

Rick Insell

By Sadie Fowler

Basketball and horses are both synonymous with Shelbyville, and the person tied to the success of both of those connecting words passionately serves on the Celebration Board of Directors. In fact, despite all of Coach Rick Insell's success in the world of basketball — including his June 2017 induction into the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame — his role on the Celebration Board remains a top tier priority.

Insell recalled the day he was asked to serve on the Board as one of the biggest honors of his life. He was in Knoxville, busy with basketball duties, when a call came in from the late David L. Howard, long-time industry leader and founder of Dabora (publishers of Walking Horse Report).

"When he calls you answer," said Insell, fondly reflecting on the memory. "You don't put him on hold. I get chill bumps thinking about it because it was such a huge honor bestowed on me, just like being inducted into the Hall of Fame ... (Saying yes) was a given. It was one of the biggest things that ever happened to me, to be honest with you."

No coach in Middle Tennessee women's basketball history has produced the success that Insell has in his 12 seasons at Middle Tennessee State University. Since his arrival there in 2005, after a prized history as head coach of Shelbyville's Golden Eaglettes, Insell has led the Lady Raiders to nine NCAA Tournament appearances, three WNITs, coached five All-Americans and grew four WNBA Draft picks.

Insell attended his first Celebration in 1958. He was living in Woodbury at the time, 45 minutes away from Shelbyville. Thus, when he took the coaching position for the Shelbyville Eaglettes in the late 1970s — the role that launched both his and the program's legacy — he was more than familiar with the horse show. "I was already aware of the Celebration but by then we were hooked," he said.

Rick, alongside wife Deb, enjoyed making their life in Shelbyville, as Rick coached, Deb ran her own business here, and together they built their own family. They dove into the community, attended the horse show every night, and full-embraced every bit of all of it.

During the early years, Insell was approached by Frank Bobo about working the Celebration sale, which led to him becoming familiar with many trainers and owners, developing friendships along the way.



"Just about everybody in the industry I knew," he said. "In the late 80s David (Howard) and John T. (Bobo) asked me to become a part of the association, so that's kind of how that all happened."

Insell said the success he was experiencing as head coach during the 80s, 90s and 2000s went hand-in-hand with that of Howard's, who was building his own business and also raising a family in Shelbyville with his wife Mary.

"One of the big things for me is when I met David," Insell said. "He had come into Shelbyville with Dabora, his kids were (young), and Deb and I would see him and Mary at the horse show. He was busy with his involvement in the industry but I remember he always went out of his way to make us feel at home."

Again, Insell said it was an easy yes and a huge honor to join the Board. It's a role he's passionately served in ever since.

"What strikes me the most is, as an outsider, Coach is not only very talented but he's very passionate with whatever he does," said Mike Inman, current Celebration CEO. "Whether it's his commitment to MTSU or the Celebration — and this probably comes from his early days coaching in Shelbyville — he's passionate about whatever he does. Everything he is committed to he's committed to making successful. Rick does this not for Rick, but for Shelbyville and The Celebration."



Coach Insell is surrounded by family during an MTSU game in which he was recognized following the Hall of Fame announcement.

Since those early years in the late 1970s, Rick and Deb have attended the horse show every night. His family, now grown to include grandchildren, shares his enthusiasm for the event. Their sons are Tom, Kyle and Matt. Tom is married to the former Sarah Stewart and they have three children, Carter, Caroline and Charley. Kyle is married to the former Megan Parsons, and Matt is currently the head women's basketball coach at the University of Mississippi.

"Each of my three sons have their own boxes and all three are very much involved," he said.

He takes the role seriously but also enjoys the event, fully understanding its significance to the community and its impact to his own family traditions. The people, the atmosphere — both make the horse show something hard to describe unless you've experienced it for yourself, he said.

"When it's over on that last Saturday night and you're walking to your car you have the feeling that you can't wait for next year and you just hope it never goes away," he said.

Coach said his role as a Celebration Board member carries a different type of stress than coaching basketball players.

Seeing the show carry on is of utmost importance to him.

"The Celebration is big," he said. "It's big for Shelbyville and big for the entire state of Tennessee. As a (Board member) you want to make sure you have a good show. That requires taking care of the people and the trainers. You want a good show and also want to make sure all the horses showing are compliant. We've invested a lot of money to make sure it continues."

What comes after August for our Celebration's favorite coach? Insell's quick to point out coaching the Lady Raiders is a 12 month a year job and he's not slowing down anytime soon. His next goal at hand is making sure they get into the Final Four. While embarking on that journey he'll continue enjoying life down the road from home court.

"I've been blessed to have Shelbyville," he said. "The emphasis in basketball there was unlike anything else in the country so to be able to go down the road to my alma mater ... I get the best of both worlds. Shelbyville and Bedford County play a big role in our lives and all the lives in Middle Tennessee."

Hall of Fame Inductee

In Insell's 12 years at MTSU, the seven-time hall of fame inductee established a track record unlike any other in the Lady Raiders' rich women's basketball history, while also creating lofty expectations. Entering his 13th season leading his alma mater's women's basketball program, Insell has also positioned Middle Tennessee as one of the winningest programs nationally.

Insell, the program's all-time winningest coach with 298 victories, is among the nation's leaders in his profession. Middle Tennessee's .766 winning percentage over the last five years is 18th nationally, and the program's .686 overall winning percentage is 17th best all-time.

Insell is one of five Division I head coaches to average 25 wins per season with at least 10 years head coaching experience.

A 1977 MTSU graduate, Insell built a high school girls' basketball dynasty at Shelbyville Central High School. He guided the Golden Eaglettes to a record 10 Tennessee Secondary Schools Athletic Association (TSSAA) Class 3A state championship and two USA Today national championships, compiling a sparkling 775-148 (84 percent) ledger during his 28-year tenure.

On the court success is not the only concern of Insell, as he has made sure his players get the job done in the classroom as well. His Shelbyville teams received the TSSAA Distinguished Award for Academic Success from 1989 to 2000, an award based on team grade point average.