

NICK,

continued from Page A12

in Keizer is a different deal because of the reputation of the city. People think Keizer and they think baseball. If you think things like that don't matter, they matter halfway around the world."

Nicholas' career would likely have been much different if he hadn't been pressured to come back to Keizer 30 years ago. He was a McNary graduate, but he'd started teaching in St. Helens without any desire to leave his new home.

"It was a one town community and it was a kick. The fishing was outstanding, hunting was outstanding and there wasn't anything you couldn't do outdoor-wise," Nicholas said.

Then he received four phone calls. Two from his former teacher and coach, Vic Backlund, and two from then-principal Kathleen Hammond asking him to transfer to McNary.

Hammond scared Nicho-

las, then and now, but it was Nicholas' father who finally convinced him to return to the Iris City.

"I was talking with him and he reminded me that 'it was Vic Backlund,'" Nicholas said. Backlund and other teacher-coaches at McNary were the ones who inspired Nicholas to teach. "I watched them and it just looked like fun."

When Nicholas played baseball for Backlund in high school, the thing that impressed him most was the sense of purpose.

"Every day that we went to practice, we had a plan and we had a reason for everything we did if someone asked us," Nicholas said.

Nicholas took over the freshman baseball squad in his first year back at McNary and lost six games. It made him fear for his job security.

"But after that year, we sat down and put together a baseball manual that detailed how we do it at McNary. If we had questions, the answer was in that book. We weren't just on

the same page, we were on the same sentence," he said.

Not long after he returned to the school, Jerry Lane and John Whelan enlisted him as a wrestling coach. That pair of mentors supplied him with more lessons about what it took to coach well.

"Whelan's philosophy was that you could be mentally tougher than anyone else, and you didn't give in. He was a bulldog. If you gave in and lost, you were going to get it. If you lost and never gave in that was as good as a win," he said.

He credits Lane, "who didn't sugarcoat anything," as the biggest influence on his own demeanor.

In 1992, Nicholas was an assistant coach in baseball when the team won the state title. The most overwhelming emotion was a sense of relief for himself and, more so, for Backlund. It also changed his perception.

"Getting to that game and winning was something I didn't think you could ever

"Teaching them that they could work hard was the one thing I knew I could do."

- Craig Nicholas

do, but we had a great team that stole something like 180 bases that season and got thrown out twice. We ran wild on everybody," he said.

At the time, Nicholas was also an assistant football coach and took on the junior varsity squad under Head Coach Gary Swanson, who had come from Roseburg High School. Swanson's pedigree of militaristic preparation simply didn't mesh well with the existing program, but Nicholas says Swanson is still the best person he's ever known.

When Tom Smythe arrived at McNary, he told Nicholas they'd be state champs in three years.

"Everyone thought Smythe was arrogant because he would stand on the sideline with his arms crossed, but that wasn't it. He was planning his next five plays and figuring out how to score without embarrassing the other team in the process," Nicholas said.

Three years later, in 1997, the Celtics took the state title with a field goal.

"That first time, I thought I was going to have a heart attack," Nicholas said. But recalling the game also summons up one of his most powerful memories. "I was up in the booth as defensive coordinator and we were on the home side. They said there was something like 9,000 Keizer people at the game and they

all started stomping and yelling, 'Defense, defense.' The vibrations rose up through the floor and I still get goosebumps on the back of my neck thinking about it."

The program took a second football title in 2001.

The year after Nicholas' team took the 2009 state title in baseball was one of his lowest. Despite having a number of returning players from that championship team, it never coalesced into a family the way they had the prior year.

In his final game, a playoff game, the team was shut out by a second-string pitcher. On the way home, those feelings of having let the city down returned. He even started having chest pains.

The next morning, he wrote his resignation.

It wasn't so much disappointment in his kids, but Nicholas felt he'd lost the ability to teach a team the one thing he's tried to impart to all his students - how to work hard.

"On the field or in the classroom, we end up with a lot of kids who either don't want to work hard or don't know they can. Teaching them that they could work hard was the one thing I knew I could do," he said.

After hanging up the baseball cleats, Nicholas continued to coach football with Tom Smythe at Lakeridge High School, but their plans for the program were never fully realized. When Isaac Parker was hired as McNary's new football coach, he asked Nicholas to return as defensive coordinator, but Nicholas still had one more year's commitment to Smythe, a gentleman's agreement between the two veterans.

In Parker's second year with the program, he asked again and Nicholas accepted out of a sense of mutual respect.

"When I was defensive coach for McNary, we went on a run of six or seven years when South Salem High School hadn't scored on us. Then they brought in Isaac as offensive coordinator and they

got a touchdown on us. I was ticked. The next year they beat us," Nicholas said. "People always say don't go back after you leave, it won't be the same. But, when I left in 2008, we'd had a great group of kids who had bought into the program. Parker had gotten the new kids to do the same thing."

Nicholas taught wellness classes at the school for most of the time he'd taught at McNary, and runs into former students frequently on visits to the doctor and at the emergency room. He's turned out more than a few emergency medical technicians and nurses.

Along the way, the students continued to teach him.

"They taught me that if you think there's one way to do it, you're wrong. There's all kinds of horror stories. You think everybody's got the same thing and they don't," he said. "They also taught me that there are very, very few bad kids. They have bad home lives or they're reacting to something else. People do things for a reason, they don't do it because they want to, it's some kind of outreach."

He officially retired January 16, and was on his way to spend "as many days as he wanted" at Disneyland with his wife. After visiting friends in Arizona for the better part of a month, he's boarding a plane bound for Germany.

He's joining Smythe again to coach the Saarbrücken Hurricanes in the German Football League.

"The next seven months of my life is everybody's dream. Smythe took them to league championship last year and he wants havoc on defense this season," Nicholas said. "He told me he thinks we're going to win it all this year. I asked what happens then. Smythe said, 'They'll name a country after us.'"

Nicholas said it was an astoundingly quick 30-plus year career. But, there's new music playing for him - probably something with accordion in it - and he's not ready to quit dancing just yet.

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bowling scores

Mixed Nuts Men's high games: Dawayne Wiltgen, 246. Men's high series: Dawayne Wiltgen, 688. Women's high game: Krystal Hall, 264. Women's high series: Krystal Hall, 654.

Ladies' Double Women's high game: Nancy Sharp, 192. Women's high series: Nancy Sharp, 549.

Monday Nite Trio Men's high games: Brian Kaplan, 267.

Men's high series: Brian Kaplan, 743. Women's high game: Emily Markus, 223. Women's high series: Emily Markus, 620.

Men's Continental Men's high game: Brandon Kowalik, 260. Men's high series: Bill King, 708.

Twilighters Men's high game: Norm Sioda, 269. Men's high series: Norm Sioda, 707.

Women's high game: Sharon Dornbusch, 269. Women's high

series: Catrina Simons, 544.

Statehouse Men's high game: Tom Hammerschmith, 285. Men's high series: Tom Hammerschmith, 730. Women's high game: Jill Poole, 246. Women's high series: Jill Poole, 638.

Bowl Crazy Men's high games: Ted Natividad, 259. Men's high series: Eric Gorman, 701. Women's high game: Aymee Narvarz, 244. Women's high series: Kathy Kaplan, 590.

Thursday Seniors Men's high game: Daryl Jones, 239. Men's high series: Daryl Jones, 642. Women's high game: Connie Bork, 191. Women's high series: Margaret Ruiz, 479.

Sportsbar Challenge Men's high game: Steve LeWright, 233. Men's high series: Steve LeWright, 658. Women's high game: Loretta Davis, 177. Women's high series: Loretta Davis, 484.

Jr. Majors Boy's high game: Dallas Wiltgen, 235. Boys high series: Donny Grubugh, 616. Girl's high game: Sierra Mo Hurtado, 266. Girl's high series: Hanna Russell, 651.

Bantam Preps Boy's high game: Liam Bissell, 108. Boy's high series: Auron Davidson, 309. Girl's high game: Rinoa Davidson, 127. Girl's high series: Rinoa Davidson, 350.

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