

Legend: 'He was able to get us to the next level, and it seemed easy'

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she said. "He just said, 'You know Susie, if someone saw something in you this early, someone else will.'"

Sather's encouragement reassured her she wasn't making a mistake by turning down the offer, and, indeed, the right position came her way shortly after.

On the sideline, Sather didn't raise his voice, which the players appreciated, even more so when they later found as a coach they did so themselves, to a degree.

"One of the things that stuck with me about his coaching style is he was not a screamer during the game," Jorgensen said. "I didn't appreciate that as much until I started coaching my own kids and rec teams. I found myself being somewhat of a screamer during the game."

Jim Hayes, a member of the 1987 boys third-place team, put it this way: "You could always hear his voice. He wasn't a yeller, but you could hear him. You wanted to be in tune with what he wanted to say."

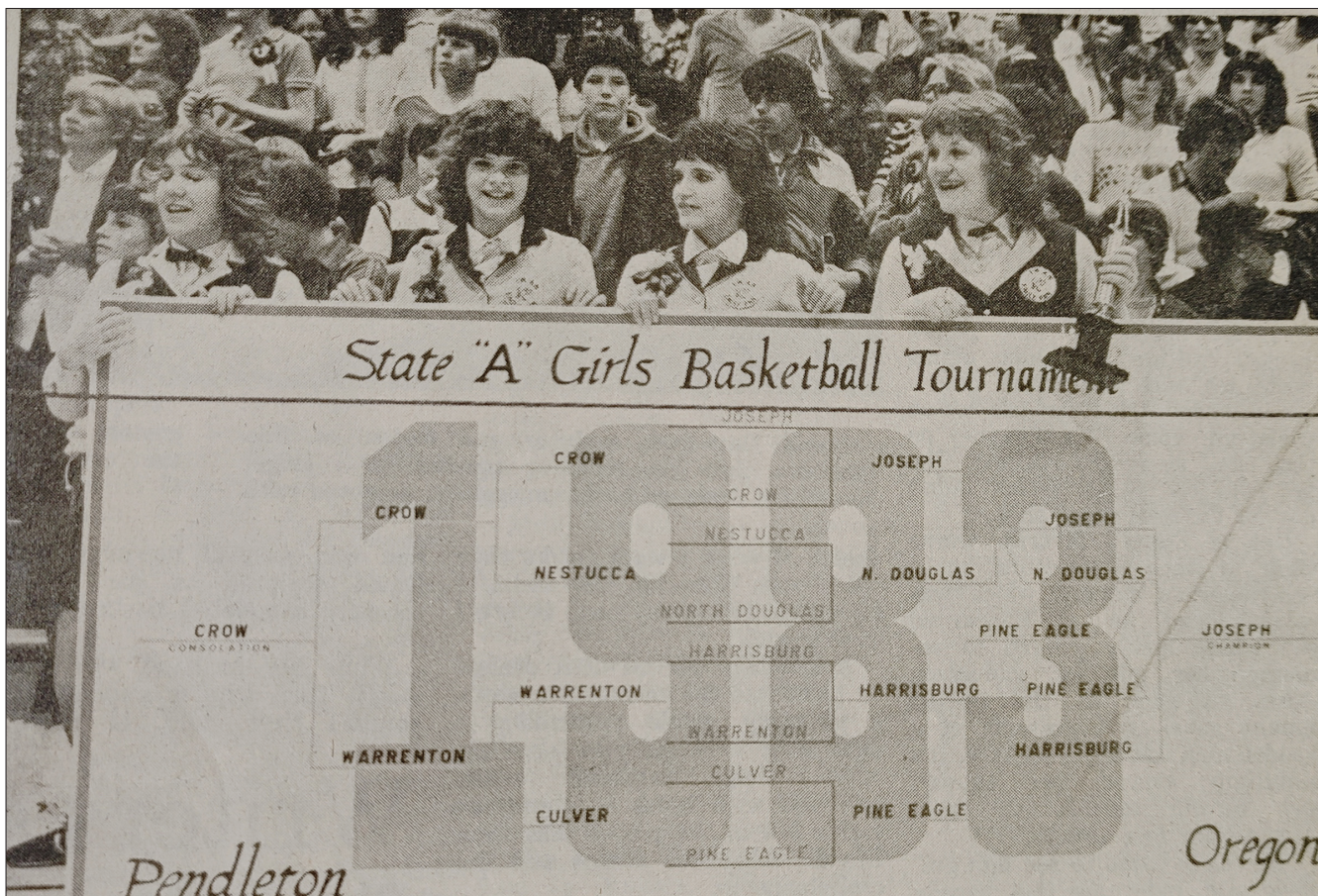
On-court success

Sather coached at Joseph at the tail-end of his three-decade career. He spent his final 12 years in Joseph — four of them coaching both the boys and girls basketball team. He, in fact, had a coaching resume that saw him not only be a head coach for boys and girls basketball in Joseph, but even volleyball.

He got his start coaching in Oregon at Wasco County in 1960, where he coached the boys basketball program for nine years, then spent a decade at Neah-Kah-Nie — also coaching boys hoops — before heading to Joseph for more than a decade. He wrapped up his career in 1990.

Sather, of course, is best known for his run with the Joseph girls — a 27-0 season in 1981, a 24-0 campaign in 1982 and a 26-0 run in 1983 — but he also won more than 300 games across three decades coaching boys hoops at his three schools. His best boys squad was in 1987, when the Eagles took third at the state level with a 23-3 record.

And in 1981, a Sather-led



The Joseph Eagles celebrate their third straight state title in 1983. The championship cemented the first dynasty in Oregon girls basketball history, as the win was the 77th in a row by Joseph. The streak reached 79 straight games. Gary Sather, the head coach for the Eagles at the time, died March 21, 2021.

Wallowa County Chieftain, File

Eagles volleyball team took fourth at state during one of his two runs as the school's volleyball coach, which he led for a total of six years. He even served as an assistant football coach.

"He was a better basketball coach, but the cool thing about him and volleyball is he knew he didn't know much about it, so he wasn't afraid to say, 'What do we do here?'" 1982 Joseph graduate Dixie McCadden said.

Sather already had two decades under his belt when he took over as the girls head coach prior to the 1980-81 season. The Eagles had several players back from a team that took fifth at state in 1980.

"I think that we had the skills," McCadden said. "I think we would have been good no matter what coach (we had, but) I don't think we would have been what we were without him. We were faster, taller, deeper in the bench. It was the perfect storm of people at the time."

"He was able to get us to the next level, and it seemed easy."

Given the way Sather quickly gained the respect

and trust of his players, they never second-guessed anything he told them on the court.

"We all trusted him, and when he said, 'Here is the game plan,' that is what we did," Patton said.

The wins started coming in a flurry for Joseph during that first season, but it was never anything the players — or Sather — dwelt on.

"I don't even remember seeing it in the paper until 15-0," Coughlan said. "It didn't mean anything. It was game to game to game. Then we started seeing it in the paper and said, 'Wow, that is something.'"

Sather, instead of tracking the team record, focused on every facet of the game, which Jorgensen said was vital to the team success.

"He hammered us so hard in the fundamentals that we were comfortable," Jorgensen said. "There was no need to hype us up. He never talked about the win streak. He would say 'Everyone else is talking about it. We don't need to.'"

Jorgensen said with Sather's coaching style, teaching the fundamentals meant starting with the small things and building up to a polished product. Every detail mattered.

And when the Eagles took the court, they were never found lacking.

"It just became automatic," McCadden said. "We didn't make very many mistakes."

Wins, then championships

Joseph completed its first undefeated season with a 40-38 win over Pilot Rock in the title game when Patton hit the winning shot in the closing seconds.

"He had called a timeout, and he told us to run our

offense and said to me, if I get a chance, drive baseline," she said. "Cindy Turner is our point guard and made it happen. She got the ball to me. I remember thinking, 'I have to do this, it's what he said to do and it has to work.'"

Along the way, the Eagles knocked off a team in Corbett that became a rival of sorts come playoff time. Corbett won the state title the previous year, edging Joseph in the semifinals by a 41-39 margin.

In 1981, the Eagles took down Corbett 61-52 in the quarterfinals, then won a low-scoring battle, 33-24, over Yoncalla in the semifinals on the way to the title-game win over Pilot Rock.

It was the start of a special time on the court, though for some players, it didn't immediately register how special the run was.

I knew we had done something really important after we won in '81 when the whole town greeted us after we won. That was pretty touching," McCadden said.

Early in the 1981-82 season was when Jorgensen knew.

"We were beating big teams. We played some bigger metro schools and we are beating them by 30 points, and we (starters) are sitting out in the fourth quarter," she said. "You just knew you had something special then."

The streak hit 30, then 40, and reached 51 when the team won its second straight title in 1982 in a game that didn't come down to the wire — a 56-39 blowout win over Sacred Heart.

"I don't know that there was a lot of thinking about it back then," Patton said of the streak.

Win No. 50 came against Corbett in the semifinals in yet another showdown, with

the Eagles hanging on for a 43-40 victory.

That 1982 run also was special in that Sather also coached the boys team to state, through their run ended prematurely with two straight losses.

"We never really excelled until we got to district and regionals," Mallon said. "It was really magical, to tell you the truth. I don't think any of us had an expectation of winning districts. We were going to play our best, run the system."

Exceeding expectations

The streak was supposed to end following the 1982 season.

"We lost the size on our team, and I think a lot of people thought it was a big drop in talent, which it was," Jorgensen said. "I never felt stressed going into a game feeling, 'Oh no, we can't be the one to lose the streak. He kept us focused on our job.'"

The team faced numerous challenges in the playoffs that year, but overcame them all.

The final four wins Joseph earned — which moved the winning streak to 77 games — came by a combined eight points, and included one-point win over Wasco County (41-40) and Crow (58-57) and a three-point victory against North Douglas (43-40) to reach the final. The battle-tested Eagles fought off a fourth close contest to complete the title trifecta by defeating Harrisburg for the 1983 crown, 50-47.

The run finally did end with a 30-26 overtime loss to Wallowa on Dec. 10, 1983, in the third game of the 1983-84 season, capping the streak at 79 games. That season saw Joseph go 11-9. Sather stepped down as the girls coach following the season.

In 1987, the boys team made a run to the state semifinals before slipping by Portland Christian in the third-place game, 74-72, to take third and go 23-3. To date, it's still the best run ever by a boys basketball team at Joseph.

Hayes, one of the seniors of that team, said Sather was the same as he was when his cousin, Patton, and brother, Blane Hayes, placed in the early '80s.

"He was completely a straight-shooter in the classroom and when he was coaching," Jim Hayes said. The standards were always the same."

He coached the boys three more seasons after the 1987 run before hanging up the whistle in 1990.

He finished his career with a record 302-378 in 31 years as a boys coach, and 88-9 as a girls coach. His combined mark was 390-387.

Reflecting

Gary Sather and his wife of 65 years, Jeannine, remained integral parts of the community after Gary Sather retired until they moved out of Northeast Oregon.

It was during a class reunion about two decades after the first championship that the court was renamed after the local legend.

"He was very humbled by it," Patton said. "He was very surprised, humbled, and that was really when he spoke to all the factors that went into those successful years, that it wasn't him. We would all argue that maybe not, but he was a big part of it."

Patton said at that reunion that Sather said of the success, "We had the good fortune of having the right kids in the right place in the right community at the right time."

"And we would all add we had the right coaching," Patton said.

Sather's passing left a hole in the basketball community in the city of Joseph — especially those whom he affected the most.

"He still means a lot to me personally," McCadden said. "I don't have a negative thought about him. The last time I saw him was at a reunion a few years ago. He was still the same guy. He was a positive, caring guy, he wanted to know how we were doing, and when he asked it he meant it."

Hayes said he became emotional on learning of Sather's death, calling the coach a local legend in his eyes.

McCadden said she felt lucky to have him as a coach.

"I played in college, and he was by far the best coach I ever had," she said. "And I played three sports in high school and in college. He was by far the best coach I had in any sport."

Jorgensen agreed, and said she was grateful to get to know him.

"There is nobody that touches Gary Sather."



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