

Oklahoma Sports Hall of Fame: It's a family affair

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The 2009 Oklahoma Sports Hall of Fame inductees, top from left Ted Owens, Jon Kolb, Bob Tway, and Cal McLish, seated, pose together on Monday. Photo By Nate Billings, The Oklahoman

Jon Kolb thought long and hard about who he wanted introducing him at the Oklahoma Sports Hall of Fame induction ceremony.

There were celebrated teammates and legendary coaches and longtime friends. There were men such as Ron Freeman and Terry Brown and Gary Southern.

"I thought about each one of those," Kolb said Monday evening, "but I just kept coming back to the boys."

His boys.

On a night the hall welcomed its latest class at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, athletic achievement was honored and sports success was celebrated. It was a black-tie event. It was a packed house.

It was a family affair, too.

Kolb was introduced by his two youngest sons, Tanner and Caleb. Had his oldest son been living in the U.S. instead of overseas, Kolb would've had three presenters.

His boys don't remember when their dad was a standout football player at Oklahoma State or with the Pittsburgh Steelers, but Kolb has no bigger fans.

"For me," Tanner said, "my dad was my hero."

No doubt there were plenty of folks around the steel mills and the hard-scrabble towns of Pennsylvania who felt the same way. Kolb was a man, after all, who started on four Super Bowl championship teams during the Steelers' dominance of the '70s.

Consider the eight other men who started on all of those title teams — Terry Bradshaw, Mean Joe Greene, Franco Harris, Jack Lambert, Rocky Bleier, L.C. Greenwood, Mel Blount and Jack Ham.

Kolb was part of that core, and he became part of the lore.

Those Steelers were beloved in Pittsburgh. Like the Sooners of the Switzer era or the Cowboys of the Sanders years, the players were icons and idols.

None more perfectly reflected the blue-collar city in which the Steelers played than Kolb. He was a left tackle, a guy who had the toughest but most unsung job on the team.

Do your job, and no one notices.

Screw it up, and everyone does.

When someone decided to name an all-time Steeler team a few years back, Kolb was one of only 33 players selected. This is a franchise, by the way, founded in 1933.

"Some people still recognize him," youngest son, Caleb, said. "We'll be eating dinner, and they'll come over."

Kolb grants every request and signs every autograph. He believes it's right. He considers it important.

Nothing, though, has been important than his family.

He made pancakes for the boys when they were younger, doing them in the shape of Mickey Mouse when the boys were younger. He coached their football teams. He watched their wrestling matches.

One day after work, Kolb hopped in the car and drove all night to one of Tanner's college wrestling tournaments. After watching him win the whole thing, he drove home without sleeping.

He was awake for 36 of 40 hours.

"But I was just so wired," Kolb said.

He has passed on that importance of family.

Not so long ago, Caleb called Tanner. The younger brother, who will be a freshman this season on the Nebraska wrestling team, was eight hours away getting ready for a tournament. When Caleb arrived, he found that he had no coach.

"The way I was raised," Tanner said, "there was no question what I was going to do."

He was on the road as soon as possible.

"That's not me; that's him," Tanner said of his dad. "We are such a close family. Family has always been No. 1, and still to this day, it's that way."

Two weeks ago, Kolb took his sons rock climbing. Last week, they went kayaking.

"They're my life," Kolb said.

No wonder he asked them to be his wingmen on Monday night.

"Somebody said the other day, 'It doesn't matter what your sons think of you. What matters is what other people think of your sons,' " said Kolb, who bear hugged both of his boys after their introductions. "I have been blessed with both."