 **Murray (Muzz) Bryant: 1972- 2009**

When 22 year old Murray (better known by his nickname Muzz) Bryant began his first practicum at Belmont Secondary School, he had no idea that this building would become his second home for the next 37 years. By the time of his retirement in 2009, Muzz had become the longest-serving coach in the school’s history.

Muzz was a Vic High graduate who became involved in the Victoria sporting scene at a young age. His dad, Joe Bryant was a terrific all round athlete and is a member of the Victoria, British Columbia, and Canadian Halls of Fame for his basketball and fastball accomplishments. Lacrosse was Muzz’s favorite sport as a youngster and he later played six years for the Victoria Shamrocks before it became too difficult to balance a full teaching load with the demands of Senior “A” lacrosse. Before becoming a teacher, Muzz worked for the Victoria Maple Leafs professional hockey team, starting out as a “stick boy” and later assuming an assortment of other duties, including how to stitch up players so they could return to action after suffering a laceration. When the team relocated to Phoenix, management offered Muzz a job if he was willing to accompany them, but after careful deliberation, he decided to stay in Victoria. Obviously generations of Belmont students reaped the benefits of that decision.

After completing two teaching practicums at Elizabeth Fisher Junior High School in 1972, Muzz applied for a permanent teaching job in all three local school districts. He accepted a fulltime physical education position at Belmont-Fisher for the following September. Ironically, the Victoria school district called the very next day to offer him a job, but he’d already committed to Sooke.

As a young teacher, Muzz was eager to help Belmont’s athletic program in any way, so despite the fact that soccer and volleyball were his preferred sports, he agreed to take on the Belmont Sun Devils junior boys’ basketball team as his first coaching position. That was the start of his long association with basketball, as he continued to coach the juniors for several more years before taking over the senior boys’ Belmont Braves from Bill Spotswood in 1979. Muzz consistently produced competitive teams that were able to challenge the strongest schools on the Island. He took the Belmont Braves / Bulldogs to the provincial championship tournament on four separate occasions, including in 1991 when a strong group led by Curt Spaven and Amrit Lalli finished third in the province: tying the best ever result for a Belmont boys’ basketball team. When former Vikes star Tom Holmes transferred to Belmont in 1997, he and Muzz joined forces and formed a highly effective coaching tandem for the next decade. In Muzz’s final 2007-2008 season, his underdog Bulldogs squad upset three higher ranked teams to win the Vancouver Island Championship tournament and earn their coach his first Island title.

Under Muzz’s very capable guidance, Belmont’s soccer teams also experienced consistent success. He began by coaching the junior boys and later switched to the senior girls. In 1987-88, his girls’ squad won the Islands and placed 4th at the provincial championship tournament, Belmont’s best-ever finish to that point. The girls improved on that result one year later as they placed third in the B.C., becoming the only Belmont girls’ soccer team to medal at the provincial tournament. Muzz also periodically coached a variety of other sports such as field lacrosse and track and field. In addition to his school coaching, he was remained active in the community and coached the Junior Shamrocks for two seasons and headed a very successful men’s slo-pitch team for many years that won many tournaments, including the Senior “A” provincial title and the Western Canadian Senior B championship.

Besides the regular practices and games, Muzz wanted his basketball guys to experience a significant road trip once in their high school careers, so he and long-time Bulldogs manager and assistant coach Lyle Dhur planned bi-annual trips in December or January, often to warm-weather locations, starting with a Hawaii excursion in 1979. Over the years, the team returned many times to Hawaii, a few times to Edmonton, and twice to Prince Rupert (which took care of flights and accommodations for the boys). Other big trips included Alaska, San Diego, Pasadena, Arizona, Florida, Waco and Dallas, Texas. There were always basketball games scheduled, but also time set aside for historical and cultural events, social activities and hanging out on the beach or at the pool with team-mates. Most of the players remember these trips as one of their high school highlights.

For many teachers, summer is the time to relax and take a break from coaching, but Muzz regularly coached community summer league teams. He remembers one year when his team went undefeated, led by young point guard Steve Nash. Muzz also became involved in the administrative side of sport, and held various positions with LVISSAA. After retirement, he also served a five year term as vice president of Basketball BC.

Although Muzz looks back fondly on most aspects of his coaching career, fund-raising was the one aspect of the job he found the most onerous. Coaching a high school sport is a very time-consuming venture and Muzz was usually at school before 8:00 every day and on game nights, sometimes didn’t arrive home at night until 9:30 pm. Weekend tournaments often occupied Fridays and Saturdays, leaving Sunday as potentially his one day off. However, Sunday evenings were Bingo Night: one of the basketball teams’ major fund-raising ventures. There was no casino in Victoria at that time, so the Bingo hall in the Colwood Corners Shopping Centre was a popular spot for small-scale social gamblers from the western communities to congregate. Those were the days before anti-smoking bylaws had been enacted so a constant haze of cigarette smoke permeated the room. The girls’ and boys’ basketball teams alternated weeks for Bingo duty. Two or three players were required to hand out cards and help with various duties, while adults, often Muzz, Bill Spotswood, Norm Halls, Kathy Wright and an assortment of parent volunteers handled the supervisory positions and dealt with the money. The final task at the end of the evening was to take the cash profits to the direct deposit slot in the nearby Royal Bank. Muzz definitely did not relish the short Sunday night walks to the bank the possibility of getting robbed was often in the back of his mind.

A second major basketball fundraiser was wood chopping, which occurred on a field behind Glenwood Meats. Players would gather on the weekend to buck, split, and deliver wood, which would then be sold. Some players had to be taught the proper and safe technique to use mauls and chainsaws, and apparently the coaches were good instructors as no one ever suffered a serious injury. Besides earning money for team expenses, wood chopping became a team bonding activity. Muzz, in partnership with Langford mayor Stew Young, always a huge Belmont supporter, developed positive relationships with local businesses such as Costco and Home Depot, and these companies regularly donated money to support Belmont athletics. Muzz recalls one time when the president of Home Depot flew into town to personally present a cheque to the school.

Muzz was always a positive, energetic and dedicated coach who genuinely cared about his players and tried to keep in touch with many of them after they graduated. He, Lyle and Tom regularly organized an alumni basketball tournament on the Remembrance Day long weekend and former players would come back to participate in the fun, but often surprisingly intense and fiercely competitive games. Some sort of social event was always part of the weekend, so the guys could have time to renew old friendships and reminisce about their high school experiences. Every year, some people would fly in to Victoria from out-of-town just to have the chance to get on the court again with their former team-mates.

There was no one prouder of his school than Muzz Bryant and his enthusiastic spirit helped create a positive atmosphere at Belmont. He read the daily announcements over the PA every morning for many decades, and delighted in adding his own creative touches, ranging from occasional impersonations of administrators to singing a few lines of a well-known tune with his own original lyrics. After his retirement in 2009, he occasionally worked as a teacher-on-call at Belmont and remains one of the schools most loyal supporters.