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'Extraordinary volunteer' Jim Neville entering hockey hall of fame



By HEATHER RULE
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Jim Neville is part of the Illinois Hockey Hall of Fame's Class of 2017. (Jim Smith)

FEEDBACK

Jim Neville started out coaching youth football before he jumped to hockey. Coaching was about more than just teaching the game to young players; it helped Neville stay on track.

That's because in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Neville said he was a "big-time drinker."



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"I was able to kill the drinking, but this filled the void," Neville said of coaching. "And that's kept me occupied and happy and satisfied all this time."

He said he hasn't had a drink since he started coaching hockey.

That was over 40 years ago and kicked off decades of volunteer coaching hockey at a variety of levels, from high school to sled hockey, plus some development camps along the way.

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Neville is part of the 2017 class for the Illinois Hockey Hall of Fame. Neville, who grew up in Park Ridge and now lives in Mount Prospect, is being inducted in the builders' category. He'll be inducted at the hall of fame dinner on Jan. 28 at the Belvedere Events & Banquets venue in Elk Grove Village.

FEEDBACK

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Neville's Maine and Notre Dame teams won high school state championships. Some big moments to be sure, "not that I had anything to do with good players," Neville said as his modesty chimed in.

He teaches his players about the game and also about the game of life, doing so in a fun way, according to Jim Smith, Neville's longtime friend and fellow coach. That's why he's getting the hall of fame nod; the builders' category recognizes someone who is more than a volunteer, Smith said.

"It's somebody that goes above and beyond," Smith said. "And Jimmy is probably a true definition of going above and beyond."

For Neville, a 1955 Fenwick graduate, it's the people that stand out. He's made many, many friends in other coaches, within organizations and with former players. To this day, he runs into these various faces, many simply asking "Hey, Mr. Neville. How you doing?" Neville said. He even ran into a former player's father when visiting some friends in Palm Springs, Calif., just before Christmas this year.

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One of the closest people to Neville over the years, on the ice and off, is Smith, the current president of USA Hockey.

Smith was the altar boy at Neville's wedding before they became friends, then his best man as Neville and his wife Judy renewed their vows on their 25th anniversary. For their 50th anniversary, Smith surprised them by being an altar boy again for the ceremony, even though he was in his 50s.

In addition to their friendship, Smith, who's also on the board of directors for the Illinois Hockey Hall of Fame, and Neville also coached together for a number of years starting with squirts in Park Ridge.

"He's just been an extraordinary volunteer," Smith said. "One of the best I've ever come across. Whatever you ask him to do, he will do."

Neville went over the basics with his players at the various levels, working on positioning and playmaking. He also concentrated on goaltender coaching, a strong suit of his, he said.

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"I've been lucky to have some really good goalies," Neville said. "I don't know if it had anything to do with me."

With Neville getting older, he's sort of semi-retired, and he said he's felt burnt out the past year. Still, if they need him, he'll be there, he said. His induction into the hockey hall of fame also came as a surprise and was the last thing he said he expected.

"I'm not out looking to get a pat on the back," Neville said. "I'm just happy to be involved."

Heather Rule is a freelance reporter for Pioneer Press.

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Jim Neville coaching highlights

EXPERIENCE

Coach, Chicago Hornets Sled Hockey Organization, beginning in 2003

- Also coached disabled athletes at hockey development camps until 2015

Coach, U.S. National Development Camps in Colorado Springs, Colo., and Lake Placid, N.Y.

- Starting in 1985, he coached a select group of players in camps for more than 14 years

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Coach, high school hockey

- Won a state championship with Maine
- Won 1992 state championship with Notre Dame

Coach, Northern Express Hockey Club, Niles and Park Ridge – mid 1980s

- He helped organize the club, which merged the Niles and Park Ridge Hockey clubs

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- Named Coach of the Year by the Northwest Hockey League in Franklin Park

Volunteer assistant coach, Park Ridge Hornets Hockey Organization, Park Ridge – mid 1970s

- His team won state his first year as coach
- Co-coached with Jim Smith, the current USA Hockey president

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- Served one year as president of the organization

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