team. Their coaching went beyond gymnastics. They caringly shaped successful individuals who pursued careers in various fields, creating lifelong friendships, cherished memories, and a lasting legacy. Their dedication, hard work, and unwavering support nurtured young athletes, helping them grow into strong, intelligent, and successful women. The Augustines' legacy will forever be cherished by those who were fortunate enough to be a part of their journey.

Daniel Traffas, a native of Sharon, Kansas, left an indelible mark on the baseball field during his time at Fort Hays State. His achievements as a pitcher are a testament to his talent and unwavering dedication. In his senior year, Daniel soared to new heights, earning the prestigious title of the 1995-Mile-High Intercollegiate Baseball League Pitcher of the Year. With an impressive 8-3 record and a remarkable 2.47 ERA, he dominated the baseball diamond.

What stood out for me in Daniel's story was his family bonds. Behind every great individual lies a support system that drives them forward. For Daniel, this pillar of strength was his mother, Karen. Amidst their father's health battles, Karen selflessly took on the responsibility of caring for the family, exemplifying unwavering resilience. Her commitment and ability to juggle numerous roles without complaint left a lasting impact on me.

Daniel's love of baseball is largely due to his father's influence. Countless hours were spent practicing together, forging a bond that would last a lifetime. Even in the face of adversity, when an accidental injury left their father with a broken jaw during a practice session, his resilience

and unyielding spirit shone through. The vivid memory of their dad's sacrifice serves as a poignant example of the love and admiration between father and son.

This heartfelt story encapsulated a range of emotions, from excitement and gratitude to admiration and love. And that is what I love most about this annual celebration. It is a reminder of the profound impact that family, teammates, and coaches can have on an individual's life. Daniel Traffas' journey is a testament to the resilience and unwavering dedication required to achieve greatness.

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