

A tribute to one of the best

Hamilton Township loses true sports legend with the passing of Lea Terry

By Rich Fisher

Fish4Scores.com

Jan. 11: The phone would ring and the distinctive voice would answer.

“Hamilton athletics . . .(pause) . . .Lea Terry.”

It was a voice that was as deceiving as it was unique.

When I first had to start calling Lea Terry and he answered that phone, he almost scared me with his tone. It was kind of like “What are ya bothering me for!”

At the time I worked for The Hamilton Observer, a weekly paper with a short shelf life. So I was dealing with Lea a lot. After he got to know me, that voice on the other end of the phone still had that same gruffness. But as soon as I gave my name and told him why I was calling, suddenly he was friendly Lea, willing to do whatever he could to help me in one way or the other.

Just like he was with everybody else in the Mercer County sports world.

Sadly, we lost Lea on Monday at the age of 88 and my condolences go out to Lea’s wife, children, grandchildren and anyone else whose life he touched.

With Lea’s passing, came the passing of a true legend in these parts.

The word “legend”, of course, can be bandied about and used loosely when it doesn’t really apply. In fact, I do it all the time as a joke.

But Lea Earl Terry is a legend and that is no joke. Innovations he helped start are still a strong part of the area’s sports fabric.

He’s heroic, not just at Hamilton High West, but beyond Park Avenue and in every crevice of Mercer County. That’s what happens when a guy has a productive career of nearly 40 years in one place.

Lea began teaching and coaching at Hamilton in 1949 after serving in the army in World War II and graduating from Rutgers. He coached pretty much every sport at every level (there weren’t nearly as many back then) before taking over as Athletic Director in the early 1970’s.

He retired in 1988, but his legacy lives on in his offspring.

Daughter Linda Laird is a swim coach at West, which competes in the Lea E Terry Natatorium named after her dad. His son, John Terry, is a football official and area softball coach.

One granddaughter, Gerri “Bear” Laird, is the softball pitcher for Steinert. Another, Jamie Terry, is the softball pitcher for Nottingham. A grandson, John Terry, is captain of the Nottingham High ice hockey team and collected a goal and an assist in the Northstars 3-2 win one day after his grand dad died.

Not only is Lea’s family still contributing, but Lea’s methods are still being utilized.

Marty Flynn, long-time athletic director for the West Windsor-Plainsboro schools, was the Hornets varsity baseball coach during most of Terry’s tenure as AD.

“With all the technology and computers and iPads and all that other stuff these days, I still use Lea’s organizational grid for tracking daily games,” Flynn said. “He was amazing. I would die without today’s technology but I call that grid that he used my bible.”

Evidently, it was quite a famous grid according to John Wagner, who was Hightstown’s Athletic Director in the 1980’s.

“Lea was the one in charge of the master schedule every year,” Wagner said. “He was the workhorse of the athletic directors. He presented the schedule every year, all we had to do was fill in the spaces.”

“He had that kind of mind,” Flynn said. “He could seed tournaments, create schedule matrixes. I wasn’t involved with those meetings back then but the other ADs spoke so highly of Lea regarding those pieces of the puzzle that were very important.”

Current Hightstown AD Gary Bushelli was part of those meetings, and concurred with Flynn.

“Lea was known as the scheduling guru,” Bushelli said. “He did the entire master schedule as long as he was there. Oftentimes this is a very difficult, challenging task but Lea handled it with ease.”

Not only that, but Terry, along with fellow athletic directors at the time – including Steve Meunch, Steve Timko (now head of the NJSIAA), Carol Parsons, Dave McWilliam, Nick Gusz and Vince Ardery – were the driving force behind the inception of the Mercer County Tournaments.

Lea was also AD when Hamilton West became one of the original eight Mercer County schools to form the Colonial Valley Conference.

“Hamilton was one of the larger schools admitted along with Steinert and Trenton,” said Ardery, who was Notre Dame AD at the time. “These schools had elite athletic programs and raised the CVC to the next level.”

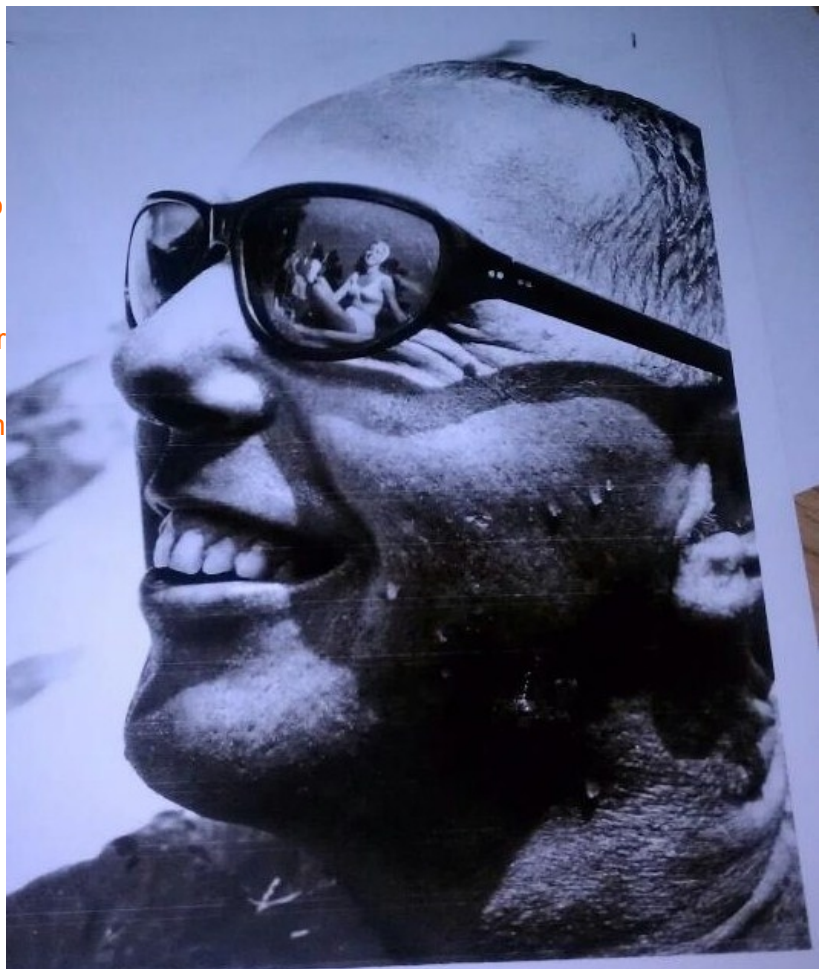
Ardery noted that Terry’s contributions planted the seeds for many great things to happen in Mercer County sports.

“Lea worked tirelessly to raise the Hornets, Hamilton Township, the CVC and all of Mercer County athletics to the highest level of competition in New Jersey,” said Ardery, now the AD at Neptune High School. “He served as the treasurer of the association and for many years was accountable for the gate receipts from sold out championship games that drew thousands of spectators to the area’s largest venues -- Mercer County Park, Rider University, Lawrenceville’s Lavino Field House, The College of New Jersey and other places.”

And while Terry was making sure things ran right, he also made sure that his young colleagues had a good role model.

“He was a beloved teacher, coach and administrator,” Ardery said. “He was a warm, friendly, hard working man. He was quick to volunteer his assistance to the young and inexperienced AD’s.

“He would share his vast amount of knowledge with all of his peers and he became the respected elder statesmen of the Mercer County athletic directors and later the Colonial Valley



No one is quite sure who the gal in the shades are, but those type of sunglasses probably served Lea Terry well when he was trying to keep fellow ADs guessing during their numerous hands of penny poker.

Conference athletic directors.”

But first and foremost, Lea Terry’s greatest attentions were given to the Hornet coaches and players.

“He was very dedicated to Hamilton High West,” Flynn said. “Even in the past few years I would go to Thanksgiving games and see him there.”

In fact, in the early 1980s there was a movement by the CVC to try and re-schedule football games, which would have moved the Steinert-Hamilton game away from Thanksgiving.

Terry wielded his influence to make sure nothing ever disrupted that tradition from being renewed every Thanksgiving morning. Over 30 years later it is still going strong.

“Lea was an extremely dedicated, responsible, hard-working AD,” Bushelli said. “I can’t ever remember him missing an athletic contest at Hamilton.”

Terry also mentored countless Hornet athletes and coaches, leaving a positive impact on them all. He helped groom Mike Gilbert, who was Hamilton’s swimming coach under Terry. Gilbert took over as AD when Lea stepped down in 1988.

“I just want to give my condolences to his loving family,” said Gilbert, who is now Director of Educational Services for the Hamilton Township School District’s Secondary Division. “He was one of the most sincere, caring, and dedicated individuals I have ever met. . .just a wonderful person who set the model for all athletic directors.”

He also set the tone for youthful coaches who could sometimes get a little excited in the heat of battle.

“Lea had a big influence on me,” Flynn said. “He kind of guided me when I needed some guiding, telling me what to do and what not to do. He taught me how to maintain professionalism and sportsmanship. He would bring you in his office in his own way, or talk to you out at the field, and make sure you knew how to stay on course.”

Maybe no one knew all aspects of the professional Lea Terry better than Jack Bell, who had him as a teacher when he attended West, and as a co-worker and boss when he taught and coached at Hamilton.

“We team-taught together when I was hired at Hamilton,” Bell said. “Lea was a very dedicated teacher and was always willing to work hard to make the athletic program as strong as possible while he served as athletic director and taught classes at the same time.

“The pool at Hamilton is named in his honor because of the respect that he gained from the administrators, faculty and student body when he served as varsity swimming coach over the years. It is because of Lea’s mentoring abilities that I feel I became a better teacher and human being.”

Away from the athletic fields, Terry enjoyed a relaxing game of cards with his AD buddies – and loved to imagine the stakes were high.

“I know that Lea enjoyed playing penny poker,” Bushelli said. “I played with him several times and it was great fun. Lea played those pennies like they were hundred dollar bills.”

After he retired, Terry became the classic grandfather, always following the exploits of his grandkids at (who also include former Steinert athletes Amanda and Alyssa Laird). It was then that former Steinert Athletic Director and local basketball official Rich Giallella got to know Terry better.

“I refereed many games at West and he was always professional and courteous,” Giallella said. “I’ve known him the last ten years; as he followed his granddaughters. He was always there and always proud.”

And his grand kids felt the same way. A quick glimpse of Gerri Laird’s Facebook page will tell

you just how proud she was of her grand dad.

But we will leave it to Bell to have the last word – as it truly sums up four decades of quality work.

“Hamilton Township,” Bell said, “will always remember Lea Terry as one of the finest!”