By Pete Dufour

There must have been something in water at the Earl Crabbe Gym in the early 1970's.

Upstairs, the1971-72 Placer basketball team was having perhaps one the finest seasons in Placer history. Undefeated at home and in the Sierra Foothill League, they went on to the championship game of the first-ever Sac-Joaquin Section playoffs and were ranked No.1 in "Superior California" by the Sacramento Bee.

Downstairs, in the Earl Crabbe's dusty, musty basement with torn mats laid helter-skelter on a concrete floor, the 1971-72 wrestling team toiled to take its place atop all squads in the Sacramento area with a team dubbed The Wild Bunch. This team was also ranked No. 1 by the Bee.

The basketball team, under coach Tom Barry, was inducted into the Placer Athletic Hall of Fame in 2018 for their 26-3 record. This year, the wrestling team will be inducted into the PHS Athletic Hall of Fame on April 27 in a ceremony in the school's iconic Earl Crabbe Gym.

The wrestlers, under coach Bill Flake, posted a 15-0 dual meet record, won the Sierra Foothill League and Sac-Joaquin sub-section championships.

Flake had been building the program since the mid 1960's. He had found success with earlier wrestlers such as Placer Hall of Famer Steve Stratton and Doug Clark. The team had won Sierra Foothill League titles and even a "sub-section" championship the year before. But the Wild Bunch of 1971-72 brought the Hillmen to a No. 1 ranking and solidified Placer's reputation, upon which other teams would thrive in years to come.

Led by heavyweight Placer Hall of Famer Gary Anderson, the team of sophomores, juniors and seniors was a perfect 15-0 in dual matches and won several tournaments before winning sub-sections. Several wrestlers went on to Northern California championships. Anderson would go on to win the first ever true state championship competition the following year.

Seniors Bill Hanley, Bill Johnson, Pat Chapman, Randy Bailey, Dave Stouder, Larry Lyles and Tom Morris were supported by an exceptional junior class of Anderson, Dick Emard, Blake Chandler, Jim Jordan, Bob Cunningham and Stan Domen. At the 95-lb and 104-lb class Terry Deen and Jeff Stadel competed as stellar sophomores.

The team's accomplishments were staggering. Anderson, Bailey, Deen, Domen, Chapman, Johnson, and Hanley all had 30 wins or more. Nearly every wrestler in the lineup won the SFL and sub-section titles.

The burly Hanley was the enforcer at the 191-lb weight class, and compiled a team high 39-2 won-loss record. He was as quick as he was strong and fearless. Anderson was 37-3-1 and Domen was 37-4, placing 6th at the Nor Cal championships. As a team Placer won the El Dorado, Woodland and Placer invitational tournaments, to go along with their sub-section tournament title. The team brought home nearly 60 medals from tournaments.

"Coach Flake had us believing we could not be beaten, and he worked us hard in practice," said Bailey. "The seniors and juniors wrestled together. We were a pretty tight bunch, and we had your back on the mat, on campus and around town. Flake made us a team."

Jordan, who wrestled three years for the Hillmen and later coached wrestling at Mira Loma High School said of the team, "You have to understand: Everything we accomplished was because of Bill Flake. He instilled a street fighter mentality in us. He was a master motivator, teaching us we could accomplish great things in our lives."

Anderson credited Flake's enthusiastic head gear slaps before each match as a key motivator. "During tournaments, when there were a lot of matches going on, he couldn't always be at the start of your match, and you wanted that headgear slap. I didn't know what to do so I would slap my own head gear!"

"There are thousands of us who wrestled in high school and college who owe a debt to Bill and his group of dedicated coaches," added Anderson. "With this team he put wrestling on the map, and with it, all the Placer teams."

Others who contributed heavily to the varsity squad through practices, fill in replacements, and challenge matches include Ron Roybal, Kevin McCool, Lane Parker and Carlos Porter. Members of the team also excelled in other sports.

Porter was an outstanding wide receiver on the football team and was part of the school record 440 relay team in track. Anderson was an outstanding thrower in track and was an all-league football player, as was Hanley. Chapman set a school record with a 41-yard field goal, out of the hold of Stouder. Jordan was a star running back his senior year. Cunningham, Stadel, Lyles, and Johnson all excelled in football.

The Athletic Hall of Fame ceremony will be held in the Earl Crabbe Gym at Placer High School on April 27. A Meet and Greet reception will begin at 6 pm followed by the induction ceremony at 7 pm.

Tickets for the reception cost $25 until April 15, and $35 after, and are available online at placerathletichalloffame.org.

The 7 pm ceremony is free of charge to the public.