

McFarland thrives as teacher, coach, official and athlete

By Carol Bryant

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A coach typically excels in one sport.

That's not the case for Bob McFarland, 58, Grand Island Senior High's veteran coach, physical education teacher and sports official in his 35th year at the school.

He's coached basketball, tennis, gymnastics, football, girls track and currently coaches boys golf. He teaches everything from aerobics to badminton.

He officiates basketball, football, baseball, softball and volleyball. He plays most sports. Golf and table tennis are his favorites.

On a recent afternoon, McFarland sported a fresh wound underneath one eye, the result of a student accidentally hitting him during a gymnastics activity. The spot, which eventually became a black eye, isn't the first bruise he's garnered at his job. He recalls breaking his nose once.

As a coach, he breaks down a skill into well-described, attainable parts.

When he was hired at Grand Island Senior High, the school's gymnastics coach had recently resigned. McFarland accepted the challenge to coach the sport and gained experience by attending clinics and by getting tips from other coaches.

As a teacher, McFarland is friendly but firm.

He is very goal-oriented and very interested in doing as well as he can himself," said Roger Harms, a Senior High math teacher who's known McFarland ever since he began teaching there.

His expectations for students are high," Harms said. McFarland will work tirelessly" to help students attain the highest levels they can reach.

He does like kids," Harms said. He does want them to improve themselves. He really thinks he can make a difference."

Senior High Principal Kent Mann said McFarland is without a doubt a committed, caring, professional educator." As head of the physical education department, McFarland has developed a good program that enables students to make exercise part of their adult lives.

He practices what he preaches. He knows what he's talking about," Mann said.

McFarland participates with students in the 20 to 25 sports he instructs in classes.

I try to be a good example. I wouldn't make them do anything I didn't do myself," he said.

He likes to work with wood and has built recreational equipment for the school, such as archery stands.

McFarland is proud of the school's intramural program, which includes basketball, coed volleyball, badminton and table tennis.

Through the span of my teaching here, I've probably had more connection with students through the intramural program than my coaching career," he said. They get a lot of exercise. They don't have to meet expectations of any specific coach."

As a sports official, McFarland focuses on athletes, not himself, said Orv Qualsett of Grand Island, who refereed basketball games with McFarland for 18 years. Qualsett used to teach and coach at Senior High and worked with McFarland there, too.

Bob was a very consistent official. He understood kids," Qualsett said. The athletes knew when Bob was working a game what to expect, what they could do and what they could not do."

When you can't compete yourself, it's enjoyable to be there just to watch them," McFarland said about officiating.

As an athlete, McFarland is tenacious.

Golf is my favorite outdoor sport. Badminton is my favorite indoor sport," he said. He's competed in badminton at the Cornhusker State Games and Nebraska State Badminton Championships.

Badminton is a very quick sport, and it takes a lot of strategy, very similar to tennis."

McFarland tells his students he'll give them A's for the class if they can beat him in a badminton game, played to 15 points. He recalls only one student beating him. He sometimes spots students a few points so they start with an advantage.

I love the challenge of the sport of golf because it is very technical. I never played golf until I was in graduate school," he said.

A roommate talked him into taking up the sport, which McFarland nicknamed "pasture pool" and thought he'd never play. He completed his master's degree in physical education and health at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana.

McFarland and his brother took up tennis as high school students in Sumner after a man gave them tennis racquets. The brothers set up their court on a roller skating rink and used sheets draped over a rope as the net.

I love to play table tennis," he said.

He competed in football, basketball, track and baseball in high school and at Peru State College.

Two years ago, McFarland had a heart attack while playing golf, then had triple bypass surgery.

I didn't think it would ever happen to me because of all the exercise I've done," he said. Since then, he's altered his diet slightly and continues to run several times a week. His family has a history of heart problems.

McFarland and his wife of 33 years, Karen, have two sons. Bruce, 28, is a substitute teacher in Grand Island. Hank, 25, works in Oklahoma City, Okla., for an insurance company that sells mortgages.

"I've known I wanted to be a teacher and a coach since I was in the fourth grade," McFarland said. Teaching is like a challenge in sports. You want to see other people succeed."