

# The Sports Man

## Herald Editor Gary Stewart to be inducted into KM Hall of Fame

"There is a need to feel our bodies have a skill and energy of their own, apart from the man-made machines they may drive. There is the desire to find in sport a companionship with kindred people. I have found all these." — Roger Gilbert Bannister

By DWIGHT FRADY  
Special To The Herald

While just a youngster growing up in Kings Mountain, Gary Dean Stewart can remember throwing a rubber ball against the back of his house and shooting hoops in a goal nailed to the barn.

"I won a lot of World Series games with that rubber ball and some NCAA titles with that basketball," he said. "Growing up, I loved all sports."

In Little League, Stewart was the best bunter on the team. He'd lay down a bunt and easily beat it out for a hit. "If they had had designated bunters back then, I'd have made the major leagues," he said during a recent interview.

Then came Pony League and the bases became 30 feet longer. His legs couldn't handle that extra distance. He played JV basketball in the ninth grade at Grover, then consolidation came along his sophomore year at Kings Mountain High School.

"They had some great athletes and I knew if I wasn't good enough to play at Grover there was no use trying to play there," he said. As it turned out, he did the next best thing. He started writing about athletes.

It turned into a distinguished career. Today, he is a walking history book on Kings Mountain athletics, was the first recipient of the KMHS Booster Club's Lifetime Membership Award, is one of the founders of the Kings Mountain Sports Hall of Fame, and is its current president.

On Tuesday, April 17, he will become a member of his hometown Sports Hall of Fame, along with Judy Medlin Champion and Delbert Dixon.

"I appreciate the committee and the people who nominated me," Stewart said. "In a way, I feel like I shouldn't be one of the inductees while still serving on the committee, but after it was announced and people started congratulating me, I felt more comfortable about it. It's not about the plaque I'll receive, but about people saying 'you deserve it.' It's a great compliment."

After he received his high school diploma, Stewart had planned to attend Gaston College. One day while at McGinnis Department Store, he ran into Herald Editor Martin Harmon, who was soliciting ads.

"Harmon asked me what I planned to do for a career and I said, just kidding, 'I might come to work for you,'" Gary's sister, Lib, was working with the paper at that time.

"Later, Harmon called and asked if I would be interested in writing sports for the paper," Stewart said. "I told him I might want to try it. That's been 36 years ago and I've been writing ever since."

While growing up, Stewart hadn't seen many football games. Baseball was his first love, watching his beloved Yankees play on television when Dizzy Dean and Pee Wee Reese were the announcers.

"I loved the Yankees and hated Carolina," he said. All that changed when one of his children, son Dee, attended Carolina and got his degree. "I started sending money down there and decided I might as well pull for them," he said. "I've invested a lot of money in those Tar Heels."

When Stewart first started as sports editor of The Herald in August of 1964, the Mountaineer football team was destined to have a perfect 10-0 record.

"Pat Murphy and Richard Gold were seniors.

Most of the games weren't even close," Stewart said. "We went to the WNCSSAA playoffs that year and I just knew we would win. We lost to Hickory 6-0 and that was the saddest time of my young life."

Murphy and Gold are both members of the KM Sports Hall of Fame. Murphy later quarterbacked at Appalachian while Gold became a baseball star at Florida State. "If Pat had been taller than 5-10, he would have made the pros," Stewart said. "He had a great arm."

Stewart loves all sports and enjoys writing about all the young athletes, but come football season he is in his realm. He slings his camera around his neck, gets a reporter's notebook and roams the sidelines.

He'll take a picture, and while the referee is placing the ball will jot down what happened on the play. Sometimes he'd like to have three hands.

His family are also strong Mountaineer supporters. He met his wife, the former Mary Jo Rogers, at a football game. "She has always been a football fan and loves college football," Stewart said. His daughter, Leigh Anne, misses very few games and Dee attends games when he can work it into his schedule. Gary and Mary Jo, a nurse with Cleveland Home Health, were married on Aug. 6, 1971.

Stewart said it will be a little strange being on the other end of the Hall of Fame plaque presentation. He's inducted former major leaguer Jake Early, Gold, and a fishing buddy, Eugene Goforth.

Through sports, he's been able to meet many athletes and coaches he's admired. One of his biggest thrills was getting to interview the late Mickey Mantle, one of his boyhood heroes with the Yankees.

The coaches at Kings Mountain when he first started his sports writing career were Bill Bates, Don Parker, Bill Cashion and Bobby Hussey, all in the Sports Hall of Fame. Another, Fred Withers, had retired the year before.

"Bates meant a lot to me as a young sportswriter," Stewart said. "When you're 18 and you've got a title with a newspaper, you think you're it. Bill had patience with me, as did those who followed, Bob Jones, Dan Brooks, Denny Hicks, Ron Massey and the current coach, Dave Farquharson. Massey, now coaching in Kannapolis, was here five years and is one of the best coaches and nicest people I've ever met."

Stewart said one of the most enjoyable times he's had with The Herald came a few years ago when he put out a special edition called "75 Years of Mountaineer Football."

"That took a lot of work," he said. "but very enjoyable. In those 60 pages, I had interviews with some people who played in the 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s I hadn't met."

"One of them, Shu Carlton, I got to know when I worked in sports at The Gastonia Gazette from 1967-71. He's a coach I truly admire. When he coached at Kings Mountain, I was a kid living in the country whose dad worked the second shift. I didn't get to see football games. He and his lovely wife always come to our banquets."

Stewart said that three of the most enjoyable years he had covering Kings Mountain football came when Anthony Hillman was a star running back under Coach Massey. Hillman broke all of the rushing records at the school.

The most unforgettable coach Stewart ever met was the Baron of Barlow Bend, Frank Howard, the football coach at Clemson. "He could take any situation, no matter how serious, and make it comical," he said.

Two athletes who made the pros from Kings Mountain were Kevin Mack (Clemson and the Cleveland Browns) in football and George Adams in basketball.

"None of the baseball players I've written about have made the major leagues," he said,

"but I can still see all those home runs Paul Brannon used to hit. He still holds the state prep record for career home runs."

Gary, the son of the late George and Letha Stewart, said the saddest time in his life came when they lost granddaughter Kayla Newton (1993-96). Kayla, the daughter of Leigh Anne and Steve Newton, was born with three rare diseases, the worst called Ondine's Curse.

Kayla was on life support from the day she was born till the day she died. "That was the toughest thing I ever went through," he said. "But now, looking back, it was one of the most rewarding times of my life because of what people did for us and for their encouragement."

"I'm a firm believer that the Lord works for good in every situation. That happened very early in our daughter's marriage. It took four years out of her life where she couldn't do anything but look after Kayla. After Kayla died, she was prompted to go back to school and now she's a nurse at a women's clinic in Gastonia."

"One morning, she and others delivered a baby before the doctors got to work. They delivered a healthy baby. So good things do come out of bad situations."

While working for a daily, one of Gary's most memorable assignments came in the Atlantic Coast Basketball Tournament when North Carolina State froze the ball against Duke. Norm Sloan had first come to Raleigh to begin an illustrious career. He figured the only way to beat the Vic Bubas-coached Blue Devils was to freeze the ball.

"It worked," Stewart remembers. "State beat Duke 12-10 and the next day we ran a play-by-play in the paper. But Carolina and Charlie Scott took State to the cleaners the next night when Sloan didn't slow things down."

Although he has enthusiasm for all sports, Stewart will tell you flat out that "I wish they could play football 52 weeks a year."

Although the Mountaineers have developed strong rivalries with several teams over the years, he feels that Shelby is still the Mountaineers' biggest rival.

"Kings Mountain had rather beat Shelby than anybody," he said, "because of Shelby's tremendous tradition. We'll be in a new conference next year, but my personal preference would have been for them to be able to play the same teams they've played virtually forever. It will take some getting used to."

After leaving the daily newspaper field, Stewart was sports editor of the Herald from September of '71 to January of '79. He became the newspaper's editor in 1979.

He has won numerous awards in sports writing, sports coverage and feature writing from the NC Press Association, along with writing awards in sports, personal columns, editorials, general news, people features and photography from Republic Newspapers Inc.

He has been named Media Person of the Year Region C Law Enforcement Association, Media Person of the Year North Carolina High School Athletic Association, and many other awards from local organizations such as civic clubs, fire departments, schools, etc. for coverage of their activities.

But he is happiest when he is living in that tinsel, rose-colored world of sport where yesterday's tragedies fade like the ripples on a lake, because there is always a new "game" and a new "challenge" tomorrow.

A lifelong member of Dixon Presbyterian Church, he has another sister, Linda Stewart O'Shields and brothers, Ralph E. Stewart and the late Herman O. Stewart. Son Dee is married to the former Lori Derby.

Someone has said, "We are a part of all whom we've met," and that fits Stewart. Coach Massey has high praise for Stewart. He is looking forward to April 17 when he will be a part of the program.



"What's impressive about Gary is his demeanor," Massey said to this writer. "He has a true love for Kings Mountain athletics and the community as a whole."

"I've always appreciated his professionalism. He finds positives to dwell on in prep athletics. Seldom do you find a lot of space given to high school athletics in a lot of newspapers, but he gives great coverage."

"I truly feel like our friendship evolved over the fact that anytime we needed something in the paper, he was more than willing to give us that space, and the fact that he is just one fine person in addition to being a top writer."

"People don't realize the legwork he does on the Hall of Fame Committee. In the five years I served, he did a tremendous amount of legwork."

"That man can tell you every statistic of every athlete who's been through school, all of the records of the coaches, and can virtually give you a play-by-play account of every game he's covered."

Carl Champion, calling from his Champion Landscaping office in Florida and a Hall of Fame member and chairman of that group for 13 years, said of Stewart: "He covered every softball tournament we ever had and about every sport you'd care to mention. He was there even when he didn't need to be there. He was loyal to the hometown boys — and still is."

"There was nothing I ever asked of Gary that he didn't do or go out of his way to do. One of the biggest things is that Gary has never looked for praise about the articles he's written regarding people and the kids who've come out of the high school athletic program. And it's not just sports. He's loyal to the entire city. It would be a world of a mess if we didn't have him doing his job."

"It got to the point where I was traveling back and forth from Kings Mountain to Florida. I went to Gary and asked him if he'd do a lot of things I'd been doing on the Hall of Fame Committee. He didn't hesitate to say that he would take on that responsibility. He took the ball and ran with it. They could not have a Sports Hall of Fame without Gary's help and support."

"I look forward to being back in Kings Mountain to see him get his just rewards. Nobody is more deserving."

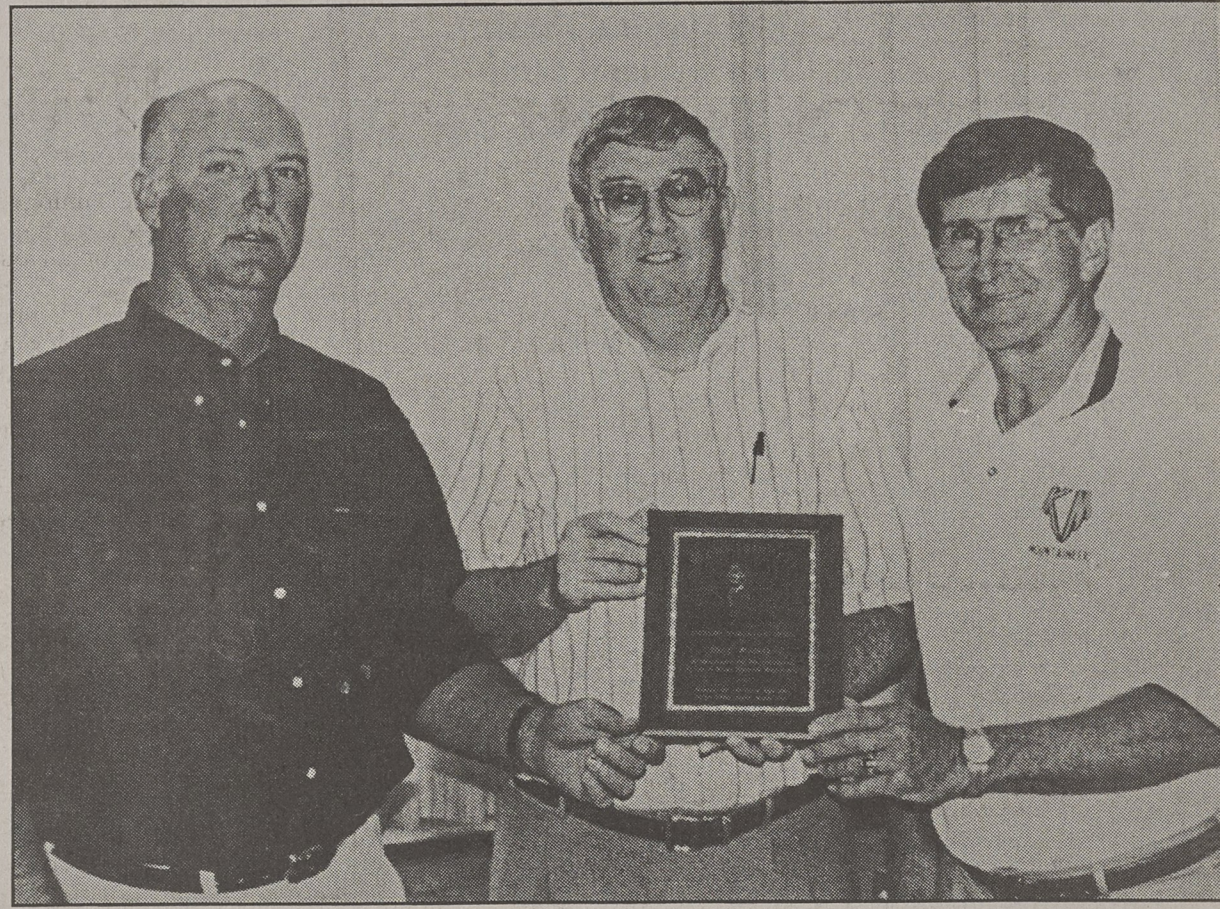
Until the day he writes "30" to his professional writing career, you can rest assured that Gary Stewart will keep on making people feel good about themselves.

He lives under the motto that success without honor is an unseasoned dish. He has always felt much for others and little for himself.

And that, after all, constitutes the perfection of human nature.



Former Oakland Raiders star Mickey Marvin, left, and Gary Stewart at the 1993 Kings Mountain Sports Hall of Fame induction ceremony.



KMHS Booster Club co-presidents Scott Ellis, left, and Tommy Barrett, right, present Gary Stewart the club's Lifetime Membership Award in 1998.