

SALEM WALL OF CHAMPIONS

HERE'S TO YOU

Salem's second induction class includes ex-NFL star, basketball stalwarts, district architects

Tim Smith
hometownlife.com

Gary Balconi glanced out at the smiling faces looking back at him during Saturday night's Wall of Champions induction ceremony at Salem High School.

Like virtually every other person to go up onto the podium, Balconi shook his head in utter amazement to now be part of the second class of outstanding Rocks athletes and teams forever enshrined on the wall across the corridor from the gymnasium.

Following the program, the former Plymouth Salem coach, teacher and athletic director tried to sum up what it means to not only have an annual soccer tournament named after him (the Gary Balconi Invitational), but be part of the school's permanent legacy.

True to form, Balconi tried to deflect any praise coming his way.

"You know, I just look at the support staff, the people I worked with ... I was surrounded by so many wonderful, wonderful athletes," Balconi said. "They all responded, we came together, we worked hard."

"The kids made me feel good and I tried to reward them and make them feel special also. Like I said, if I had my life to live over, I'd do it again because I enjoyed every day, many different positions, elementary, middle school and high school."

Team effort

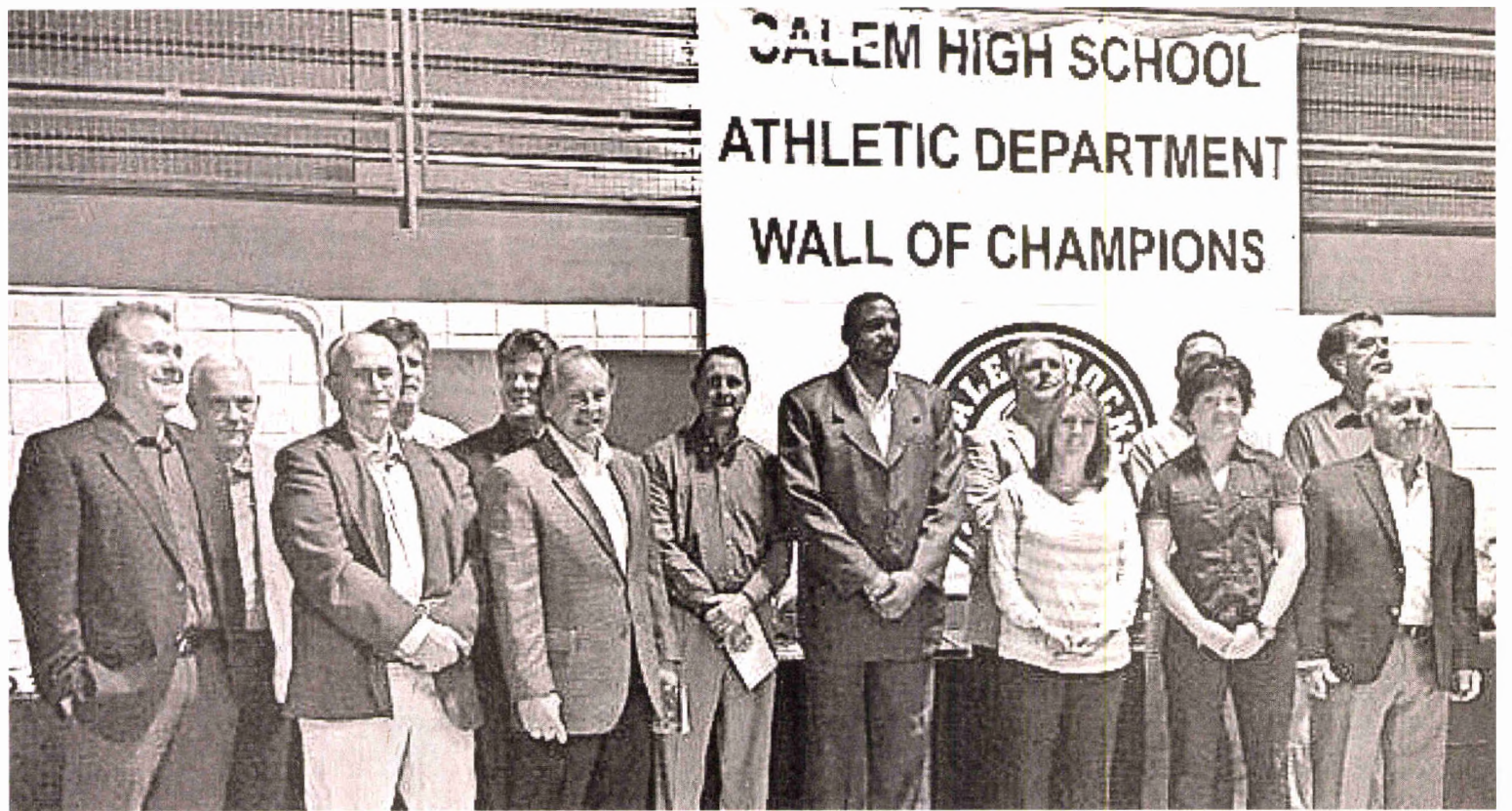
Asked how fellow inductees Paul Cummings and John Sandmann (both honored posthumously) might have reacted to being part of the new class of inductees, Balconi didn't hesitate to answer.

"They were both very humble, very kind and very warm," Balconi said. "I think they'd feel as I do, so fortunate that we were allowed to have these kids and these parents in our lives and to work together and enjoy the benefits of being together as a team."

Balconi got his start at Salem as a football coach from 1972-78, also branching out as head track and field coach (1975-91).

Eventually, he was assistant athletic director and, in 1996, the Balconi soccer invite was launched in honor of his efforts in constructing the current varsity soccer stadium.

"We had a lot of parent help; (athletic director) Paul Cummings worked along with me and let me run with it," Balconi said. "We wanted to build that facility. We had the property and parents were willing to



The newest inductees into Salem's Wall of Champions proudly stand at the conclusion of Saturday's ceremony.

help, we all worked together."

Balconi was the last inductee of the evening, which featured the national anthem, a catered dinner from Rose's Restaurant and Lounge and introductions from master of ceremonies Bill Keith.

'Gold' standard

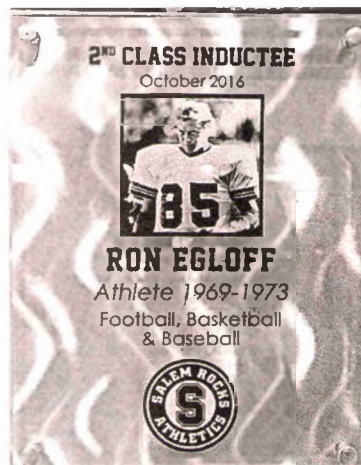
In addition to Balconi, Cummings and longtime athletic director Sandmann, the second class includes former National Football League player Ron Egloff, two-sport all-stater Jill Estey (a standout women's basketball player at the University of Illinois), all-world swimmer Ron Finley and standout basketball player James Head (who went on to play four seasons at Eastern Michigan University).

Also enshrined were Kelly Jaskot (a three-sport standout who played four seasons of women's basketball at the University of Detroit), brilliant baseball pitcher Tom Willette and the 1975 Rocks baseball team he pitched for, which won the state championship.

Egloff, a tight end for the Denver Broncos and San Diego Chargers, was part of Friday night's football halftime ceremonies introducing the newest members of the Wall of Champions.

He presented to his alma mater a gold football, part of Wilson's Super Bowl High School Honor Roll initiative; high schools across the nation are presented gold footballs to honor any graduates who were active players or coaches in a Super Bowl. Egloff played in Super Bowl XII for the Broncos.

"This is just unbelievable," Egloff said to open Saturday's string of speeches. "When we first got the email from Anna (Britnell) and Brian (Samulski, of the Salem athletic depart-



TIM SMITH

Ron Egloff's plaque on the Salem Wall of Champions. He followed his Rocks career with football success in college and the NFL.

ment), I didn't really know what it was going to be like.

"Just to walk in here and look in the hallway and see what you guys have done is amazing. I'm just blown away by the whole thing. It's really cool."

Honored, humbled

Estey — who excelled during the 1980s at Plymouth Salem in girls basketball and girls soccer — thanked all of her teammates and coaches for helping her grow into an all-state basketball player and Michigan Miss Soccer (in 10th grade).

She particularly gave credit to her basketball coach, the legendary Fred Thomann.

"Fred was a once-in-a-lifetime coach," Estey said. "I wish he was here to receive this award with me. He believed in me, he pushed me to be better every day."

Summing up how all of the honorees felt was Head, who tore up the basketball court during four seasons in the

SALEM'S NEWEST INDUCTEES

GARY BALCONI: Football and track coach won the Observerland Coach of the Year award in track and field in 1987. He also was assistant athletic director (1985-95) and was instrumental in the construction of the Park's varsity soccer stadium.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A football and baseball player at original Plymouth High School in the 1950s, Cummings went on to become a physical education teacher at all levels of the Plymouth-Canton district. He also was varsity football and baseball coach at Plymouth Salem before becoming assistant athletic director and (in 1985) director of K-12 athletics, health and physical education.

RON EGLOFF: Not only was Egloff a talented prep football player (1971-72), he was a standout baseball player at Plymouth Salem. Egloff was a first team all-stater in football, participated in the All-American Bowl and played football at Wisconsin. He then played nine seasons in the NFL, with Denver and San Diego.

JILL ESTEY: No matter the sport, Estey excelled in it — whether girls basketball or girls soccer, earning all-state honors in both during the 1980s. She received a full-ride scholarship to play women's basketball at Illinois, where she won the Lillian Speck Courtsiders Award for athletes excelling in leadership, academics and ability.

RON FINLEY: A four-year varsity swimmer (and three-time MVP) for the Rocks, Finley was undefeated his senior year (1977) in the 100 backstroke and was ranked in the top 10 in the nation in that event. He is a National Interscholastic Swimming High School All-American.

JAMES HEAD: Rocks longtime basketball coach Bob Brodie called Head "one of the best, if not the best" to play the sport at the high school and the statistics support the claim. Head led the Rocks to a 73-19 record over four seasons, establishing school rebounding marks for game and career. He had a distinguished college career at Eastern Michigan.

KELLY JASKOT: She was a go-to player at Plymouth Salem in girls basketball (all-state), volleyball (all-region) and softball (MHSSCA all-state) and went on to letter four seasons at the University of Detroit in women's basketball. A student of all of those sports, Jaskot returned to Salem in recent years to help coach both girls basketball and volleyball. She now is part of the basketball coaching staff at Mercy.

JOHN SANDMANN: He passed on a tryout with his hometown Brooklyn Dodgers to go into the U.S. Navy, but that merely opened the doors for his longtime career as a teacher, coach and administrator in the Plymouth-Canton Community Schools district. That career spanned 37 years (1948-85) and he is credited with developing the athletic facilities that now comprise the Park.

TOM WILLETTE: His senior season for the Rocks featured a 14-1 record, 1.12 ERA and 179 strikeouts in just under 94 innings. He also was a .400 hitter and offensive catalyst for the 1975 state championship team.

1975 BASEBALL TEAM: Coached by the late Wayne Sparkman, the Rocks upset No. 1-ranked Canton in the district championship game and went on to capture the state title. The Rocks went 21-7.

1990s, earning all-state and All-America honors along the way.

Among his school records are most rebounds in a game (24) and career (856).

"I'm really blessed to be receiving this award," said

Head, whose sister Dena was part of the inaugural Wall of Champions class in February. "I'm speechless."

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WILLETTE

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other inductees Saturday, including all-state swimmer Ron Finley.

He noted several original Rocks from the 1960s, including Dick Michaels and Mike McCord. They swam at what then was Plymouth High School (later Central Middle School and now the Plymouth Arts and Recreation Complex).

"They were tremendous swimmers," Finley said. "I just hope this committee doesn't keep it to Plymouth Salem athletes, which started here in '71 or '72."

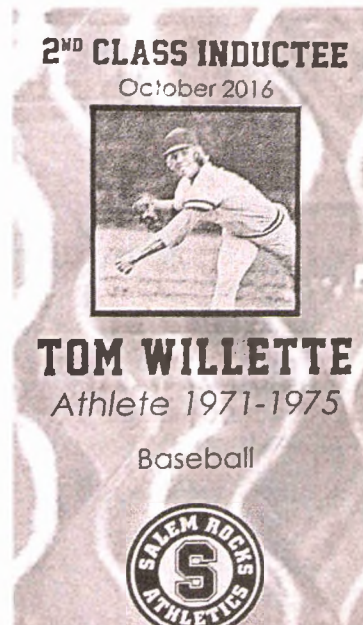
Britnell closed out the program with a promise to "reconcile as a committee and talk about the old Plymouth High School and see what we can come up with."

Toasting teammates

Willette was named to the second class, as was the Wayne Sparkman-coached baseball team that won the championship.

That team finished 21-7, with Willette the straw that stirred the drink (he went 14-1 with a 1.12 ERA and 179 strikeouts in just under 94 innings).

"I think what made Wayne a good coach was he was always prepared and he was able to



TIM SMITH

Tom Willette's plaque went up last weekend on the Salem Wall of Champions, along with those of eight others from school history.

adapt to the team he had," Willette said about the coach, who died at age 48.

A number of players from that Rocks squad were on hand for the induction ceremony, including Willette's friend and catcher, Vern Nagel, who introduced Willette.

"We knew we had a good team in 1975, but I don't think



SALEM ATHLETICS

This photo of the 1975 Plymouth Salem Rocks was included in the program for Saturday's Wall of Champions induction ceremony.

anyone thought we were destined to win the state championship," Willette said during the program. "Our No. 1 goal was to kick Canton's butt, because they were ranked No. 1 in the state that year. We did — we beat them 9-0 in the district finals.

"But without the support and talent of my teammates, I would not have achieved the individual success I saw that year. So thank you, and a big thank you to my catcher, Vern Nagel. There's always a special bond between a pitcher and a catch-

er."

What if?

The pitcher's high school career got him drafted by the San Diego Padres in 1975.

But he opted to pitch at North Carolina State University, where he was beset with elbow and shoulder woes that took miles off his fastball and years off his career.

Understandably transformed back to the mid-1970s for an evening, Willette said he had a wish.

"It would be to get on the mound for a day, with that full head of hair you see (on a nearby photo), not what you see here," Willette said. "And once again, be able to have that feeling of effortlessly throwing a baseball with great velocity."

"And then, to turn and see my brother (Rob) standing in left field and turn again and see my greatest fan, my dad, sitting at the top of the bleachers."

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