



STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Skeet O'Connell, 93, a longtime coach and administrator at Clark College, will attend a rededication of the O'Connell Sports Complex on Wednesday.

The Center of Clark College

Claude 'Skeet' O'Connell was the face of athletics at the school for generations

The O'Connell Sports Center has classrooms and a workout center and offices and a gym that houses Clark College's athletic teams.

Which means it's almost as full of life and activity as its 93-year-old namesake.

Because as Claude "Skeet" O'Connell sits in his east Vancouver retirement community, recounting his six decades of influence and contribution, the memories flow freely and the smiles come readily.

"I still do lots of walking," O'Connell said. "I walk the stairs and hallways here, at least an hour every day."

He lifted weights until a few years ago. He played golf until a balky knee



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got the better of him last year. He is a frequent winner of the monthly billiards tournament.

"We play a lot of pool here," he says,

"but there's no gambling."

So as Clark prepares to rededicate its athletic facility, celebrating a renovation that was two years in the making, it is easy to understand the impact O'Connell has had on the college.

Serving as athletic director and, at various times, coach of the basketball, baseball and golf teams, O'Connell spread his tentacles across generations.

"He is my mentor," said Denny Huston, Clark's current athletic director and a former athlete and coach at the college. "He has affected my life in every aspect. He is the best role model I've ever had: How you treat other people; being a winner; being a

true student-athlete. He has the most contagious smile of anyone you'll ever meet."

"The only detracting thing I can say is he retired from four or five positions here at Clark, and people got tired of throwing retirement parties."

Maybe that's because, as O'Connell says, "I flunked retirement."

The Vancouver story

Like so many others, O'Connell's connection to Vancouver began with the shipyards of World War II, which lured him to the burgeoning city when

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a medical condition kept him out of the military.

He had graduated from what is now Western Oregon University. He had taught school for a couple years. He had played some minor-league baseball.

Working in the shipyards seemed a logical way to aid the war effort, but O'Connell was soon drawn back to teaching. He worked at Lincoln Elementary, and then as principal at Fruit Valley. And when Clark started its athletic department following the war, he became its first athletic director and basketball coach and baseball coach.

Those were spartan times.

"Clark didn't have a building," O'Connell recalled. "We double-shifted with the high school in their building.

"And you should have seen our uniforms. Yikes. You couldn't go out and buy them; they looked like P.E. uniforms."

That didn't hamper his teams' success. Clark won

Behind the name 'Skeet'

His parents named him Claude, but for the past 75 years or so it has been "Skeet," in honor of an outstanding Oregon State player from the early 1930s.

"In the course of a ballgame, I made a couple good plays, and one of the guys called out, 'Hey, great job, 'Skeet,'" said O'Connell, a 93-year-old former coach and administrator at Clark College. "After that, I was called 'Skeet' all the time."

A couple professors used to call him Claude, O'Connell said, but even StellaMae, his wife of 65 years, knows him better as Skeet.

— Greg Jayne

state junior college basketball championships in 1947, 1954, 1955, and 1956. It won a baseball title in 1956.

And along the way, O'Connell laid a foundation that remains strong today.

"It's incredible the number of people whose lives he has touched," Huston said.

Which makes this a good time for the story that best exemplifies the substance of the man: Skeet and his wife, StellaMae, have been married for 65 years.

They met when both were teaching at Lincoln, and their

two children, two grandchildren and three great-grandchildren all reside in Clark County.

The key to a long marriage?

"Pick the right girl in the first place," O'Connell said. "She's really been a dandy."

Legacy at Clark

A lifetime of coaching and a lengthy marriage would be monument enough to most people. O'Connell has a building named for him.

The O'Connell Sports Center was dedicated in 1986, honoring the man who long defined

Clark College athletics.

"I thought that was the greatest thing," O'Connell said. "I was very complimented and pleased."

The facility was recently renovated, with about 3,200 square feet being refurbished, and about 7,200 square feet being added.

On Wednesday, the facility will be rededicated with a ceremony acknowledging the \$2.6 million renovation. At the same time, the college will name a meeting room in the building for Ted Farnsworth, a longtime supporter who died in 2004.

O'Connell plans to be in attendance, strengthening the ties of the past 60 years and likely joking about his age.

"I used to say, 'Everybody will get old, but not Skeet O'Connell,'" he said. "But these years are catching up with me. Don't grow old."

For 93 years, Skeet O'Connell hasn't.

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