

IGHSAU bestows top honor on Tom Keating

Written by Tom Fruehling

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Standing just off the volleyball court at the packed Cedar Rapids Ice Arena Wednesday night, with several hundred screaming Saints fans filling the seats behind him, Xavier Principal Tom Keating couldn't help but marvel at how the sport has grown since he first got in the game.

With 40 teams from five classes competing in the state tournament this year for the first time, it's the largest field ever.

Keating, the most decorated volleyball coach in Iowa history during his 24 years at Dubuque Wahlert, remembers the 1970s in the game's infancy when six teams played for the state title in small gyms passed from one high school to another.

When the first of his 16 Wahlert teams made it to the tourney in 1985, he remembers saying, "I'd play it in a parking lot if they called it the state tournament."

Keating, 57, retired from coaching in 2003 to become Xavier's second principal. But he'll be recognized Saturday between championship games as only the second recipient of the Iowa high school volleyball Golden Plaque of Distinction.

Mike Dick, executive director of the Iowa Girls High School Athletic Union, said this is the first year coaches from all 10 girls sports will be honored.

"Choosing Tom for this inaugural award was an easy choice," he said Wednesday after the Xavier loss to Charles City. "He's someone who has always done the right things for the right reason."

"If you had kids or grandkids, he was the kind of coach you'd want them to play for. With Tom, he saw teaching and coaching the same way."

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And he was more successful at it than anyone else in the state.

His Wahlert teams won a record 11 tournament championships, including four in a row from 2000 to 2003. And they were in the final four 15 times, also a record.

Keating's Golden Eagles were ranked in the top 10 nationally 10 times, and his career record of 776-82 is fourth on Iowa's all-time win list. He was named Iowa volleyball coach of the year seven times and was twice honored as national coach of the year.

Four of his players were high school All-Americans, and 31 went on to play Division I college volleyball. More than a dozen followed him into coaching.

"He's a living legend," said Mount Mercy University volleyball coach Rick Blackwell, who has known Keating for years as both a former coach at Kennedy and principal at Regis Middle School.

"As a coach and as an administrator, he's focused on what's good for the kids and the overall program. He's just a first-class guy."

As with a lot of accomplished coaches, Keating never played the game he was good at coaching. A native of Philadelphia, he came to Simpson College in Indianola to play basketball.

"And my folks thought it would be good for me to get out of Philly and grow up," he said.

With degrees in psychology and education, he took his first teaching job in the small Story County town of Maxwell in 1977. The school had about 125 students.

He says he taught everything at the junior and senior high level, coached basketball and track

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and drove the school bus to games.

When the school started volleyball in 1979 he was offered the coaching position. "I took it," he said, "because it paid an extra \$500 a year."

He moved to Wahlert with its much bigger student body year later and was an assistant volleyball coach for three years.

"I didn't go there for the coaching," he said. "They had a full-time position teaching psych.

"And I had gone to Catholic schools growing up and wanted to be part of that kind of community where the parish, parents, students and faculty are all involved together."

For the next two decades, Keating established a volleyball dynasty, starting with a state crown in 1986.

"I always had great players," he said. "And, more importantly, I had great kids. They were committed, worked hard and were great representatives for the school."

He also credits longtime assistants Jan Thyne and Jim Kuhl, along with his wife of 32 years, Jodi, who supported his career while raising three sons.

Keating says he still misses coaching.

"Every day," he said. "I miss the interaction with the kids. I miss the competition. And I miss the coaching fraternity and sorority."

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And with all the honors he's been given, he says the highlight of his life's work came several years ago.

"We had a reunion of our first state championship team," he recalled. "The players came back years later, and they had their own kids running all over the floor.

"All the memories came back, and it was fabulous. It made it all worthwhile."