When a basketball coach gets hired at Placer High School, the first thing he needs to learn is the importance of the annual Kendall Arnett Tournament. When Wendell Witt first experienced the event as a new coach on campus, he was blown away by the excitement and tradition of the event.

Coming from Southern California, he was used to "Lots of pre-Christmas tournaments before the league season begins, but they were no big deal with measly crowds." The Kendall, as it is familiarly known, with its packed standing room only crowds, extra bleachers, pep band, signs, and rituals, "was huge! Much bigger than I thought," he admitted.

He would end up coaching Placer in 11 Kendall tournaments, winning seven of them with two runner-up results.

For his overall coaching experience at Placer, Witt will be inducted into the PHS Athletic Hall of Fame on April 25 in a ceremony at the school's iconic Earl Crabbe Gym.

The mustachioed coach arrived at Placer in 1979 after 13 years of coaching in Southern California, where he was named Orange County Coach of the Year at Los Alamitos High School.

He coached two years of Junior Varsity for Placer before taking over the varsity reins from legendary coach Tom Barry. "Tom set the standard," Witt said, "But I never felt pressure other than what I applied to myself. Tom was humble about what he had accomplished and was very supportive."

The only pressure Witt admitted to having came during his first Kendall Arnett Tournament, when he found his team down by 20 points at halftime of the championship game to rival Nevada Union. Knowing the importance of the tourney to Placer and Auburn, he felt he had to come up with something. So he and assistant coach Terry Tangney decided to change strategy and to run and speed up the game in the second half. The tactic worked, as the Hillmen won by 10 points, to complete a 30 point turn-around.

Witt coached the Hillmen varsity basketball squad for 11 years, compiling a 205-117 record. Along the way, his 1988 team won the school's first Sac-Joaquin CIF Section championship. But the title came in a most unexpected way.

Placer finished fourth in the tough Capital Athletic League that season, but were still invited to the playoffs. They beat Sonora, the top-seeded team, 65-53, and then downed East Union 50-49 to claim the crown.

But for Witt, it came with a loss of sorts. He had promised his team that if they won Sections, he would cut off his mustache. At a rally in front of the entire student body a week later, students shouted "Shave the 'Stash'" and the coach complied. "It hasn't been shaved off since," he remembers with a smile.

The Hillmen advanced to the Northern California playoffs where they surprised Foothill of Fremont 64-60 before running into an old school rival, Jefferson. The Daly City team had been a mainstay of the Kendall Arnett Tournament in the early 1970s and split two classic contests with Tom Barry's teams.

The Grizzlies edged Placer 60-59 and went on to win the California state championship.

Witt gives credit to the coaches in his program for their help and expertise. "I had great coaches, especially Terry Tangney my assistant coach. We were more like co-coaches. I appreciated his loyalty and commitment to the program." He also credited Junior Varsity coach Mike Duda, long-time freshman coach Doug Stryker, and trainer Dave Timpone.

He enjoyed his 15 years at Placer. “The staff was just filled with great people, and sports was huge. It was a fun place to teach and coach. (Principal) Jug Covich had a lot to do with it, It was a great environment.

During his first summer in Auburn, Witt created a summer basketball camp for third to ninth graders as way to get more youth involved in the sport. In an interesting side note, Witt mentioned that three of Placer’s current coaches, Nate Swesey, Greg Robinson, and Cole Miller, all attended his summer camps as third graders.

Witt, who retired from teaching in 2003, also coached softball at Placer.

He came by coaching naturally, having played football, basketball, and tennis at Glendale Hoover High School. He was captain of his basketball and football teams and an all-league receiver two years in a row.

He earned a scholarship to Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington where he played wide receiver on the football team that won the league title every year he played. In his sophomore year, the team went undefeated and won the NAIA championship, and was inducted into the school’s Hall of Fame.

Witt is married to his current wife wife Jackie, He has three adult children with his previous wife Kathleen — David, Erin, and Julie. All are Placer grads and all were involved in sports at the school. He also has six grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

The Athletic Hall of Fame ceremony will be held in the Earl Crabbe Gym on April 25. A 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.