OBITUARY

JOHN TRACY MEHR (1928-2020)

John Tracy Mehr, a longtime Amherst College football and golf coach, died at his home in Hoschton, Georgia on February 26, 2020. He was 91. His life was an inspiring story of love, loyalty to his family and faith, personal accomplishment, and service to others. He leaves behind a devoted family and a large community of grateful friends and former colleagues and students whose lives he enriched.

Known to friends as Tracy, he was simply “Coach” to countless men and women he mentored over more than four decades. The values he imparted on and off the fields and fairways — through his words and actions — are best captured in his beautiful penmanship on a “Post-it” note affixed to his computer screen: “Code: God, Honor, Courage, Character, Integrity, Duty (To God, Family and Country)”. He adhered to those principles throughout his life.

Growing up in Milwaukee, Tracy played football, basketball, and golf. He caddied to help with family finances and to pick up the techniques of more experienced players. With the strokes he learned, Tracy and his father, Jack, won three Wisconsin State Golf Association’s (WSGA) father-son championships during the mid-1940s. In later years, he didn’t dwell on the hardware they had won, but drew great comfort from his remembrances of having been able to lean on each other during competition. Tracy also won the WSGA's Junior Boy's Championship during his high school senior year in 1946. He earned a football scholarship to the College of the Holy Cross where, during the football off-season, he and his golf teammates, including the late PGA pro Paul Harney, helped restore its golf program to prominence during the immediate years following World War II.

After graduating in 1950, Tracy did graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Finance, served honorably as a U.S. Marine during the Korean War, explored his faith as a seminarian, and continued to tinker with his golf game. Eager for a career path and interested in helping others, he seized an opportunity to become head football coach at Georgetown Preparatory School in Washington, D.C. and, thereafter, at Loyola High School in Baltimore. His five seasons at Loyola were highlighted by an undefeated season, a pair of Maryland Scholastic Championships and three State Catholic Titles. Most importantly, it was in Washington, D.C. that he met the love of his life, Carol Lawless.

Tracy’s early successes led to an assistant football coach position at Boston College during the early 1960s, where he also earned an M.B.A. Upon accepting an assistant football coach appointment at Amherst College, Tracy and Carol moved to western Massachusetts in the mid-1960s “never looking back but grateful about the prior blessings along the way.” Tracy coached seven sports at Amherst — most notably football and men’s and women’s golf. He was particularly proud to earn tenure as Professor of Physical Education, which affirmed the breadth and depth of his teaching methods and contributions made to the physical, emotional and social development of student-athletes.
Freddie Scott ’74, one of a rare breed of Division III players who went on to a NFL career, credits Tracy with preparing him to play at the highest level as a wide receiver by pushing him physically and mentally after practice while working on the psychological aspects of the game, such as intimidating defensive backs. He also filled the role of the father and stepfather Scott lost early in his life. “I saw all the great attributes in a man,” Scott said. “I consider him not just a coach but a father figure who shaped my being.”

During his tenure alongside head coaches Jim Ostendarp, Jack Siedlecki, and E.J. Mills, Amherst football teams had a 173-87-4 record and won 10 Little Three Championships. In his final year of coaching (2000), Amherst won both the Little Three (besting Williams and Wesleyan) and was co-winner of the first-ever New England Small College Athletic Conference Football Championship. Over the years Tracy received numerous awards for his contributions to high school and college football, including the prestigious John Baronian Lifetime Contribution to Football Award conferred by the Gridiron Club of Greater Boston. For many years Tracy also coached the Amherst men’s golf team and launched the women’s golf program which later won the 1990 National Golf Coaches Association Division II-III Championship.

Upon Tracy’s retirement from Amherst in 2001 and inspired by his impact on young men and women, particularly those who had been thrown a few undeserved obstacles, Walter Donovan ’85 and other alumni created and funded The Mehr Scholarship Fund. This Fund supports the education of Amherst students Tracy affectionately called “diamonds in the rough”. “As a coach, teacher, mentor, and friend, Tracy took his work to a higher level beyond the playing fields, the court, and the golf course,” Donovan said. “He was more interested in what we did after Amherst than the accomplishments during our four years on campus and remained a constant pillar of guidance and support throughout our lives.”

Golf was always a part of Tracy’s life. During the summer of 1971, in the midst of helping Carol raise five young children and painting his home, Tracy commuted to courses hosting the Massachusetts Golf Association’s Amateur Golf Championship. Wearing sneakers periodically because of blisters developed during the tournament’s final 36 holes played at Taconic Golf Club in Williamstown, MA, Tracy became the first player from Western Massachusetts to win the state title. In 2011, on the 40th anniversary of his win, over fifty of his former players and his children joined Tracy for a ceremonial final round at Taconic and jubilantly cheered him after he calmly sank a 15-foot putt on the final hole. The Mass Amateur victory opened doors for Tracy to play in the British Amateur and the Senior British Amateur. Throughout his years, he played on the finest courses in the U.S. and elsewhere — often for free through friendships he made or his sheer nerve to “walk on.” In 2013, Tracy was inducted into the Western Massachusetts Golf Hall of Fame.
Beyond the playing fields, Tracy had many interests. He spent hours cultivating a cottage garden, arguing over plant placement with his wife. He read extensively and engaged in local government matters serving on the Amherst school board; and he was a frequent writer of letters to newspaper editors (much to the chagrin of his wife and children), using the same pointed, direct language he used as a coach.

His interests, however, never got in the way of time spent with his wife, four daughters and son. As a father, his quiet love was seen through action instead of words. He instilled in each a commitment to education, hard work and family while also ensuring each could throw a spiral and had a passable golf swing. His love and commitment to his wife of 61 years, Carol, is known by many as a love for the ages. Together, they raised their family, toured the world, launched a travel business, debated politics and cared — with a deep love and respect — for each other. After retirement, he and Carol faithfully wintered and joined friends in Hilton Head, S.C. Tracy’s only regret in life was that his impending death meant leaving Carol.

During the latter stages of his life, many spoke about a certain nobility to Tracy — not of rank, but of character seen in his simple decency and goodness, in his deflection of praise to others following a victory, in his compassionate arm on a shoulder after a defeat, and in his uncommon courtesy to listen. When he did speak, his words often carried meaning beyond that moment in time. Monica Romano ’81, the first captain of Amherst’s women’s golf program, spoke for those many in expressing, “We’ve lost his physical voice but his words will continue to lead many of us.”

Tracy is survived by his wife, Carol, his daughters, Barbara Mehr, Mary Lange (Joe), Kate Mehr (Jon Martin) and Kristen Mehr and his son, John Tracy Mehr (Mary), and his nine grandchildren and great grandchildren: Brett Lange, Finn Gaston, Kelsey Lange, Kelly Mehr, JT Mehr, Jack Mehr, Riley Gaston, Sarah Martin and Emily Martin.

A Celebration of Life service is being planned for this coming fall in Amherst. The funeral service will be private. Should friends wish, a memorial donation in Tracy’s honor can be made to The Mehr Scholarship Fund, Advancement Office, Amherst College, PO Box 5000, Amherst, MA 01002.