

Bob Wood: A Tribute

1941 - 2019

You meet only a few people in your ever-so-brief time on earth who are larger than life; the kind of person who commands a room, the kind of person who simply takes charge. This is the guy who sees a need and fills it. He doesn't just talk; he does. These people are starters. Inertia is not part of their personalities. They don't just complain that "Somebody should do something about this." They are, in a word, Leaders.

Back in the day, some of the other high school sports had the advantage of having formed coaches' associations. Some of these coaches' groups held workshops. Some had Halls of Fame. Others chose all state teams and coaches of the year. These organizations were able to speak with a unified voice to the Michigan High School Athletic Association officials in Lansing. Before Bob Wood, if we had a gripe, we were on our own in terms of voicing it. But not after 1977.

In July of that summer (to be precise, 7-7-77), Bob convened a group of invited tennis coaches at Bill Oliver's Lodge next to Houghton Lake. They included Saginaw Heritage's Bob Quinn, East Grand Rapids' Charlie Partin, Whittemore Prescott's Chuck Reed (He got Bob's daughter up on skis for the first time), Harold Holcomb of Essexville Garber, Chuck Wright of University Liggett, and Tiger Teusink of Holland. There were, of course, others, some very prominent coaches. Most of them can be found on our Coach of the Year lists and in our Hall of Fame.

Make no mistake, Bob was the moving force and the commanding voice. When E.F. Hutton (a.k.a Bob Wood) spoke, everybody stopped everything to listen. He had an outsized John Wayne-esque personality and the achievements to back it up. Although Charlie Partin was the first president followed by Bob Quinn, there was little doubt as to who ran the show.

Bob's first achievement on behalf of all of us was the hosting – with Gary Bodenmiller -- of an enormously successful workshop in Feb. 1977. His keynote speaker was U of M's Brian Eisner, whose teams had, up to that point, won seven Big Ten championships (He would win 18 in 30 years). Brian, the coach of Vic Amaya (He would go 5 sets with Bjorn Borg on the Centre Court at Wimbledon, Malivai Washington (Wimbledon finalist) and Mike Leach (NCAA singles champion), was terrific in terms of

both presentation and content. He brought enormous credibility to the workshop and by extension, to our fledgling association.

Need more credibility? Coaching at his high school alma mater --- as a player he won the state championship --- Bob's teams captured 39 state titles. Not content with simply winning in his division, he regularly scheduled against the best squads in the state regardless of class. Although University Liggett was small, his kids competed on an even or superior basis with the best. More to the point, he was not much concerned about records; he simply wanted his boys and girls to gain the best competitive experience.

He certainly got it. Who would not want to come to Bob Wood's tournament? Who would not hope that he would accept an invitation to theirs? He was one of the first to take his teams all over the state. Just as valuable, he taught by example that it didn't matter what your record was when going to the state seed meeting. His team actually sometimes finished a campaign with a losing dual meet record. As a result, he would encounter coaches at the state seed meeting with unblemished records who simply couldn't understand why their kids should be seeded below his. They learned, often the hard way, that what matters is level of competition.

To be sure, he stepped on a few toes along the way. Bob was not afraid to confront and his leadership ensured that our association would stand strong in terms of what matters. Before the advent of our Claims Committee, coaches had a tendency to tread lightly with regard, say, to suspicions of stacking. Not Bob. "I had to deal with a notorious year-after-year stacker in my regional," says Ed Waits. "I was told throughout one season that their No. 1 singles player was actually a 3D player. When Bob got 'wind' of this, he called their A.D. and blasted away ("You have a tennis coach who cheats!"). He had a commanding presence



even on the phone and spoke from a position of authority. After all, he was on the Board of Director for the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association and in 1978 he was a speaker at the National Athletic Directors Conference. The lineup quickly changed.”

“Bob (and Tiger Teusink, who over the years has been regarded as the foundation of the MHSTeCA) were also not afraid to leave a player off the all-state team because of bad behavior,” continues Ed. “Woe betide the parent or coach who called to protest the exclusion. They were talking to an individual who, through his achievements, had an excess of *gravitas*.”

“He didn’t care about circumstances or background. After all, he was the athletic director of an exclusive private school that educated privileged kids. The parents of his tennis players were, to understate, high profile. Parents and coaches statewide who held their players’ self-esteem and hurt feelings above ethics and sportsmanship didn’t stand a chance against Bob. He held the high moral ground with authority. He once berated USTA officials at the U.S. Open for permitting such lousy behavior from John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors. ‘Here we are trying to educate the youth of America,’ he protested.....”

One key component of the rapidly-gained influence of the MHSTeCA was that Bob developed an unusually cooperative relationship with MHSAA Assistant Director Warren McKenzie, an invaluable asset in terms of tennis coaching improvement. The two of them – along with Tiger and Gordon Boettcher -- worked together to abolish an antiquated system for determining a state team championship, a system that was universally acknowledged to be a sham. Warren was the positive influence that green-lighted the effort, Bob was the promoter (and did some compromising), and Tiger did much of the initial set-up work. The result was the institution of an entire team flight format at the final tournament. The fact that the change came from Bob and Tiger did much to gain acceptance from coaches throughout the state of such a radical overhaul.

The two of them also worked out a better system of seeding for the state tournaments. In addition to instituting area seeding meetings the day after the regional tournaments, Bob and Warren-appointed coaches – ---MHSTeCA members in that our board consisted of the most successful and influential tennis leaders in the state -- would gather at the MHSAA offices in Lansing to seed and make the draws. This was brand new, the result being that there was so much more input from the rank and file with regard to the set-up of the state championships. Over the years, the accuracy of the seed results at the final tournaments speaks for the effectiveness of this system. Before one of the workshops, Bob organized a successful effort to send Warren and

his wife on a cruise upon McKenzie’s retirement.

The man had connections. After visiting the National Tennis Teachers Conference in New York City with Gary Bodenmiller, the two embarked on a remarkable 40-year mission of hosting enormously successful workshops. They featured some of the best clinicians (Vic Braden, Dennis VanderMeer, Peter Burwash, Kirk Anderson, Gundars Tilmanis, Wayne Bryan, and Jorge Capestany), players (Chris Evert, Arthur Ashe, Tim Gullikson, Pam Shriver, and Jack Kramer), and college coaches (Eisner, University of Wisconsin’s John Powless, and Gene Orlando along with the MSU varsity team). The effort not only afforded invaluable teaching techniques to tennis coaches (often the best came from relatively unknown speakers) but gave us an opportunity to gather with colleagues in one venue for fellowship and feedback just prior to the spring season. What better place to hold a General Membership Meeting or fulfill your Rules Meeting obligation with Warren McKenzie, Gina Mazzolini, and Dan Hutcheson? What better timing for the opportunity to gather around a banquet table to honor Hall of Fame inductees and Coaches of the Year?

Those of us who helped out at the clinics knew how exacting Bob could be. “He demanded excellence in everything he pursued,” says Tiger. “His workshops reflected that.” As evidence, he would use much of his workshop microphone time pleading for evaluations and then spend each Saturday afternoon after the event going over them with Gary.

As an athletic director who traveled the nation under a variety of auspices, Bob often declared to anyone who would listen that no state had a more effective tennis coaches association than ours. Given his wide-ranging experience, he knew this firsthand, especially after he left Michigan and briefly coached in two other states. “When we attended national conventions, coaches from around the nation were all over us, wanting to know how we got organized and how we operate,” says Tiger who was Bob’s frequent travel companion and golf partner. “They would ask how we organized the workshop, the final tournaments, the dual meets, and the efforts to change rules. We were celebrities.”

Not surprisingly, he had an impact nationally. He was Tennis Chair of the National High School Athletic Coaches Association (1979-1982) and its President (1986-1987). He is not only in the first class of our Hall of Fame (1986) and in the MHSCA Hall of Fame (1990) but is an inductee into two *national* organizations: The aforementioned NHSACA (1997) and the National Federation of Athletic Associations Hall of Fame (2003). He was a four-time speaker at the National Tennis Teachers Conference in New York (1979, ‘81, ‘84 and ‘86). In 1980, he served on the

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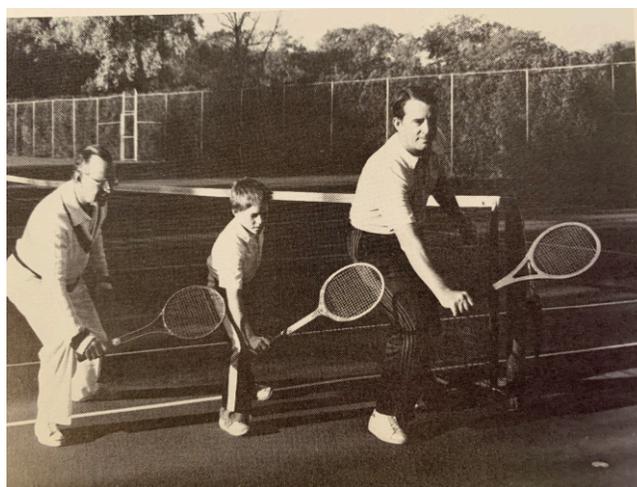
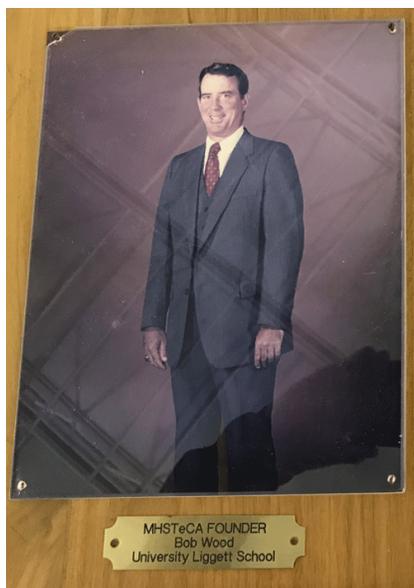
President's Council on Physical Fitness. To be associated with Bob Wood was to bask in reflected glory This was *our* leader.

Thus, It was almost a given that Bob's connections to national tennis would extend to his service at the USTA Boys 16s and 18s, held each early August at Stowe Stadium in Kalamazoo. Although many of our finest high school tennis coaches who lived and worked in the region--- Jim Cummins, Al Pollard, Gary Ellis, Don Hudson, and Peter Militzer --- have volunteered their time at the event, Bob journeyed across the state to spend a week at the tournament serving in various capacities for 38 years. "He 'held court' in the top of the tower where he was a huge asset to all the media, answering phones, retrieving players for interviews, and doing odd jobs," says *Kalamazoo Gazette's* Pam Shebest. "He was always the first one in the tower, arriving at 7 a.m. and not leaving until 4 or 5 p.m. every day. A steady

stream of current and former high school and college coaches would make their way to the tower every year to reminisce and talk tennis."

"When the local cable channel began televising the finals, Bob was perched on the catbird seat as one of the play-by-play guys, adding tidbits about players during the matches," continues Pam. As it turns out, that "local cable guy" was Hap Haasch, an assistant tennis coach at Gull Lake and Executive Director of Public Media Network in Kalamazoo. As producer of extensive tournament coverage over the years, he worked closely with Bob. "We were simply in awe of him," he says.

For his service, Bob was awarded a Green Jacket, the tournament's highest honor for a volunteer. In 2017, his last year at the USTA tournament, he received a Hitchcock chair, engraved with the Kalamazoo College symbol, for his 38 years of service.



**Wood Family: Three generations
All high school tennis champions at University Liggett**

To gain perspective, we should recognize that Bob didn't accomplish all of this by himself. There were so many who helped establish and maintain an association that in the future coaches might be in danger of taking for granted. Some of the Founding Fathers are gone, but what all of them left was a substantial legacy. Yes, it is a fallacy to assert that if it were not for Bob Wood, we would not have all state teams, coaches of the year, a Hall of Fame, semiannual board meetings, workshops, effective and improved rules changes, a strong voice in Lansing, etc

But the bottom line is that it was Bob Wood who stepped forward and started it. Back in the 1960s and early 1970s, he saw something and then did more than just say something.

John McEnroe used to repeatedly declare that if a female professional tennis player picked up a substantial paycheck, she should give some of the money to Billie Jean King whose force of personality pioneered such opportunities for those fortunate competitors who came after.

In like manner, if you have had some of your kids on the all state team or if you have been named Regional or State Coach of the Year; if your 3rd doubles team got to play in the final tournament or if you have been honored with a national award (You have to be nominated by your state organization); if you have been inducted into the MHSTeCA Hall of Fame or have been honored for another reason at the banquet --- you owe Bob Wood some of your glory.

As with Billie Jean, he passed it on.