



MIKE ARBUTINA

Like any small town, Freedom boasts certain names that are instantly familiar, instantly honored. The name Mike Arbutina undoubtedly is one of them. A lifetime resident of the town, Mike Arbutina, who passed away in 1996, carved a legacy that heralds back to his years in high school, followed him to his service during World War II in the Pacific theater, and brought him full circle to his hometown, where he raised a family and forged a distinguished career in education and athletics. But his was not a provincial life; Mike's work as teacher, administrator, and presiding officer in the Western Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic League (WPIAL) led to his reputation throughout Beaver County and ultimately all of

Western Pennsylvania.

Mike was born in the year 1925 to hard-working Serbian immigrant parents. They joined the ranks of the foreign born who shaped Beaver County into a thriving blue-collar community: Italian, Polish, Slovak, Serbian, African-American. They were a tough breed, working tirelessly in their pursuit of a better life for their children and grandchildren, relentlessly pursuing their versions of the American Dream. Mike grew up in this melting pot, attended his local elementary and junior high schools, and ultimately graduated from Freedom High School in 1943. A committed athlete, Mike earned three football letters as a 155-pound center and three letters as a basketball player for the school. He was the consummate athlete.

Mike graduated during the war years and worked for a mere two months at Freedom Oil Company before being called upon to serve in the Navy Sea-Bees in the Central Pacific Islands of Eniwetok and Kwajalein. He was discharged in 1947 and returned home to work once more at Freedom Oil. But his sister Mildred encouraged Mike to enter college. At her urging, he enrolled in Geneva College, graduated in 1950 with a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration, and continued his higher education by earning a Masters of Education from the University of Pittsburgh in 1967. This laid the foundation for his many years in public education and athletics.

Before his career in education, Mike briefly worked for two years at the Conway Yard office of the Pennsylvania Railroad. There he joined the ranks of countless Beaver Countians who labored diligently on the tracks and in the mills that strengthened the pulse of the area. It was a foundation that would engender in him a work ethic that remained unrelenting throughout his life.

Mike's vocation as an educator began in 1952, when he was hired as a social studies teacher at Freedom High School. Quickly he rose to the rank of assistant principal. Then, in 1962, he left Freedom to become the principal of the newly built Western Beaver High School, north of his hometown but similar in its hills and valleys and its hard-working residents. He remained at Western for twenty-seven years until his retirement. But he chose to raise his family in his hometown of Freedom; he married Catherine Hansen of Rochester, and with her, he had three children, Petra, Lucas, and Matthew. All of them would continue to follow in his footsteps at

Freedom High School, continuing to shape the Arbutina name and legacy in both academics and athletics.

The year 1959 became a banner year for Mike Arbutina, for that was the year he became involved in the WPIAL Basketball Steering Committee. That was the beginning of a long association with the athletic organization; in 1971 Mike became treasurer, and in 1972 he ascended to the office of president. He remained president until his retirement in 1992.

Under Mike's tutelage, the WPIAL developed into one of the largest and finest scholastic leagues in the nation. He was a key manager in the development of the league as it is known today.

When Mike first became president, the WPIAL boasted no full-time employees. With the emergence of girls' sports and the incorporation of private and parochial schools into the league, Mike developed a full-time staff and increased the size, scope, and influence of the league. He also encountered thirty lawsuits during those developmental years, and he managed to win all but one. Those suits and changes were keys to building the strength and impact the league enjoys today. Mike's mentorship extended beyond Western Pennsylvania; he was active at the state level, serving as vice-president of the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association (PIAA) for two years and as president for three years.

In retirement, Mike remained active in local Freedom government, once again returning to his deeply imbedded roots. He became the town enforcement officer, a role in which he served until his death in 1996.

The town of Freedom presently is a mere ghost of its past. The main street is nothing like it was in the days when Mike roamed it as a student and a young adult. The schools he attended now are non-existent, replaced by a new and evolving complex overlooking the river valley. But the names that helped to shape the community still live on in the social clubs, the churches, and the homes of those who weathered decade after decade of change. The name Mike Arbutina is synonymous with Freedom, a name that commands recognition, respect, and high regard for a native son who would be proud today of this honor that ranks him with the legions who comprise the Hall of Fame.