

Harlan County Sports: Columns: First family of Clover Fork sports Evanses carrying on tradition of excellence



Julia Evans is pictured with three of her sons —David (left), Roy and Robert.

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First family of Clover Fork sports —Evanses carrying on tradition of excellence

By JOHN HENSON

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Julia Evans figures she has seen them all through seven decades of traveling eastern Kentucky watching her children

and grandchildren — every baseball field, basketball court and football stadium in every corner of the mountains, along with occasional trips to the flatlands.

Evans and her husband, Roy, raised seven children in the Red Bud section of Clover Fork, including five boys who shared common traits of size, strength and athleticism. Beginning with Roy, who graduated in 1958, and ending with Robert, who graduated in 1985, the Evans brothers played starring roles on numerous Evarts High School teams, especially in football where they each wore the No. 71 jersey before it was retired for good when Robert's high school career ended. It was framed and placed alongside other Evarts greats such as Perky Bryant and Mr. Football Scott Russell along the hallway near the EHS gymnasium.

All five Evans brothers went on to sign college scholarships in athletics — Roy, Danny and Donnie in football and David and Robert in baseball.

Through it all there was one constant. Julia was always there to watch, whether at home or away. Now at 88, Julia cheers on a new generation of Evanses. She was in the stands in June at the Kentucky Basketball Academy in Lexington to watch Sarah Evans (David's daughter) play center for the Harlan County Lady Bears.

"I started going to games when I was 15, when Roy and I were dating. Roy was pitching ball," Julia said after an HCHS scrimmage. "We got married when I was 16, and I've been going ever since."

Julia remembers playing basketball, softball and running track at Evarts before girls sports came to an end in the late 1930s.

"I think during a 20-year span she didn't miss a game because she had one of us playing," David said. "There was never an option to not be successful. There was never an option to whine or quit at anything. Looking back now, especially after I coached all these years, I realized a lot of people don't have somebody behind them like that pushing them. It's all in us. We wouldn't go home and complain about anything. She wanted us to do whatever we could to help our teams win."

Discipline was crucial to her sons' success, according to Julia.

"They knew to walk the chalk, and when I told them to do it, they did it," she said. "They knew they had to give 110 percent all the time, and if the coach didn't put them on the bench, I would have."

"We had to do what was expected of us, at school and at home," Robert said. "If we got paddled at school, we got paddled at home. Our sports started with our dad. He worked over 30 years in the coal mines. He pitched in the Coalfield Leagues and had a chance to go play pro but was making more money in the coal mines, and he had two kids at home."

"Our mom has been watching sports in Harlan County for generations. She's a sports person. She would let you know if you had a bad game, and she made sure we gave it our best," Roy said. "I guess playing sports was just expected of you. The good Lord blessed us with a little size and talent. It was a pretty nice thing to have in one family. It's something to be proud of."

Julia said her husband pitched well into his 40s, working in the coal mines during the week and pitching on the weekend. She said he was the Mountain States League's most valuable player five times during his long semi-pro career.

"He worked Friday night and got up Saturday and pitched a doubleheader," Julia said.

"My dad was a hard worker and was very athletic. I saw him basically give his life to raise us. He wanted more for us than he had," David said.

"Every town, I think, has one of these families," said Harlan County High School Principal Bob Howard, a 1970 Evarts graduate who was the school's last principal before moving on to HCHS. "It's typical of the mountains. The Evans family definitely, on Clover Fork, is one of the families where you can't pick up an annual and not find something about an Evans. They were good athletes and good students. It was a tradition at Evarts. The Evans family had their place in our trophy case when we were at Evarts."

It was a tradition that David took notice of very early in his life.

"I remember when I was little and put that jersey on me. I think Donnie was probably a senior then and was already getting letters from colleges," he said. "It hung down below my knees, but I couldn't wait until I could be the one to wear it.

"I didn't want to disappoint any of them. It's not just about sports. It's about the way you live."

Roy set the bar high for his younger brothers as a standout tackle on Charlie Hunter's early teams at Evarts, earning a scholarship to the University of Kentucky. He left with many others during the "Thin Thirty" era when Charlie Bradshaw took over as coach, landing at Eastern Kentucky University where he played defensive tackle for two seasons. He was invited to try out for the Dallas Cowboys before a collapsed lung ended his football career and started a long career as a coach and administrator in Madison County, first at Madison Central for 22 years and then at Madison Southern for eight before retiring."

Danny also went on to Eastern Kentucky University after a standout career at Evarts and played three years for the Colonels at defensive tackle. He later settled in Berea.

Donnie played offensive tackle at Eastern and then returned to Harlan where he worked for the Harlan County School System and then ARH.

David was best known as a standout pitcher for the Wildcats who took those talents on to Jacksonville State University in Alabama where he pitched in two College World Series on the Division II level. After coaching in the Kingsport area following college, David eventually returned to Harlan County and rebuilt the struggling Cawood High School baseball program before returning to his alma mater as a baseball and football coach. He eventually moved to Harlan where he led the Green Dragons to a district title. He is now a teacher at Harlan County High School. His oldest daughter, Sarah, is a 6-foot junior center who is ranked among the top players in the 13th Region. She's also a standout softball player.

Robert played baseball two seasons at Gadsden State University in Alabama before completing his bachelor's degree at Eastern Kentucky University. He was a teacher and coach at Black Mountain Elementary School. He has two daughters who play basketball and softball. Kaitlin is an eighth-grader and is already a member of the HCHS junior varsity and freshmen teams. Emily is a fourth-grader and has started her basketball career. Both were members of a Harlan Little League softball team coached by their father and their mother, Kim.

Nine years younger than any of his brothers, most of the Evans' accomplishments were part of legend when he entered high school, but he remembers watching David prepare for his college baseball career during the summers.

"I got to watch David play baseball in college and all the work he did when he was home between seasons," Robert said. "Growing up as an Evans in Clover Fork, there were a lot of expectations. I was expected to play ball. It was always done with love, but there were high expectations.

"That was always with me growing up. It was kind of expected, but I was brought up looking at it as a way to get a college education. I thank the good Lord he blessed me with enough ability to be able to do that. I got to travel all over the country and play ball, and it was a blessing."

There were also two girls in the family. Joyce Kirby is a retired nurse in Virginia and Sharon Shepherd worked in the Harlan County School System, serving as principal at Evarts Elementary School. Sharon is married to former Harlan County Schools Superintendent Robert Shepherd. Their son, Scott, was a standout football player at Evarts High School. He now works as a counselor at Harlan County High School.

With several granddaughters either playing high school or middle school sports in Harlan County, Julia has no plans to end her longtime love affair with sports.

"Oh, honey, that's my life, " she said. "It always has been."

"That's the way it has always been," Robert said. "The Lord has blessed us that she's been here with us this long, and I hope and pray she is with us until my daughters graduate. She has always been there."