

Kearney Hub Sports by Buck Mahoney, Sports Editor on April 19, 2018

When the “best Kearney athlete ever” discussion begins, the name of Tom Heller will come up sooner than later.

His credentials whip everybody else’s.

- Prep athlete of the Year in 1967 by the Omaha World-Herald and Lincoln Journal Star.
- First Kearney High football player to rush for 1,000 yards.
- All-state in football and basketball and a qualifier for the state track meet in the hurdles.
- All-time Big 10 scoring leader in football with 123 points, back when Kearney High was the Big 10 champion.
- Nebraska Cornhusker scholarship winner and part-time starter as sophomore defensive back.
- Averaged 17.1 points per game in basketball as a senior.

This fall, Heller’s accomplishments will get gold-medal treatment when he is inducted into the Nebraska High School Sports Hall of Fame. He is only the second KHS athlete to be inducted, joining Stacy Imming. Two KHS coaches, Roger Mathiesen and Tom McCann, also have been inducted.

This year’s induction ceremony is Sept. 23 at Lincoln East High School. Tickets to the induction ceremony are \$25 for adults and \$10 for K-12 students. Pre-kindergarten children are admitted for no charge. Tickets will be available through the Nebraska Sports Council in Lincoln.

This year’s induction class includes Kansas City Royals outfielder Alex Gordon from Lincoln Southeast, American discus record-holder Ben Plucknett of Beatrice and former

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NCAA Volleyball Player of the Year Chistina Houghtelling of Cambridge among the 20 inductees.

Another KHS alum, Diane Rouzee, will be inducted this year, a testament to her coaching success with the Grand Island Northwest volleyball team.

Many think Heller's induction is long overdue. But it's still welcome news.

"I was thankful, very thankful," Tom's widow, Sue, said. "I'm happy for him, his family and everyone around him. It's really well-deserved."

Heller, who coached football and basketball in Colorado, died in 2014.

He was best admired for his ability to conquer any sport. It was something Sue saw firsthand from the time they met in junior high.

"Ping-pong, pool, golf, water skiing, gymnastics, trampoline — you would just watch him and think, 'How can he do that?'" He just had a real sense about him that made him excel at everything he did athletically," Sue said.

The first time they visited her parents' cabin at Johnson Lake, he tried water skiing and got up on the skis on his first try. The second time, he was skiing on one ski.

"He was just pretty remarkable," she said. "The same was true of golf and tennis. Anything he tried, he was good at."

To go along with his incredible athletic ability, she remembers Tom for keeping his cool even in the most intense situations.

"Besides his God-given talent, he worked very hard," she said. "He was humble, thankful for his teammates and coaches and always gave them credit. I think he was admired by his players and their parents."