

# 2010 Saugerties Sports Hall of Fame



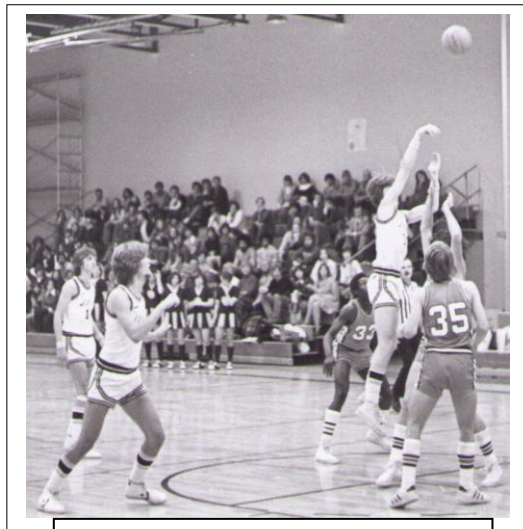
## John Speirs

To do complete justice to the story of John Speirs' sports career within the space allowed here is a near impossibility. He has had one of the busiest, most diverse careers in the history of Saugerties sports. Whether describing his exploits as an athlete, coach, community volunteer, official, or devoted family man, John Speirs' enshrinement May 1<sup>st</sup> into the Saugerties Sports Hall of Fame comes as well-deserved as any ever bestowed. This is the story of one of our town's own elite multi-talented athletes, greatest coaches, and respected, accomplished officials. As a player, his imposing size and agility along with deceptive power made him a force in every sport he participated in, from baseball and softball to basketball, soccer and volleyball. The teams he coached always played hard and were well-prepared. They had respect for the game, teammates and opponents alike, becoming true reflections of their mentor. John's officiating career has become nothing short of sensational and as well-rounded as his playing and coaching careers.

The story begins in the Bronx where John was born to Robert and Dorothy Speirs on October 13, 1957. The family moved to Saugerties when John was just two years old and he has called Friendly Saugerties home ever since. John has three brothers, Bob, Tom, and Jim, as well as one sister, Joan Misasi. He was married in April 1980 to Catherine Campisi and they will soon celebrate their 30<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. The union has been blessed with two daughters, Cara, 25, and Jillian, 22.

John credits his dad and older brothers, Bob and Tom, for introducing him to sports at an early age. His dad was always his biggest fan and sports inspiration, teaching him how important sports would become in his life. John says, “Dad taught me in the living room (baseball on TV), in the kitchen (fights on the radio), in the back yard, and at the ball field. He taught me about pride, respect, and sportsmanship – playing for the love of the game.” His mom was always there for him with support for whatever he did in and out of sports and through all the good and bad times. His brother, Bob, brought John to biddy league signups as soon as John was old enough looking forward to seeing John utilize his height. Bob also got John involved with golf and continues to help him with his game today. Tom is the person who introduced him to the sports not played with a ball, and as a result, John became and still is an avid hunter with a deep love of the outdoors. John says his brother, Jim, showed him perseverance, especially “absorbing all the beatings I inflicted on Jim in wiffle ball in the back yard and in all the one-on-one basketball games at Cantine Field.” As a sidebar, John vividly remembers the day he scored the first basket ever on what was then the new court near Lion’s Playground at Cantine. “Jack Kolano of the DPW let me on even before they had put the lines down and I hit the first shot.” The court is still a cornerstone of basketball activity today. John thanks his sister, Joan, for showing him the value of dressing for success - “To look good on sports away game trips and in school, and how much better you can feel about yourself when you look your best.”

John’s first organized sports experience was in Biddy League basketball. He then played Little League and Babe Ruth baseball, making all-stars in both, and continued with basketball in CYO leagues. John says his early coaches, including Harold Swart, Vince Hackett, Ray Scally, Doggie Hewitt, and Boo Schaffer were instrumental in developing his game skills, but more importantly, showing him how rewarding the friendships and relationships made through sports would be later on in life.



John drains a jumper at C.G.C.C

At SHS, John, a 1975 graduate, played on the first varsity soccer team as a freshman in 1972. He scored the team’s first goal and went on to play four seasons, leading the squad in goals all four years. John played one year of JV and three years of varsity basketball as a starter and team captain. He also started and captained the varsity baseball team for two years following a two-year stint with the JV unit. During his years at SHS, he also played American Legion baseball. He gives sincere thanks to all his coaches – Ron Kunst, Ron Buzon, Bud Smith, Hank Smith, Larry Marcus, Larry Nevil, Tony Elia, and Tony Vizzie. These coaches taught John to work hard, be a

good teammate, respect the game, and to have fun with sports.

Upon Graduation from SHS, John went on to become a rare three-sport college star at Columbia-Greene Community College for two years, earning his A.S. Degree while playing soccer, basketball, and baseball. He excelled in all three, particularly



John at Columbia Greene C.C.

soccer and basketball, leading both teams in scoring both years to earn all-conference honors. He then transferred to SUNY New Paltz where he concentrated his efforts solely on the soccer field. He once again led the Hawk team in scoring two years and earned All-SUNYAC soccer team designations twice for SUNY New Paltz. It was here that John earned his B.S. and M.S. Degrees in Education, setting the stage for the next phase of his life, becoming a teacher and an outstanding coach at SHS.

As a player, John continued his varied career in sports, adding S.A.A. volleyball to his resume. He also played in adult travel soccer, for the Saugerties Dutchmen baseball club, S.A.A. Premier League and half-court basketball, and S.A.A. softball, which he has played since 1974 and continues to play in the A Division today. In fact, his Sue's Restaurant team is the

reigning 2009 A champs. In each sport played in his adult years, John has many championships won by his team, as well as a myriad of individual honors. He was a premier league and half-court MVP and scoring champion, and once scored 50 points in a premier league game against tough competition. He has also been an A Division MVP in softball, as well as winning homerun and pitching titles. John hit four homeruns in one game! John says with a smile that he is the all-time league scorer and assist's leader in the Saugerties Health Club, a group of men who enjoyed pick-up basketball and played for decades. Most assuredly this is one of the most varied playing careers we have ever seen in Saugerties and John is justifiably proud of his accomplishments.

It is however, when we begin to talk of John Speirs' coaching career that he beams with excitement, for one of his greatest thrills in sports was coaching Cara and Jillian in Little League softball, where his all-star teams won division and section titles in the 11-12 age group. Cara was once hitting and had a 3-0 count. John was coaching third base and yelled into Cara "take this pitch, Cara, take this one." The next pitch, true to form, sailed over her head, but she swung anyway and missed. Of course, John yelled, "Cara, what are you doing?" to which she replied, "Dad, you said to take this one so I did." Jillian once caught a pop-up with bases loaded and no outs. All the base runners for some unexplained reason were running, so Jillian stepped on third and tagged the runner coming from second for a rare unassisted triple play!

Spanning 26 years, John's coaching career at SHS included many teams on all levels in many sports. He coached two years of modified, three years of JV, and one year as an assistant varsity soccer coach. There were two years of modified boys basketball and one year of freshman. Then came two years with the JV boys and an eight-year run at the helm of the boys' varsity where John compiled an 80-80 record, including a season-best 17-5. Softball was where he

enjoyed his loftiest success, beginning with a JV squad that he led to an awesome 48-0 undefeated record in a three-year stint. This was followed by 16 outstanding seasons with varsity, where his 280-79 record and 23-2 best season have gone unequaled since. These teams won 5 MHAL championships (including a three-peat) and a Section 9 title. Some of John's fondest coaching memories at SHS include Melinda Whitaker's 18-K one-hit shutout during the first championship season, as well as coaching three of Saugerties best players during their ascension to the 1000-point plateau; Steven Freer, Chris Fabiano, and in his lone year with the girls' varsity, Jodi Elmendorf. John gives special thanks to his long time JV coaches and friends, Will Perks (basketball) and Jim Barbato (softball), for their contributions to his program. He also gives a heartfelt thanks to his long time unofficial assistant coach and current best friend, Gary Littlefield, for all his help through Little League all-stars and Disney high school softball trips, as well as keeping his book and stats for high school games. John was also selected as the MHAL Softball Coach of the Year and received a similar honor as The Daily Freeman Coach of the Year. He received a Pride of Ulster County Award in 2005. He also coached basketball for one year at Ulster County Community College. Although, he notes with pride, more important than any award he received for coaching, is knowing that a number of his former students and players have gone on to become teachers and/or coaches. Five are presently at SHS – Mike Melville, Mike Tiano, Melinda Whitaker, Brittany Littlefield, and Katie Morales. Kristen Gelsliecter, his top softball pitcher ever, is teaching and coaching volleyball and softball at Rhinebeck High School.

As a servant to the community, John often volunteered at events like the Special Olympics. He served as a league rep for premier league basketball and A Division softball for the S.A.A. Soccer, basketball, and softball clinics have been outlets for sharing his considerable coaching skills, as were summer recreation camp clinics, and windmill pitching clinics that he still conducts. Volunteerism, organization, coaching, and playing all define John's lifelong love for sports.



John and Family

A career like this involves major time commitments and John points out that just about every day since ninth grade he has been involved with some kind of sports event. He has been blessed with the continued support of this wife, Catherine, who sacrificed her time while John was off at these events, all while raising their two beautiful daughters. Her love and understanding helped John reconcile the family sacrifices made and enabled him to continue pursuing his career in sports. John also thanks Cara and Jillian for the

unconditional love they always gave him even though they often missed their dad. He is proud of the fine young women they have become, caring about family above all else.

Incredibly, and as if there wasn't enough to this story, there is still another aspect of John's career that has been perhaps the most gratifying, that of officiating. John fell in love with calling games the first time he blew a whistle. It was such a natural extension of his playing and coaching career and has allowed him to stay involved and be part of the action. He has officiated most S.A.A. sports and has done baseball from Little League all the way to the semi-pro Dutchmen games. It is, however, at the scholastic level that he has enjoyed seemingly unparalleled success. John set immediate goals for himself to be the #1-ranked official on all three sports boards – soccer, basketball, and softball. Within five years of calling games he had attained that goal, another notch on the belt of this outstanding sportsman. He called championship league contests in all three sports during one school year, as well as doing sectional and state level games. He has become such a respected arbiter that he routinely gets and accepts assignments to call the biggest games each year. Again, John describes the new friendships made through officiating as his biggest reward for becoming so proficient in such a demanding segment of the sports scene.

Aside from his family and coaches, John's biggest sports inspirations include a veritable "Who's Who" in Saugerties sports circles. Jack Keeley always had John's respect for his hard work and dedication to local sports. Rich Koegel was a senior at SHS when John was a freshman, and he strived to be a versatile athlete like Koeg, who John thinks is the best ever to play at SHS. As adults and playing as teammates and foes, the two men developed a friendship and respect for each other based on playing clean, hard, and respecting the games they played. Another favorite is Al Hrdlicka, who embodied for John everything that is good in sports. Jack Naccarato, along with Al, showed John the importance of pick-up basketball – to keep playing, scoring, and enjoying the game as long as you can, and, if all else fails, "make up the score." These men, Hall of Famers all, helped John's career on and off the courts.

John's fondest sports memories include playing with his two great friends, late Hall of Famers Scott Emery and Larry Panella. He holds the memory of umpiring with "The Chief," George Talmadge, as being among the influences which ignited his officiating career, as well as watching all the local greats who have graced the fields and courts of his beloved hometown.

So it is in closing that we recap the unbelievable, continuing sports career of John Speirs. The family core values, the friendships and relationships made and kept over so many productive years as a player, coach, husband, father, volunteer, and official, are all of the utmost importance to John. For all who know him, we are proud to call John a friend. The Saugerties sports scene has been enriched because of his tireless efforts for local sports on all levels of competition. And, come to think about it, it sums up the legacy John has left here to say that it has always been about competition. The Saugerties Sports Hall of Fame welcomes with pride, as a member of our Class of 2010, one of Saugerties' all-time sportsmen, John Speirs. Heartfelt congratulations, John, and welcome to the club. You have made your family and the community proud. To you, many more years of enjoyment of the sporting life that you have been so

passionate about. Your achievements have inspired countless students and athletes to pursue their dreams as you have fulfilled yours.