

LeaAnn Martin's Hall of Fame Induction Speech – June 24, 2010 – Austin, TX.

Learn From the Best, Learn From the Rest, and Have Fun Along the Way

This is different. For 29 years, I have attended this banquet and sat out there, looking up here. But, being up here, looking out that direction, is a little more nerve wracking. I can see why people need glasses of water and Kleenex. Wow.

I would like to first thank my sweet husband Joel and good friend Missy for the slide presentation – awesome, and a little bit embarrassing. I would also like to thank my very dear friends Pete and Vern for the nice and exaggerated things they said. They were very generous. Those two guys have been with me through my handball journey and have always been there to support and coach me. They both hold very special places in my heart.

But as many of you know, no one plays handball for almost 30 years without the support and help of a lot of other people. Some of these folks were people who became a huge part of my life. Early on, I adopted the philosophy of Learn From the Best, Learn from the Rest, and Have Fun Along the Way. Being a teacher by profession, finding and creating opportunities to learn came easy to me. I learned from so many people – even if they didn't know they were teaching me. I had the opportunity to learn from our sport's greatest – the best, and I learned from people who wouldn't consider themselves champions – the rest. Champions or not – they were still my heroes. Here of some of my Lessons Learned:

- From friend and Hall of Famer Stuffy Singer: Shorten the game. Have a serve you know can score a point. It may be unorthodox, and unexpected, but it should be something that you know will get you a point in a pinch. I talked to Stuffy the other day and I told him what I was going to say and he let me know that he actually learned that from handball legend Jimmy Jacobs.
- From friend and Hall of Famer Fred Lewis: Be patient. And if you hit a great pass and your opponent gets it, it's OK because every pass takes a piece of his legs. That doesn't really explain why I never killed the ball, but it does explain why I passed a lot. Both Freddy and I like to watch people run.
- From Vern Roberts, who not only bleeds handball blue blood, but is also a great friend: Be positive. When Vern makes a mistake in the court, he says, "I did not do that." I tried that as much as I could. It didn't always work for me – or Vern. I have played doubles with him and heard him say that. My response is, "The hell you didn't. I saw you." Actually, after seeing some of the pictures of me here, I wish I could say, "I did not wear those shorts."
- From friend and Hall of Famer Naty Alvarado, Sr.: I never had the chance to be in the court with him, but I talked to him a lot. And outside a court in Denver, after I walked out for a time out, he told me: Don't use timeouts because you're tired. Use them to think of what you need to do.

- From good friend and Hall of Famer Rosemary Bellini, who in so many ways paved the path for women in handball: I learned tenacity and if you stare at your opponent for the full 10 seconds before you serve, you will scare them.
- From my idol and Hall of Famer Ron Emberg, who I wish could have been here tonight: Play with the girls, give back to the game, and just be gorgeous.
- From my longtime and favorite doubles partner Allison Roberts: Brains can beat youth, speed, and skill. Sometimes. Play your guts out and believe you can beat anyone.
- From good friend Lisa Fraser Gilmore: Don't be afraid to try to kill the ball off the backwall. Every. Single. Time.
- From John Bike, Jr.: Actually, it was hard to learn anything from him, but I did. He played me many times with a variety of handicaps, including him playing in dress clothes, socks and no shoes, or maybe a 19 point spot. I learned that no matter what I tried to do to him, he would still win. But, he also knows how to have fun in handball, but I didn't need to be taught that.
- And from another long time doubles partner Anna Engele, who I won more titles with than anyone else: If you are losing, or if you are winning, just hit the f-ing ball!

I learned from the best, and was introduced to handball by the best of the best. My introduction to handball was not intentional. In fact, there was a good amount of resistance on my part. In 1981 I was here, at the University of Texas as a graduate student. I was scheduled to teach some racquetball classes. While I had played some racquetball, I wasn't familiar with drills or instructional techniques. So, I asked the person that I had seen around the courts the most – the long haired guy – if he could help me with some drills. He agreed and we got in the court – me with my racquet and him with his hands. He showed me a drill – with his hands – and told me to do it. I took one off the backwall – and Pete said, “Put that racquet down.” I did, and that was the end of my racquet ball career and the beginning of my handball life. I practiced a lot – in fact, I loved to practice, and that never changed. When I lived here, I probably spent more time in Court 1 than I did in my home.

There was a regional handball tournament three weeks after I hit the first ball with my hands. Those of you from Austin know that locals don't have to send in an entry form. All you have to do was sign up on a list posted on the wall and indicate the division you wanted to play in. I happened to walk by and I saw my name on the list. So, I laughed and crossed it out. This happened over and over until the first day of the tournament and I saw my name on a bracket. Three things went through my mind. First, I was going to kill the long haired guy. Secondly, I had never played a game and didn't even know how many points were in a game. I was going to have to read a rule book. Finally, I needed to throw up. I didn't have time to do all three. So, after throwing up, I played and relied on my opponent and the ref (who was really bad, by the way) to help me through the game. I played in my first national tournament a couple of months later. That was it. I was hooked.

A few years ago I was interviewed for a campus newspaper where I teach. The question that was asked was, “What would your life be like without handball?” At the time, I had no real answer. All I could say was, “I don’t know.” Quite simply, handball has been my life for so long that I have no idea what life would be like without it.

There have been so many defining moments in my 29 years handball – not all good. I have had my fair share of injuries and losses. Actually, I am not sure if there is a “fair share” of injuries. I’ll have to ask Stuff. Maybe we were just clumsy. I had so much fun along the way. Pete always told me to quit when handball was no longer fun. That moment never came.

In my handball journey, I have had amazing opportunities. I have had terrific and patient doubles partners:

- Troy Hinnant
- Sue Sellers
- Peanut Motal
- Marla Higgins
- Nancy Kalil
- Beth Rowley
- Anna Engele
- Allison Roberts

Playing with these great players were all opportunities for me to learn, and I learned no less from my 30 year’s worth of opponents and friends, too numerous to mention, that I have met along the way.

Because handball was such a huge part of my life, all the people I am close to have been affected by my handball. They have cheered for me. A couple have bet money on me. Most importantly, all of these people have supported me. And, some even started playing because of me, seeing how much it meant to me and that was the way to spend time with me. And, there are many here with me tonight.

My sister Linda, who happens to be here with her family (including my brother-in-law Robert, my nephew Joshua, and my niece Mariah). They are from Alaska, and my sister is not a handball player. We were polar opposites growing up. I would go outside and play with the boys. She would stay inside and read Nancy Drew books. So just because we stayed away from each other, one of us was destined to become an athlete. Tonight, I’m really glad it was me because there is no Nancy Drew Book Reading Hall of Fame. Now, my brother in law is a handball player, and he has started a handball program at his school in Anchorage. My niece participates in that program.

My very close friend of 30 years, who I lovingly refer to as my Seester Linda, learned handball and we spent a lot of time in the courts. She is here tonight and after not playing handball for many years, entered this tournament. She and I have shared so much as close

friends – playing handball, to going to tournaments together, to training for and running marathons together, to marriages and subsequent divorces, the list is endless.

Another very close friend of almost two decades, Andria, is here with her parents and her aunt. We are all good friends. She learned handball from me and played until her knees told her that 6 surgeries were enough. Even though she is not a handball player, Andria and I have the strongest of friendships and I know that because she never complains when we can't go shopping, or go out to eat or walk the dogs because of my handball.

Ken Starcher, who I refer to as my “handball husband” and close friend is here. I have spent more time in the court with him in the last 20 years than anyone else. As the handball teacher and handball coach at Western Washington University, he has taught me a lot. I have learned that it's really not that bad spending 8 hours in the car taking college kids to a tournament. Of course, he is hard of hearing so it is a little easier for him. He is incredibly generous with his time and money and Western Washington University handball is a great program because of him.

Missy Mitchell and Brad Hoyt are here, and both are former Western players. Miss is my weekly doubles partner. I like to think I am teaching them something. In fact, I tell them that sometimes you lose matches on purpose – just to be a good ambassador for the sport. They are both quick to remind me what a good ambassador I am, more and more. Missy is also a reminder to me that handball has a great future because she is already giving back to the sport, in addition to improving so quickly.

My daughter, Jana, is also here. She may not remember this, but she thanked Joel and me for being handball players because she knows how it keeps us healthy and active, and not cranky. She is here all the way from the Washington DC area, despite the fact that she has a big event of her own, her wedding, coming up in a month.

Of course, there is my husband Joel, my number one fan and supporter extraordinaire. He too, fell victim to my handball life. He started playing after we met and now spends more time in the court than I do. He still hinders me when we play singles, takes my shots when we play doubles, and almost takes my shot but at the very last fraction of second holds up because he knows it's a very bad thing to do. He is so incredibly dedicated to me and handball, that I really had no chance of ever giving up handball, even if I wanted to. He is my best friend and hero in so many ways.

But, if there was one person who influenced, taught, coached, and supported me since the first day he made me hit the ball without my racquet, it is the long haired guy. What I learned from Pete is that handball is more than a game or a sport. Handball is a way of life. The most important lessons were not about how to hit a ball, or what shots to take against certain people. Don't get me wrong, Pete taught me that. Pete taught me how to play right side doubles – with him being one of the best there was. He told me to be ready to hit every shot, but don't hit any shots. When he coached me, I was a lot more perceptive than he knew. I would always ask his advice before a match. If he thought I should win, he would tell me the serves to hit, what her best shot was so I needed to be

ready for that, what I might try, and so on. If he thought I couldn't win, he would say "Just have fun."

But what to do inside the court was only a small part of what I learned. What you did outside the court was just as or more important. He taught me to watch a handball match – not by watching one player hit the ball and then the next player hit the ball. He told me to watch one player and never take my eye off of him. Because if I watched each player, I would only see how half the game is played – just offense. By always watching one player I could see the most important parts of the game – anticipation, footwork, where the player moved when his opponent hit the ball. That was brilliant and helped me more than he knew.

Pete, more than anyone I know, has dedicated his life, time, money, and knowledge, to growing handball and supporting handball. When I started playing handball, he was getting ready to run the regional tournament. I saw how he tirelessly spent days and nights preparing. This happened over and over because he runs many, many tournaments. He told me early on that every handball player should run a tournament – then there would be no more complaints about court assignments, draws, referees and playing times. I still agree with that. I saw how he spent his own money to cover expenses. How he did not go to collegiate tournaments so that all the money raised could go to sending his players. For so many years, he was the biggest promoter of women's handball. He started the Bud Light Tournament – for the top 8 women in the country. He raised money to bring in all the women and we beat each other up playing a round robin. And yes, Pete, I know you did that for me – so I could play the best women. He spent countless hours playing me, and yes, Pete, I know you never played your best or hardest against me. When his playing days were over, he spent countless hours throwing the ball for me as I did drills. I don't know where I would be in handball without Pete. And, I don't know where handball would be without Pete.

Up here tonight, I see people who are future Hall of Famers. I just am older, slower, fatter, and a much worse player than you. You know, no one in the Hall of Fame is young, fast, and strong, or at the peak of his or her game. Just look at us. So, it might not be all that it is cracked up to be – I don't know. But what I do know is that there are so many people out there who get it – who understand the commitment, the hard work, the dedication, and the support that our sport, our life, requires. You are the learners and, I hope, teachers of handball. And, I know, you won't dedicate yourselves to handball just to get you in the Hall of Fame. It doesn't happen that way. Like me, you will do it for the love of the game and people in the game, and because you love the life that handball brings you. There are many of you, and I can only hope I can be here in your moment. Because, standing here, looking out there, not only do I see the people who will be in the Hall of Fame, and I see the future of handball.

I've always thought I was lucky – lucky to have been introduced to handball, to have played the people I did, to have made the friends I have, and to have kept the friends I had despite handball, and certainly lucky to be here tonight. From starting here

at UT, and having the opportunity to learn from the best, learn from the rest, and have fun along the way, it has been amazing ride.

Thanks to all of you who make a difference in handball. Thanks to all who have played with me, or against me, to those who let me win, and to those who wouldn't, because you were all part of making me the handball player that I am, or was. Thanks to my very special friends, including Nancy, Pete's wife who has worked so hard for this tournament, for making such a difference in my life and for making my 29 year journey and this one night incredible.

Thank you.