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Snohomish County referee ends career

Longtime Snohomish County referee ends career

SNOHOMISH -- You don't wake a giant.

You let him sleep. Even if you're getting soaked.

Early in his basketball refereeing career, Marty Martinis had been assigned to work a game with the venerable official Dick Rodland on south Whidbey Island.

They were waiting in Rodland's pickup truck for the ferry to arrive when Martinis got the urge for a snack and walked down to the landing to get a candy bar. When he came back, his partner was sound asleep.

"Dick always took a catnap before the game and here he was, his bald little head propped up against the window," Martinis recalled. "I didn't want to wake this legend, so I stood outside the truck in the rain."

Such is the respect that Rodland engendered that a fellow official would risk pneumonia to let him catch a few extra zzzzzs.

There were the catnaps. And then there were the tuna fish on rye cakes that Rodland had every single day.

"Don't you ever get tired of those?" Martinis once asked him.

"I love them," Rodland replied.

"He had that and his nap," Martinis said. "Then he was ready to roll."

Roll he did, up and down high school hardwoods for 36 years, a whistle in his mouth, a twinkle in his eye, a lightness in his step. Even last year, at the age of 71, Rodland was having more fun than he'd ever had officiating games. And he was still at the top of his game, highly ranked by his peers in the Snohomish County Women's Basketball Association.

So why did he decide to hang up his striped shirt this year? "No one wants to see a ref die of old age right out on the floor," Rodland joked.

This was one of 10 reasons -- some humorous, some serious -- Rodland listed on a sheet of paper he handed, along with a letter of resignation, to Martinis at the first meeting of the basketball association this year. Rodland was in the back of the room as Martinis, the president, read the letter to his fellow referees. This was completely unexpected. Snohomish County basketball without Dick Rodland just wouldn't be the same. His colleagues were taken aback. As the news sank in, the group stood and gave Rodland a rousing round of applause. Then it looked to the honoree for a few words. Trouble is, he was gone. He had sneaked out the back door when nobody was looking.

"I'm sort of sentimental," Rodland said, as he sat in the kitchen of his comfortable home outside Snohomish last week. "I couldn't get up and read that letter. I have trouble when Lassie rescues the kids out of the well."

It was typical Dick Rodland. Unassuming. Unpretentious.

But never unappreciated.

"He was darn good," said fellow ref Kevin Erickson, "and he would be darn good if he was reffing this year."

Rodland worked boys games for the first 20 years of his career, then switched to the girls side in 1985.

Mike Lowery, the longtime Marysville-Pilchuck boys basketball coach, remembered Rodland as a "very good referee, very complete in all he did."

Rodland was almost always ranked among the top 10 referees in the county, whether he was working boys or girls games. One year he was No. 1.

"That was only because the top guy got in trouble with a couple of coaches," Rodland said. "I'm sure that's why I got it. He was better than anyone else."

Maybe. Or maybe that's simply the modest side of Rodland coming out.

"He was very reluctant to have this article done on him," said Glenn Dunbar, who worked many games with Rodland over the years.

Good people deserve recognition.

Listen to Dunbar, who lives not too far from Rodland, talk about his friend: "He's a guy who will look for things to do for other people and ask for nothing in return."

There was the time Dunbar mentioned that he had a tree he wanted to cut down. Bright and early the next morning, there was Rodland, up on a ladder, trimming limbs. Another time he showed up unannounced with his tractor to help Dunbar clear some brush.

I had recently written a piece on Keith Gilbertson Sr., who has spent a half-century coaching at Snohomish High School. Gilbertson is a very giving man, also, who for the last 20 years has been a volunteer coach at the high school.

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Larry Henry

Sports Columnist

"Dick is exactly like him," Dunbar said. "He writes little notes, goes and sees people. He's a fantastic person."

Maybe it was the time in which they grew up that made them the way they are. A time when people helped one another without expecting anything in return. A time when life was simpler and, yes, better.

Both grew up in Snohomish. Both played sports together. Both spent their entire teaching/coaching careers in the Snohomish school district.

Rodland taught 39 years at the junior high, retiring in 1991. He coached freshman basketball for six years, seventh grade for 30 years and never had a losing team. He also served as line coach for the varsity football team when Gilbertson was head coach for a time in the 1950s.

"He's a real class guy, highly respected, a good Christian man," Gilbertson said. "He loved basketball as a kid and it really became a passion for him."

You could see how much Rodland respected the game and the kids in his approach to officiating. "Every time you saw him, he was just a gentleman," Lowery said. "He refereed as a gentleman. He didn't intimidate."

Lowery says officiating is the toughest job in sports because everyone thinks they know more than the man or woman wearing the striped shirt.

"They're not afraid to tell you about it, either," he said. "Americans are brutal on officials. It speaks highly of the man that he was able to do it as long and as well as he did."

Rodland didn't begin officiating until he was in his mid-30s. He had twice "come in a close second" for the head basketball coaching job at Snohomish and figured that if was ever going to make it to the state tournament, he would have to find another way. He did. He worked three boys state tournaments as a referee -- 1972, 1975 and 1977.

In the hundreds of games he called, certain episodes stand out in his mind. One time he was working a tournament game at Mount Vernon and his partner called a flagrant foul on a player from Lynden, which meant automatic ejection. Well, the guilty party happened to be the coach's son. Rodland and his cohort were sitting in the dressing room afterwards when there was a knock on the door and a policeman entered. It seems some of the Lynden fans were a bit upset by the flagrant foul call and were waiting outside. The cop escorted the refs to their car.

That's the only time anything like that ever happened in Rodland's career.

Another time a player plowed into Rodland on a fast break, sending him through a door and onto the floor of a hallway. He came out of it unscathed.

As a matter of fact, the only time he ever got injured was last year. Near the end of the first half of a game, he pulled a quadricep muscle in his leg, forcing him to sit out the final 16 minutes. As luck would have it, Dunbar had come along as an observer and, prepared as all good refs always are, had brought along his work clothes.

Rodland's durability was such that not even open heart surgery could slow him down. In August of 1989, he had a quadruple bypass but by November he was racing up and down courts. He didn't miss a game. When they say Rodland put his heart into it, they really meant it.

Rodland refereed many a playoff game, but treated every game like it was the finals of the state tournament. "For some guys, it was only exciting if it was a top game," he said. "When I talked to my partner before a game, I'd tell him, 'This might not be a top game as far as anyone else is concerned, but it's a top game for us. Do your job, it can still be enjoyable.' "

That's what it was all about to him.

He wasn't on a power trip. He wasn't there to grab the spotlight from the kids. He was there for the kids, to enforce the rules and to remain as invisible as possible, which is what all the good refs try to do.

If they can leave the floor without anyone noticing them, they've done their job.

Dick Rodland did his and he did it in a professional, gentlemanly manner.

Then he quietly left the floor.

Just as he quietly left the room that night when he turned in his resignation.

Gone.

But never forgotten.

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