

# Gary Kehler Stadium Dedication Ranks High in Westfield's Athletic History

By DAVID B. CORBIN  
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

"It was a dark and stormy afternoon" could have been the literal description of that October 30, 1993 day. But, instead, the shining light was the renaming of Recreation Field as Gary Kehler Stadium in honor of Westfield's legendary Coach Gary Kehler. The 6-0 Summit Hilltoppers may have burst the Blue Devils' bubble, 35-12, but the primary focus seemed to be the halftime ceremony.

The Hilltoppers, under Head Coach Jim Benedict, rumbled to 222 yards on the ground and were led by sensation Torrie Fogg, who clouded the Blue Devils' hopes, by rushing for 155 yards on 17 carries. The Blue Devils featured quarterback Steve Cheek and junior halfback Erwyn Lyght, who rushed for 119 yards on 10 carries but was injured early in the second quarter and could not continue.

But the real focus was on Kehler, who was Westfield's Athletic Director from 1983-1993, and gained acclaim as the Blue Devils' wrestling coach from 1957-1983, golf coach from 1959-1984 and, especially, as football coach from 1961-1982.

Although Kehler had fabulous wrestling teams and coached several state champions, including Olympic Bronze Medalist Chris Campbell, the Blue Devil mentor was revered by all for his long list

of achievements as Head Football Coach. He completed his football coaching career amassing a spectacular 171-26-7 record. During that time, he had nine undefeated seasons, captured 17 Watchung Conference Championships

Boothe, Jr., Board of Education President Susan Pepper and Co-Chairs of the Gary Kehler Stadium Fund Lee Hale and Roger Love.

Describing the weather conditions, Kehler said, "It had to be one of the worst



**A MEMORABLE DAY FOR THE KEHLERS...**The dedication of Gary Kehler Stadium took place on October 30, 1993. Pictured, left to right, are: Dr. Bob Petix, Roger Love, Bill Sweeney, Darielle Walsh, Susan H. Pepper, "Bud" C. Boothe, Jr., Doug Kehler, Gary Kehler, Lee Hale, Alice Kehler, Mark C. Smith, Todd Kehler and Chris, Allison, Susan and Glen Kehler with son Dan.

and, until recently, had New Jersey's longest winning streak at 48 from 1967-1973.

Speaking at the dedication were: Westfield Superintendent of Schools Mark C. Smith, Westfield Mayor Garland C. "Bud"

field condition games. It was just a total disaster. There were gale-force winds. It was a very difficult time to play the game of football, but I think Ed (Tranchina, Blue Devil Head Coach at the time) because he knew the dedication was already planned, continued. And we never like to cancel football games."

Personally, Kehler added, "But, for me, it was just an outstanding day. It was a wonderful experience for the Kehlers. I was so pumped up about the dedication, that I really couldn't pay much attention to the game. It was the greatest thing that ever happened to me."

As a result, the field house did get a facelift. "It was just a good, solid, well-constructed building. Then they added an extension and raised the front where you now see Gary Kehler Stadium," pointed out Kehler.

Formerly, Recreation Field was known

as Recreation Park which was built in the 1890's. The land, formerly a farm, was acquired from the Woodruff family, according to former Town Historian Ralph Jones.

"It was strictly a baseball park with the grandstand and the infield over where the Lincoln School was," pointed out Jones. "It was the successor to Drake Park which Uncle Al Drake built a ball park with a wooden fence and a grandstand near Park Street between Summit Avenue and Boulevard."

Football was introduced to Recreation Field around 1926 and, in 1929, the football revolution really began when Bob Duncan took over as Westfield Head Coach. Undefeated seasons brought recognition and a desire to make additions in the mid-1930's.

"Although there was a depression, the father of the late Hollywood actress Anne Revere started lobbying for a field house," said Jones. "People were coming in droves to see the games. Somebody, probably him, was responsible for getting The New Deal government, namely the Works Progress Administration, to finance most of the cost of the stadium."

It worked! Construction began in 1935 and was completed in 1936.

"The stadium, originally referred to as the field house, had lockers and seating," said Jones. "Since then in 1941, Westfield, under Joe Freeman, had an undefeated, untied season and won the state championship. He had great success for over a decade and Westfield became football mad."

Jones added, "After a couple of interim coaches, Kehler took over in 1961 and had unprecedented success even on the scale of the state of New Jersey. It comes as no surprise that the field was eventually named for him."

Additionally, for his achievements, Kehler was named to the New Jersey Coaches Hall of Fame and to the National Football Foundation Hall of Fame. Also, he became one of the founders of the Westfield High School Hall of Fame begun in 1994 and was selected to the Hall in the first year.



**DRAWING PLENTY OF ATTENTION...**This 1921 baseball game played at Recreation Field, now Kehler Stadium, drew plenty of curious fans. During that era, baseball was the "National Pastime" and football was on the rise. (Westfield Historical Society)

See  
\*More Glory on\*  
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# The Glory of Westfield Athletics

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## 'The Boys of Summer'

Just after the beginning of the 20th Century, a semi-pro baseball team existed in Westfield. This photograph which was taken in 1903 shows that these "boys of summer" meant business. This semi-pro team played some of their games on the sight which is now Gary Kehler Stadium.

\*Compliments of the Westfield Historical Society\*



## Westfield PAL Plays at Giant Stadium

An experience of a lifetime was realized ship with a 33-12 whipping of Barringer.

by the Westfield PAL D football team when they got the opportunity to play before 78,000 fans at Giants Stadium during half-time of the Giants-Jets game on December 5. On the same date in 1977, the Westfield High School football team won the state champion-

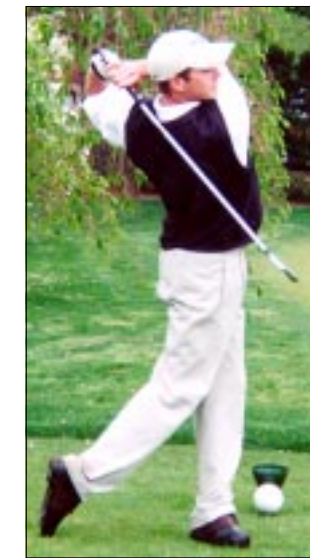


Devil verses Devil at Giants Stadium

The PAL boys performed admirably in an intersquad game, showing their offensive and defensive skills. Coach Owen Brand, who had touchdown receptions of 47 and 24 yards in the 1977 game, reminisced. Perhaps, in the future, these same boys will return to Giants Stadium to play for a state title.

## Blue Devil Golfers Set County Tourney Record

The 1999 Westfield High School golf team captured its second straight team title at the Union County Golf Tournament held at Echo Lake Country Club in Westfield. Not only did the Blue Devils win the title, but they set an all-time UCT record by combining for a low score of 310. Devils Brent Bramnick and Ron Kashlak placed first and second, respectively, with scores of 75 and 76. Later in the season, Kashlak came back to claim the Union County Match Play title. Kashlak defeated Bramnick in the semifinals then defeated Mike Occi of Cranford for the crown.



Ronnie Kashlak



Megan Shutts (Track)

## Blue Devil Track Girls Have Strong Distance Tradition

The Westfield High School girls track and field team has produced a long line of fine distance runners throughout the years. Most of the Blue Devils success can be attributed to their excellent cross country team that has won nine-straight Union County titles, five-straight Watchung Conference titles, 58 consecutive dual meets and four sectional titles in 10 years.

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