

MPA's 'good sport' retiring from post LaBrie leaving after 18 years of service

Larry LaBrie owes his career to a teacher who didn't believe in labels. Forty-six years ago, when LaBrie prepared to graduate from Edward Little High School, high school seniors were branded more strongly than they are today.

There were college students, business students and vocational or industrial arts students, and never the twain should meet. Rarely did aspirations cross over from one category to the next. In a different economy, with less emphasis on post-secondary education, there was no reason to veer off the marked trail. Thankfully for LaBrie, there was a faculty advisor with insight into his potential, and perhaps even a vision of the future.

"I had good grades, but they were all in business courses," LaBrie said. "They used to track kids, and I was a business kid. But Jim Randall kept telling me, 'You want to go to college.'" LaBrie listened, leaving the comfort zone of his hometown and his prescribed path for the University of Maine at Presque Isle.

It was a fateful choice that ultimately brought him back home and launched a 42-year career in public education, one that will end when LaBrie, 64, retires from his post as assistant director of the Maine Principals' Association on June 30.

Formerly a principal and coach at Walton School and principal at EL, LaBrie has worked for the organization that oversees athletic and extra-curricular activities in Maine since 1992. The MPA began the statewide search for his successor this week.

"It's been a great experience," LaBrie said. "Of course (retirement) comes with mixed emotions. This is a job that's like any in education. You live them, whether you're a teacher planning lessons and so forth, or you're at the administrative level as a principal or athletic director with demands that now are nearly un-doable."

LaBrie, who earned his Master's degree from the University of Southern Maine in 1971, lived and enjoyed jobs across the entire spectrum of the teaching profession.

He began at Walton when it was the freshman preparatory school for EL, teaching social studies, coaching football and serving as an advisor to intramural sports and student senate.

Seven years as a teacher, eight as assistant principal and three more as principal at Walton led LaBrie to EL in 1984. He remained until the state level job piqued his interest 16 years ago. "Probably anybody's dream is to come back home and work in a job you enjoy," LaBrie said.

Sports opportunities through the MPA have grown dramatically during LaBrie's tenure in the capital city. Lacrosse became a varsity sport for boys and girls in the late 1990s. Competition cheerleading, a relatively new endeavor at the time of LaBrie's arrival, has expanded into one of the most popular and lucrative of the principals' regional and state championship events.

Athletes in many individually-driven sports - wrestling, cross-country and track and field among them - have benefited from Maine's return to New England interscholastic championships in recent years.

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There have been notable enhancements to existing MPA programs in that span, as well. “We did a lot of things such as the ‘Super Saturday’ concept in football,” said LaBrie, referring to the promotion of all three state championship games at one site (Fitzpatrick Stadium in Portland) that began in 2002. “We’ve been able to bring ice hockey to new and bigger venues.”

LaBrie was instrumental in launching committees that have promoted opportunities for women in sports, and others promoting greater understanding of sportsmanship and safety issues. “It has become much more technical,” LaBrie said of the change in sports. “You look at the hydration issue. Back when I played football, if you drank water, you were a sissy. Now we know better.”

As he leaves the profession, LaBrie notes that one area of concern is declining participation in youth sports. While the MPA oversees varsity sports, member schools continue to report lagging numbers at the junior varsity and freshman levels. “That’s disappointing. Obviously it takes years to work on all the skills you need to get to the high school varsity level,” LaBrie said. “Now if a kid goes out for a sport in eighth or ninth grade, it’s almost impossible to catch up. It’s a difficult thing to build up the participation level.”

Many of his professional accomplishments have been collective or intangible ones. LaBrie cites a John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts Secondary School Administrator Award in 1991 as a special individual honor. “It was nominated by our fine arts department, so the fact that it came from the grass-roots level made it meaningful,” he said.

LaBrie’s wife, Willy, retired from her own lengthy career teaching in area schools last year. The couple plans to spend more time at camp this summer after Larry’s retirement becomes official. Don’t be surprised to see him at a committee meeting or a sporting event in the fall, though. “I plan to come back and do something,” LaBrie said. “I’m not going to fully retire.” - *By Kalle Oakes, Lewiston Sun-Journal, March 7, 2008*

Sports volunteer charged in embezzlement

The treasurer for several youth sports organizations has been indicted by a Cumberland County grand jury for allegedly embezzling more than \$40,000. Edward “Ted” Luebbert Jr., 47, faces charges of felony theft for allegedly stealing \$26,000 from Bayside Little League and \$15,000 from Portland youth football. The grand jury handed up the indictments today. Luebbert, a former bank worker, was serving as acting treasurer for both organizations, police said. He is accused of taking checks that were made out to the organizations and putting them into his personal accounts. Police said Luebbert has been involved with other youth sports organizations but no other criminal investigations are under way. Contacted by telephone, Luebbert declined comment referring questions to his attorney. - *By Staff Report, Portland Press Herald, March 5, 2008*

Keeping It Clean

As soon as you enter the gates of the Berkeley Little League complex on Moorage Avenue, you are urged to mind your manners. The message is as plain as the signs on the fence: “No Swear Zone,” “We Honor the Game,” and “If You Swear You Will Be Suspended.”

“I really don’t feel we have a huge problem, but when you hear the crazy stuff that goes on out there it pays to be proactive,” said Bob Everett, president of the organization. That is why the league has decided that this year, at least one parent of all children registered in the program must attend a mandatory workshop provided by the Positive Coaching Alliance, a Stanford University-based nonprofit organization developed to teach parents, coaches and organizational leaders how to effectively work with young athletes while instilling the values of teamwork, discipline, respect and goal-setting.

The national Little League organization is well aware that the few instances each year involving overzealous parents give the organization a bad name. That is why it decided to partner with Positive Coaching Alliance, said Lance Van Auken, a spokesman at the league headquarters in Williamsport, Pa. “The few bad apples out there always get the press,” he said, noting that the Little League has addressed some of the perceptions in public service announcements that aired last year and three new ones addressing parents and sportsmanship that will air this spring on ESPN.

One of the new advertisements opens with a batter at the plate during the game. As an adult voice weakly cheers the player on, the tables are turned when the player berates his father for not cheering loudly enough. “Come on, Dad, is that the best that you can do? That’s pathetic. I don’t even know why you bother showing up. . . . All the other parents are going to laugh at you. You make me sick.” In the midst of the tirade, a message appears on the screen: “Now you know how it feels. Just let them play.”

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Out-of-control parents don't only show up at Little League games; they can be found at many youth sporting events. On Sept. 30, during a Colts Neck Pop Warner football game, Mario Romano, 42, a parent and organizer of the program, was charged with assaulting his son's coach, Peter Van Ruitenbeek, punching him and knocking him unconscious. The dispute was over the lack of playing time Romano's son was getting. Romano was charged with aggravated assault under a law passed by the Legislature in 2002 that increases the possible punishment for those who commit assaults during youth sporting events. Before the charge, such offenses were treated as misdemeanor disorderly conduct cases, punishable by fines. Under the current statute, Romano could face up to 18 months in prison and more than \$10,000 in fines if convicted. Peter E. Warshaw Jr., first assistant Monmouth County prosecutor, said the case is still pending before a grand jury, and Romano's lawyer, Raymond S. Santiago of Freehold, said he expects the matter to be resolved soon.

The Jersey Shore Pop Warner Football League, which oversees teams in 36 area towns including Colts Neck, has also brought PCA programs to its membership and made it mandatory last season for 560 coaches in the Mighty Mite level (ages 7, 8 and 9) to complete the coaching program, said Craig Karahuta of Beachwood, Jersey Shore president. "We started with coaches of the youngest players and will work our way up from there," Karahuta said. "But it would be impossible for us to require 26,000 parents to take the workshop. "All you can do is try. One of the toughest things to do is to make parents realize how their behavior is affecting the players and the game," he said.

Everett, the Berkeley Little League president, said he isn't aware of any complaints from parents about the mandatory participation in the workshop. "I think there is a huge silent majority out there who is in favor of it, and the few who might squawk about it are probably the ones who need to attend such a program," he said. Everett recalled only a few instances of parents who violated the code of conduct. "We had one parent at the last game of the season whose behavior was unacceptable. There is no reason a 13-year-old junior umpire should be verbally accosted by an adult," said Everett, adding that he was upset that so few other spectators told the parent to stop what he was saying. Everett said the parent was reminded about the incident during this year's spring registration and he decided his son wouldn't be playing this year. "The kids are already aware that we won't accept any curses slipping out of their lips," he said.

In addition to the mandatory workshop, parents are also required to sign a Little League document called the Sport Parent Code of Conduct, which emphasizes six core sportsmanship principles: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and good citizenship, and holds them accountable for their behavior. "They know what is expected of them, and what will happen and the penalties that will be imposed if they refuse to abide by the code," Everett said. For example, any parent found guilty of improper conduct at any game or practice will be asked to leave the sports facility and be suspended from the following game. Repeat violations may cause multiple game suspensions, or the season forfeiture of the privilege of attending all games, according to the code. In addition, Everett said, the township also has a sports code of conduct for all youth sports that are played in the township and requires the sports leagues to investigate all violations and complaints about improper behavior. "It's just a way to make sports more enjoyable and beneficial to the kids," he said. - *By Bonnie Delaney, Asbury Park Press, March 27, 2008*

Parents paying top dollar to have professionals train kids

Michael Ferraro has a major-league swing in a tee-ball-size body, pounding one pitch after another into the back net of the batting cage. He's 7 years old and works out with two former professional baseball players as many as five times a month. "He's a good little listener, and he takes what you tell him and puts it into play," says Billy Horton, a former minor-league player who now runs Cactus Athletic Camps, which offers clinics and private instruction, in Phoenix.

In the past decade, the number of parents hiring professional trainers for their grade-school athletes has exploded, experts say. No one tracks the figures nationwide, but coaches say their business has doubled or tripled in that time. Parents shell out \$50 to \$100 an hour for individual coaching in baseball, soccer, basketball and hockey. And they send their youngsters to camps, clinics and places such as Tempe's Arizona World of Baseball, where children work with former pros. Even city parks and recreation departments are hiring former pros to give lessons at batting cages. "This has become big business," says Gregg Heinzmann, director of the Youth Sports Research Council at Rutgers University. Some experts worry that too much professional coaching and kids specializing in one sport could put too much pressure on young athletes and take the fun out of playing. Although there are parents who hire personal coaches to improve their child's chances of earning a college scholarship, if not a pro career, many say they want to help their kids improve at the games they love.

"I don't push him," says Michael's dad, Mike Ferraro, as he and Horton watch the youth in the batting cage. "I just say, 'Do you want to get a lesson?' If he doesn't feel like it, we don't do it. "I just want him to enjoy himself. I'd rather he be the best he can be."

Coaches and parents cite good reasons for professional training: Kids may get little individual training on teams of 10 or 20 players, depending on the sport. And volunteer coaches often don't have the technical expertise of professionals. Few sports are fun if a young athlete is experiencing little success.

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When Sean Whyte, a former pro hockey player, began coaching at Ozzie Ice in Phoenix in 2001, he worked with hundreds of kids. This year, he's on track to coach more than 1,000 youngsters. Like most coaches, his business comes from referrals. "I tell parents, 'If your child truly loves it, give them every opportunity you can afford to help your child reach their full potential,'" Whyte says. He cautions parents that private lessons will not make their child an instant star.

The goal should be to improve basic skills that lead to proficiency and a lifelong love of the game. Professional coaching is not a must, Horton and Whyte agree, but it can help. They work with kids as young as 4 and up through college age. But like Whyte, Horton also cautions parents, "I'm not trying to build this child into a professional athlete. I'm trying to build confidence in this child."

Despite the growing numbers of private coaches, Heinzmann of Rutgers University finds the trend troubling. He has conducted clinics on youth sports for 20,000 parents and coaches, most recently in Glendale. "We see it exploding in recent years from the standpoint of not only parents hiring privatized instruction, but children focusing on one sport to the exclusion of all others and at younger and younger ages," he says. A generation ago, the ideal was to earn varsity letters in three sports in high school, Heinzmann says. Now that children are pursuing one sport, they're suffering more overuse injuries and burning out sooner.

About 70 percent of kids involved in sports drop out before they turn 13, according to a recent study by Richard Stratton of Virginia Tech's Department of Health and Physical Education. Just 2 percent of high-school athletes earn scholarships and play in college, Heinzmann says. And the chances of anyone making it to the pros are 0.1 percent - that's one in 1,000. Parents put too much pressure on their kids by investing in professional coaching, says Chad Thibodeaux, a long-time coach and host of Kids and Sports radio show. On the air, parents often compare a professional coach with a math tutor, a comparison Thibodeaux says misses the mark. A child needs to know math, he points out. A child does not need to know how to throw a fastball. A fairer comparison would be music or drama lessons. Odds are as low that a child who takes piano lessons from a professional will wind up with a scholarship or playing to crowded concert halls.

"There's this underlying societal pressure to keep up with the Joneses, not just in sports but also in academia and the arts," Heinzmann says. Professional coaching may be right for a child intent on making a club team or a high-school student in the running for a scholarship, Heinzmann says. But he doesn't think younger kids need such training on a regular basis.

First up in Horton's batting cage is 14-year-old Jeff Clasen, who plays for the Scottsdale Storm and plans to try out next year at Brophy College Preparatory in Phoenix. "Remember, knob to the ball, not knob up," Horton says, and Jeff nails the ball.

Jeff's dad, Steve Clasen of Paradise Valley, says he brought his son to Horton for help during a hitting slump about a year ago. Jeff has no aspirations to play baseball beyond high school; he simply enjoys the game. But he enjoys it more when he's hitting well - thus, the regular lessons with Horton. The boys play basketball and football in the off-season, which puts them at a disadvantage come tryouts for Little League. They compete for spots on teams with boys who play baseball year-round.

Like little Michael Ferraro with his major-league swing. He started playing baseball at age 3 1/2. Right now, he plays with 9- and 10-year-olds, some twice his size. Michael also trains with Dax Jones, formerly of the San Francisco Giants. In Horton's batting cage, the coach pitches a fastball right by Michael. "He's throwing gas at you, son!" his dad says, laughing. Michael grins. "Who's the best hitter in Arizona?" Horton asks. "Me!" Michael says and sends the next fastball flying. - *By Karina Bland, The Arizona Republic, March 31, 2008*

School board upholds ban against Mullins

The Saline school board Thursday night upheld a previous decision by Superintendent Scott Graden to ban parent and school board candidate John Mullins from school property. The board held a formal appeal hearing Thursday after turning down a request from Mullins to delay the meeting. Neither John Mullins or his wife, Tanny, were present at the board meeting. "It is absolutely absurd that the school can have an appeal hearing without us there," Tanny said in a phone interview after the meeting. "We've never gotten a chance to present our facts." School board members said they received an e-mail from the Mullins asking for Thursday's meeting to be delayed because the Mullins had a "conflict" with the date.

Board members, after meeting for 15 minutes in closed session, said the board had already delayed a hearing once for the Mullins and others had rearranged their schedules to be present at the meeting. Tanny Mullins said they had not asked for the appeal to the school board and were still waiting to exhaust "all our administrative appeals."

At issue was a decision by Graden to first ban Mullins from district property except for picking his son up at the high school and a decision a few days later to totally ban Mullins from all district property at all times, except for when he has written permission from Graden. The bans stem from an incident between Mullins and Athletic Director Rob White on Feb. 16 at a state wrestling tournament at Saline High School.

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White accused Mullins of swearing at him, pushing him in the chest and making threats involving White's children. Pittsfield police have filed assault and disorderly conduct charges against Mullins. Also, Washtenaw Circuit Court Judge Nancy Francis has issued White a personal protection order against Mullins. In letters to the district, Mullins has denied the charges and accused White of trying to humiliate him in front of other people.

The issue stems from whether the Mullins had to pay admission to the wrestling event. The Mullins said that because they brought food to the hospitality room for the event, they shouldn't have to pay the \$5 admission. White said they had to pay and tried to collect the admission fee.

After hearing White's report of the event and doing an investigation, Graden issued the first ban, he told the school board Thursday night. After the judge issued the personal protection order, he issued the second ban. School board members unanimously upheld Graden's decision. "We're saddened this had to happen," said board President Lisa Slawson. "In my mind, the evidence shows that (Graden's) decision was based on more than sound evidence and judgment." Several other board members said the board had to protect their staff. Others said that personal protection order, which does not allow Mullins to be in the same area as White, made the ban necessary. Graden said he will continue to evaluate Mullins' attendance at events on a case by case basis. Tanny Mullins is not banned from the district. The Mullins family has been involved in several highly publicized disputes with the district in the past, most notably an incident that led to the ouster of the last Saline superintendent. In October, one of their sons was kicked off the freshmen football team for reportedly swearing at a coach, and the Mullinses claimed a coach denied their son water during a practice. Then Superintendent Beverley Geltner reinstated their son to the team, which sparked outrage among coaches and some parents and eventually resulted in Geltner's forced resignation. The district also filed a lawsuit against the couple in 2004, seeking to bar them from all sporting events in the district because of disruptive behavior. The two sides reached a settlement agreement that allowed them to attend some sporting events under certain conditions and also prompted an investigation of the district's athletic department. - *By David Jesse, The Ann Arbor News, March 28, 2008*

Assault on coach a 'nightmare' for small Oklahoma town

After a blowout win in the opening round of the state high school girls' basketball tournament, Preston coach Mickey Duncan just wanted to return to his hotel room and watch tape of his next opponent. Instead, he ended up in the emergency room and the father of one of his players ended up in jail, accused of assaulting the coach because his daughter had not started. Duncan was left with a dislocated elbow, the latest in a string of violent outbursts in several states involving parents and youth coaches. Duncan was in the gym lobby following Preston's 76-46 win against Crowder on Thursday night when 42-year-old Jeffrey Abbott allegedly hit him. Duncan said Abbott threw him into a wall about 15 feet away, and the coach's elbow hit the corner of a picture frame. "I think I said to him, 'What is wrong with you?' He had me against the wall by the throat. ... I was just shocked, more than anything," Duncan said. The men were quickly pulled apart.

Richard Lapchick, the president and chief executive officer of the National Consortium for Academics and Sports, said the increasingly violent nature of sports themselves contributes to such behavior. Parents think so much is at stake, because they're living vicariously through their child," said Lapchick, also chairman of the DeVos Sports Business Management Program at the University of Central Florida.

Preston, about 30 miles south of Tulsa, is a town with one gas station and no stop light. Preston High School has 137 students. Mark Hudson, the Preston superintendent, called what happened a "nightmare." "It was a horrible thing, but our kids handled it with such class. ... I tell everyone our school is a utopia. We just don't have that sort of thing happen," he said. "It's an isolated case and a one-time incident."

Abbott was arrested and charged with a misdemeanor count of assault and battery. He was released from the city jail Friday after posting a \$674 bond. Abbott has an April 17 hearing and if convicted could serve up to 60 days in jail. Duncan was taken to an Oklahoma City hospital, where he said he was "just rocking in pain." Doctors reset his elbow, but it was 4:30 a.m. Friday before he returned to his hotel room. "My girls were scared to death," Duncan said. "All they did was just cry." Exhausted and emotionally shaken, Duncan coached Preston that afternoon against Fort Cobb-Broxton. His team lost 66-57, ending the season at 28-2.

Hudson said he's spoken with Abbott's wife twice since, but not to Abbott himself. Hudson has banned Abbott from Preston school activities for six months, noting that Abbott's daughter was "embarrassed and humiliated by what her father did." Hudson said Abbott might apologize, but "nothing can take away from what he did to our coach and our team. ... A lot of people will remember that Preston won a state-tournament game by 30 points and a parent tried to choke a coach."

But Duncan doesn't want a stain on the reputation of a school that's won five state titles in girls' basketball and four more crowns in boys' basketball. "Preston is a classy place and this is not representative of what it's like here," he said. "We really do have the best of everything." - *By Associated Press, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, March 5, 2008*

Sportsmanship on the decline - Misbehaving high school programs racking up fines, suspensions

The Georgia High School Association is collecting \$70,000 in fines each school year, and players and coaches are sitting out hundreds of games because of sportsmanship issues and rules violations. And while most schools in the state have suffered no suspensions in the past two academic years, 42 have lost coaches or players for at least 10 contests, according to information obtained from the GHSA by the Journal-Constitution under Georgia's open records laws.

"I do not know why some schools are able to operate without violating our rules and other schools are not," GHSA executive director Ralph Swearngin said.

"We're not proud of this record, but this should not label us an unruly school because we're not," Centennial athletics director Billy Nicholson said. "We've had incidents that we've dealt with swiftly, and there have been no repeat offenders. We should see a decline in the near future."

There have been 1,105 games lost to suspensions statewide since the fall of 2006, GHSA records show. Incidents leading to suspensions include fighting, arguing with officials or any behavior that leads to an ejection. Forty-four football players were suspended because of fights or malicious violence last season. In October, five Union Grove players and five Luella players were suspended for one game each for fighting. There were more fighting incidents in girls basketball than in boys basketball — 19 girls sat out games for punching, kicking or coming of the bench, compared to 14 boys. In January, four Wilcox County boys basketball players and their coach were suspended two games each, one for fighting, the rest for leaving the bench. A Chattooga player drew a two-game suspension for entering the stands to attack a fan in Calhoun. The most suspensions occur in soccer, which has the strictest rules against misconduct. Soccer coaches and players were suspended for 305 games last year.

During his annual director's report last week, Swearngin said sportsmanship was declining in Georgia high schools and labeled it his biggest concern. But he also stressed that it's a small minority of students and coaches causing the problems that lead to sanctions. "We are dealing with over 400 schools, over 200,000 athletes and thousands of coaches," Swearngin said. "These people play in thousands of games in every sport we offer. There are lots and lots of people who are behaving themselves and doing the right things."

Fines levied against schools are almost always paid by the responsible coach, according to several local athletics directors who were interviewed. If an administrative issue causes the fine, or if a coach has a valid excuse, it is paid through athletics funds and not taxpayer money. The total fines, which the GHSA projects will be \$70,000 this academic year and \$80,000 in 2008-09, is about equal to what the GHSA pays its supervisor of officials annually. Most of that money, which goes into the GHSA's general operational budget, is taken from coaches who do not attend preseason rules clinics, a \$50 violation for each meeting missed.

Of 404 member schools, 353 have missed at least one rules clinic this year. The GHSA does not keep up with how many coaches are missing per sport by school, but the no-shows are expected to generate \$63,000 this academic year.

"We'd rather they go, but we've got a couple [of coaches] who've been around forever, and we don't push it that much with them," said Harrison athletics director Jerry Meuscke, who was surprised his school topped the list. "It's become so tough as it is to find coaches, and then when you get them, they don't always make it to rules committee. Some would rather pay the \$50."

While it's perhaps the smallest of crimes, Swearngin says he's concerned at the absentee rate because the clinics cover changes in national rules and GHSA bylaws and procedural changes. "Often the people who have difficulties during the season are those who did not go to clinics," Swearngin said. - *By Todd Holcombe, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, March 21, 2008*

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