

MAKING HER MARK

# 512 wins and counting

## Hall of Fame coach puts Branford field hockey on the map

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**BRANFORD** » What does Cathy McGuirk, the legendary Branford High School field hockey coach, have in common with World Series managers Bruce Bochy of the San Francisco Giants and Kansas City's Ned Yost?

First, some background on Coach McGuirk, whose team closed out a memorable season Nov. 4 with a 3-1 loss to powerhouse Joel Barlow High School in Redding. Memorable because, though the 12-7 year ended without a deep run into the state championships, it also included McGuirk's 500th win, on Sept. 9, against Sacred Heart Academy.

Add to that, in her 38-year reign as coach, 10 state championships, 16 conference championships, and, as of last week, an astonishing record of 512-118-62 that makes her the sixth all-time winningest high school field hockey coach, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations Record Book.

It's no wonder the 62-year-old with the trademark shock of white hair and the quiet presence on the sidelines has been named the Coach of the Year not just by the Connecticut Field Hockey Association four times, but also by the Connecticut High School Coaches Association and the National High School Athletic Coaches Association, in addition



The team's bus is festooned after their 500th win.



Coach McGuirk with senior captains Cara Broughal, Megan Shea, Caroline Murphy, and Karlee Kessler.

to being inducted into no fewer than six halls of fame.

Nor is it coincidental that, over four years as goalie on the Southern Connecticut State College field hockey team back in the early 1970s, she was undefeated and unscored upon.

Which is where managers Bochy and Yost come in. Both were former catchers. There are more

catchers that have become major league managers than any other position.

And here's the reason. Like Bochy, like Yost, McGuirk, who also played goalie for four years at Central Catholic High School in Norwalk, became accustomed to having small hard balls propelled in her direction and coping with bulky safety equipment as well as

an assortment of bumps, bruises, and scrapes.

More than that, her unique vantage point facing out onto the field, or pitch, in field hockey parlance, likewise broadened her perspective of what each of her teammates were doing, and where the ball was heading, end insert and how, in accordance with all that,

COACH » PAGE 4

PHOTOS BY BILL O'BRIEN

# Coach

FROM PAGE 1

to position herself—to understand, in short, that one of the beauties of field hockey is that it's communal, with everyone complementing each other.

Perhaps that explains the Westport native's philosophy, as Caroline Murphy, one of the team captains, put it, that each time Branford scores a goal, "the entire team scores the goal."

Murphy made that statement after Branford beat Hamden at home earlier this season. After wins on the road, according to Karlee Kessler, another captain, McGuirk and her husband John, the longtime assistant coach, traditionally make a pit-stop at Dairy Queen.

Maybe that extra-extra-curricular activity comes from the coach's firsthand recognition of just how strenuous, how grueling, the sport can be. Over eight years patrolling the net, she watched her teammates running hunched over for 30 minutes non-stop, watched them endure brick-wall tackles, watched their knees get whacked with a Kevlar stick or nailed by a hard, spherical ball launched at 40 mph.



PHOTOS BY BILL O'BRIEN

Coach Cathy McGuirk teaching what she's taught for 38 years.

Or maybe it relates back to those eight successive autumns of seeing the whole pitch. Maybe it trained her to make sure her players understood the bigger picture; that their priorities are, in descending order, school, family, and field hockey; and that the sweet wins and bitter losses eventually fade, replaced by the rich memories of the friends they made.

No surprise, said Kessler, that "everyone knows the field hockey team as a kind of family, even when



Senior captain Karlee Kessler displaying masterly stickwork in battle against Sacred Heart Academy.

we're not playing." Or that the team perennially fields more players than virtually any other sport. Or that the girls on the team "stick with it for four years," according to co-captain Meghan Shea.

Whatever it is, McGuirk has no plans to slow down. "Field hockey is my fun," she said. "It's what I do for fun."

Her husband John agreed. "The satisfaction

of seeing kids improve really energizes her. The bottom line is she loves the kids. And she knows a little something about field hockey."

A little something indeed. Not with the fanfare and bright lights of the World Series, of course, but in the small market of Branford and in the smaller market of field hockey, it's safe to say she's made her mark.