

I was hesitant to accept the invitation when Chuck Snell's daughter, Kim, asked me last spring to go to the Franklin High School Hall of Fame banquet.

I wasn't sure I belonged, even though – and many of you out there in Venangoland might be surprised to hear this – I *am* a FHS grad. Class of 1966. (I think a lot of you think of me as an Oiler.)

So here are the details: I was born in Pittsburgh. I only attended FHS for one year, moving to Franklin after a six-year stint in the Philadelphia area. After graduating from Penn State, I landed a job as a sportswriter for The Derrick, and have now lived in Oil City for about 50 years.

Chuck Snell

Now getting back to the late Chuck Snell: I wrote some stuff about him for The Derrick/The News-Herald, and Kim thought my stuff had a lot to do with her dad finally, *finally* getting into the FHS Hall. The Hall has been around since 2012, and Snell, more than just Franklin's first 1,000 points scorer, even without the three-point line to feast on, wasn't in!

Anyhow, now he is, much to the delight of his kids – Kim, Nancy and Mike – other family members, fans and friends.

Snell can now count me as a fan, sight unseen, just from what I've read — kudos to the late Jake Highton, former News-Herald sports editor – and heard, namely from Jim Hedglin and Bob Lynch who spoke on his behalf at the banquet.

So, yeah, I did accept Kim's invitation and went to the banquet at the Quality Inn. And. Glad. I. Did. It was *long*, but highly interesting, not just about Snell, but about the three other inductees – Lou Slatterback, Eric Smith and Kevin Blackhurst.

I sat across from Jim Monarch and his wife Evie. I graduated from Franklin with Jim, who is Snell's first cousin. He also has ties to Lou Slautterback.

It might be blasphemy to say this, but I always believed Snell was better at basketball than Ted Marchibroda, who was first team all-state. Snell was only an honorable mention. And to hear Hedglin and Lynch talk about him, he should have been way higher than an H.M.

Hedglin, who would become a longtime official in these parts, idolized Snell as a young kid. And, by the way, I talked to Hedglin briefly before the fete. "Love this town," he said. I know, I know, I said.

Lynch, who would go on to coach Oil City, Franklin, Pitt-Titusville and am I missing some place?, played with Snell in high school and at Clarion, although he was about three years younger.

Both will tell you nobody could shoot the basketball like Snell. Nobody. Plus, the guy was a great, *great* athlete – fast, quick and very smart – even though he was constantly in pain. ("Oh,

my back.”) Both insist had Snell’s life not gone every which way, he would have played in the NBA.

Snell had a great freshman year at St. Francis, but then left school. Snell told people he didn’t like St. Francis’ style of play; Lynch suspected he was homesick. But he did talk him into going to Clarion, which was, how to say this, not up to snuff to his level of play.

So, long story short, Snell never played in the NBA and he died young – in 1974 when he was only 40-something.

After Hedglin and Lynch talked about Snell, I thought: That’s going to be a tough act to follow.



Lou Slutterback

But Slutterback didn’t shy away from the challenge. He also didn’t shy away from telling you Jesus Christ was Numero Uno in his heart.

Slutterback coached football and wrestling at Franklin, but he got into the Hall in the service category. He was legendary, teaching physical education in Franklin’s five elementary schools: Sandycreek, Seventh Street, Central, Utica and Polk, getting paid peanuts to start. He supplemented his income by selling snow cones from his truck – his trademark.

During his speech, he asked people, “How many of you did this (having to do with him), how many of you did that?” Seems like everybody in the audience was raising their hands all over the place. Everybody except me. But the whole time I was thinking about how my mother taught with him at Central when he got his start, and I remember her talking about him in a positive way. That’s my humble Slautterback story.

Also, last summer, I attended the funeral of Pat Patterson, legendary teacher and coach at Oil City, who sort of reminds me of Slautterback.

Slautterback was at the funeral, and told a story about Patterson, how the two walked off the field together after a football game at Franklin in the early 1970s. They chatted, and Slautterback told the people at Patterson’s funeral: “You had a good man there.”

Slautterback’s acceptance speech was very long, but he was very funny. So who minded? I think he could have been a stand-up comedian. But he didn’t miss his calling.



Eric Smith

Eric Smith was next. He coached Franklin to swimming greatness, mostly in the 1990s. Everyone received a program, a Dave Smith production, that included all the deeds of the

inductees. There is an *11-page* spread on the accomplishments of FHS swimmers during his 25 years as coach.

Smith is an Oil City graduate, and began his coaching career there. I believe he was coached at OCHS by Jim Enos who started the swimming program there, but his mother, Gail, eventually became coach. Long story short, this is a real swimming family.

Eric went to Slippery Rock and began to learn the tools of the trade of coaching swimming. It's not as simple as sending the kids into the water and telling them to swim the various strokes. There's a lot more to it than that. Among his mentors was Paul Stamm, a brilliant coach at Titusville, Meadville and then Edinboro before stunning the world and turning Oil City's football fortunes around, starting in 1993.

Meanwhile, when a friend left Franklin to take another job in Virginia, he called Smith and asked if he would be interested in the coaching job at Franklin. Smith gave it a thought and decided to give it a go.

The rest is history: district champions, state champions, All-Americans. And they're all listed in the program, which is a must-have just for that reason.

Smith left Franklin three years ago to return to Oil City and a chance to coach his kids.



Kevin Blackhurst

Finally, and last but not least: Kevin Blackhurst, a Division I basketball/baseball player at Delaware.

Blackhurst, we would be reminded, is *not* the son of Fred Blackhurst of teaching and football fame at Franklin. Kevin's family is from Pittsburgh and they moved to Venango County and at first settled in Rocky Grove. That's where Kevin lived as a young kid.

Then the family, which includes three other athletes – Gary, Jill and Lisa – moved to Franklin.

Even though he was not a 1,000 points scorer in high school, Blackhurst – long arms and big hands – was a star point guard for the Knights in the late 1980s. He was also a star baseball player, starting with, where else?, the Franklin Little League.

Tom Findlan, who introduced Blackhurst, recalled their baseball days, getting the better of one another.

Delaware, what with there not being a pipeline between Franklin and there, took notice because of a typewriter written publication of – I don't know, a basketball junkie/coach? – who saw him in the Keystone State games.

As of April in his senior year, he still didn't know where he was going to go, but he made the six-hour car ride there, and Delaware soon offered. Blackhurst still wanted to play baseball in college, but didn't do well in his first tryout. However, as luck would have it, one of the players later saw him in a batting cage, and he got another look.

Kevin also mentioned his friendship with the late Jody Billingsley, who starred at Franklin and Pitt-Johnstown under coach Jodi Gault.

Kevin and Jody were just friends in high school, but he took her to the homecoming dance and prom and such, and they did a lot of athletic activities together, both basketball and non-basketball. Jody, in fact, sent him a birthday card every year until her death.

Three and a half hours after it began, the ceremony was over, but not before I got a picture taken with Kim and Chuck Snell's Hall of Fame plaque.

Before I was out the door, I saw Jim Hedglin again. "I love this town," he said again.

Yeah, and I can see why.