

# Collegiate pioneer Burnett selected for Hall of Fame

By Mike Steele

**F**or the last several decades, a small number of dedicated, talented handball coaches have devoted themselves to promoting intercollegiate handball.

We have been blessed to have among us two outstanding Hall of Famers—Mike Dau of Lake Forest and Pete Tyson of Texas.

We are honored again to have a third Hall of Fame member working with us now that Tommy Burnett, head coach and former athletic director at Southwest Missouri State, has been recognized by the USHA for his many achievements and contributions to the development of the game.

Burnett joined the collegiate coaching group in the late 1980s and made an immediate impact. His leadership skills quickly led to three consecutive terms as national collegiate commissioner. Under his wise leadership, the collegiate game thrived as never before.

Collegiate handball has always been an exciting component of the USHA competitive year, but Burnett immediately saw that it could be improved and enlarged. Under his guidance, the collegiate commissioners and coaches set aside their differences and united to promote a new vision that vastly expanded the women's game and added skill levels for players at the national tournament.

Burnett also saw a need to improve communication with the USHA board and argued successfully for the collegiate commissioner to join the board as a voting member. He held that position for four years.

With the momentum Burnett started and

guided, the collegiate tournament grew 35 percent in the number of teams participating, with nearly 40 percent more players. The coaching fraternity grew by 100 percent, and the annual budget expanded generously by 400 percent.

Marked by such growth and improvements, the collegiates became and remain the second-largest event in terms of competitors in the USHA tournament year.

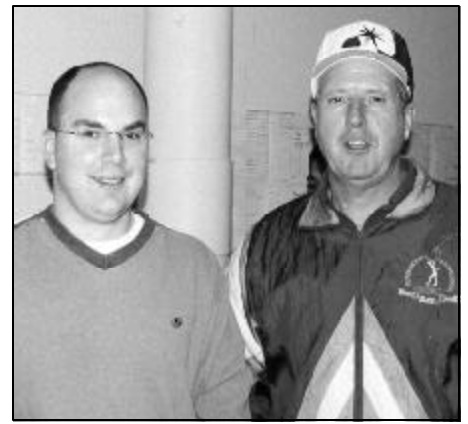
New teams were attracted to the event with generous first-year grants, per-capita rebates for players and stipends for coaches. Enthusiasm for the exciting collegiate game deepened.

First-time observers often comment on the noticeable level of team enthusiasm and support they see at the collegiates. This excitement is not reserved just for the top players, because the team scoring format means that a C-level match could make the difference in the national team title standings. That happened in 2000, when a mere 14 points out of more than 1,000 decided a new national team champion.

Burnett saw a good thing when he attended his first collegiate tournament—and knew how to make it better.

Not only was he a visionary leader for the coaches and commissioners, he also was one heck of a coach. He guided 17 players to All-American honors, won seven consecutive team championships—including a sweep of the men's, women's and combined from 1995-97—took four consecutive men's titles and won seven women's titles.

Any handball aficionado knows that Burnett coached such handball greats at



David Chapman managed a pretty fair collegiate career under Burnett's tutelage.

SMSU as David Chapman, Tyler Hamel, Tommy Little, Beth Adrian, Amber Rounseville and Alissa Donaldson.

But he also taught the game to countless youths, wrote successful grant applications to bring the game to an expanded youth audience, founded highly successful tournaments and endlessly promoted the women's game. He was tireless in helping young players find a way to try this great game, and, like many collegiate coaches, paid out of pocket for many dozens of players to get their start in tournament play. Burnett regularly stopped students just walking around the SMSU campus and asked why they weren't playing handball.

The success and impact of Burnett's vision has been ratified by the USHA's decision to devote its Capital Campaign to player development and promotion of the amateur game.

For many years to come, every handball player will owe a debt of gratitude to Burnett for his vision and energy to improve the game—not with some new shot technique or personal records, but by expanding the horizons for bringing the game to new players, democratizing the format for the collegiate tournament and being a tireless promoter for the game at all levels.

Tommy Burnett is a model of the highest and best qualities in The Perfect Game—a scrupulous leader, a wonderfully charitable spirit, a man who never wavered in his generous support for those who coached and taught the game.

Beloved by his players and admired by his colleagues, we congratulate him on his selection to the Hall of Fame, where his example will serve as a model for anyone who wants to make his or her own contribution.

Burnett has been a huge proponent of the women's game and has coached such skilled players as Mandy and Amber Rounseville.

