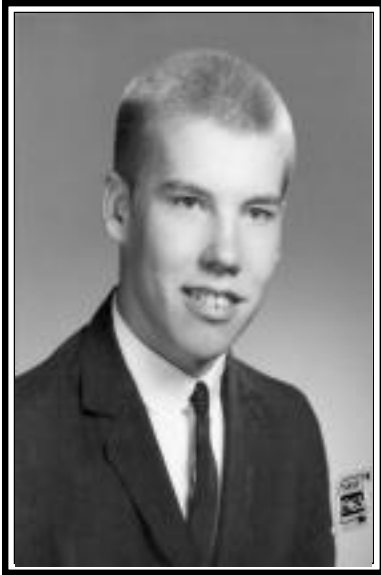


John Sultan - 1965



Around 1953 the Fitchburg YMCA, which had been located on Main Street since the 1890's, announced that it was going to construct a new facility on Wallace Avenue just a few steps from Fitchburg High School. Immediately families began to enroll their children into the various swim programs, which were being offered by the YMCA, and thus was created a basis for the outstanding swimming squads, which competed for FHS in the 1960's. One of those kids was a blonde-haired kid named John Sultan, who would go on to become the greatest swimmer in the history of the Red Raiders, and who this evening we are honored to induct into the FHS Athletic Hall of Fame.

Like many of the kids of the 1950's and 1960's John came out of B.F. Brown Junior High School hoping to compete in more than one sport. He was a kid with excellent athletic abilities and instincts, who competed on the freshmen basketball team, and was a four-year member of the outstanding track and field squads. In fact John was such a good high jumper, that he qualified for the state track meet in

senior season. He received varsity track letters for all four of his years at FHS-1962 through 1965. But it was John's prowess in the swimming pool, which made him one of the most honored athletes of that brilliant Class of 1965.

As early as the 1963 swim season John Sultan began to make a name for himself as an up and coming star for the Red and Gray, when he qualified for the state championship in his specialty the 100 yard freestyle. Although a place on the victory stand eluded John in his sophomore season, he had sent out a message to his opponents and coaches across the Commonwealth: "watch out for the Sultan kid from Fitchburg." Under the encouragement of his young coach, Vince Herring, who was just out of FHS himself as a member of the Class of 1960, John really began to move forward as one of the state's elite swimmers. And as John improved, so did the Red and Gray swim squad, which became a major force itself. Joining John on the Raider squad were kids like John Marion, John Harnell, Jeff Wilkinson, Pete Hertel, Les Neeham and Edgar Peay, who were improving their times throughout the 1963 swim season. At the end of the 1963 season the FHS junior was poised to make a name for himself at the state level. In the Eastern Massachusetts competition, John finished second in the 200 yard Individual Medley and third in the 400 yard freestyle, and then in the All State Championship held one week later, he finished fourth and sixth in the same two events. Those results had been outstanding for the 11th grade swimmer from FHS, but John was determined that his individual times would be vastly improved in his final campaign for the Red and Gray. John and the rest of his teammates felt that, the team as a whole could be a serious contender for the overall state championship.

But that team goal received a serious setback when their outstanding breast stroker Jeff Wilkinson left FHS to attend Deerfield Academy. But this seemed to spur on John and his coach Vince Herring to greater efforts, and his times dramatically improved as the 1965 season approached. Knowing full well that his senior-laden squad even without Wilkinson was a potential statewide powerhouse Coach Herring loaded up the schedule with very strong competition. When I recently spoke to John about that 1965 season, he related the story that the FHS squad knew they were the real deal when they whipped the defending state champion, Boston English, within the friendly confines of their YMCA pool on Wallace Avenue.

Late in February of 1965 the Raiders took on their dreaded nemesis, GHS, at the Wildcats home pool, Greenwood Memorial in a competition, which John still remembers very vividly forty-five years after

it occurred. The overall meet was back and forth, so that the final event of the day, the 200-yard freestyle relay was going to decide the meet. John was usually the final swimmer on that relay leg, but Coach Herring had needed him in the 400-yard free style race held just moments before the relay. John had won the 400 to give FHS a very narrow lead in the competition, but he was physically exhausted, and Coach Herring felt that the other members of the relay team could pick up the slack. In a terrific back and forth race the Wildcat anchorman Dave Phillips out reached FHS' Steve Rogers to give the Wildcats a dramatic dual meet victory. Despite John's two terrific victories in the 400 freestyle and the 200 medley, the victory over Gardner had eluded the Red and Gray once again.

Now it was onto the State Championships held at the University of Massachusetts, where John and his teammates sought a little revenge against the Wildcats as they vied for the state title. Our inductee, John Sultan had a fabulous performance at the state's as he became the first Red Raider to ever capture a state championship with a tremendous victory in the 100 yard freestyle, and he backed up that victory with second place in the 200 yard freestyle. Once again the meet came down to the 200 yard relay where FHS finished third while Holyoke finished sixth to capture enough points to win the team title over FHS 40½ points to 38½ points in the closest state championship ever held up to that date. John recently pointed out that one of his team's tri-captain, John Marion was disqualified by a technicality in the breaststroke semi- finals to deny the Red Raiders almost guaranteed points in that event finals. So close, yet so far and John Sultan clearly remembers that team loss even more than the individual victory some forty-five years later.

So it was that John Sultan's athletic career was concluding as graduation approached in June 1965. But there was one more athletic event, which John would participate in at FHS, the Junior-Senior Relay. In 1965 the Junior-Senior Relay was huge at Fitchburg High School and the Class of 1965 was loaded. Led by the like of Barney Keenan and Rod Tulonen, sixty-five had its sights on the long time team record set by the Class of 1933. John gladly joined the relay team as they romped to a new all time relay record with the thirty runners averaging a 2:17 per man, which was truly amazing. This was a record, which will live forever since the event is no longer held in the half-mile format. And now it was onto East Carolina University located in Greenville, North Carolina, John had established eight records while competing for the Red and Gray, but his career at ECU was even more outstanding.

John Sultan was the three time All Southern Conference All Star (1967-1969) while capturing eight individual conference championships and establishing five school records in individual races. He was a College Division All American in his junior season at East Carolina and was elected team captain for the 1969 squad. In that same senior year John was awarded an Outstanding Collegiate Athletic National Award for his efforts at East Carolina. But his swimming accomplishments did not conclude when John graduated from college. He remained in the pool as a swimming coach and water polo coach in California at the high school and college level, and of course that kept John in excellent physical shape, which led to Master's swimming where John became a national leader. Between 1983 to 2011 John had been a five time All American at the various age-based competitions, he has been a three time Master National Champion while establishing six World Records and was a Bronze medalist at the World Master's Championship in 1992.

Following graduation from ECU, John got into sales and marketing for numerous cheese and floral companies all across the United States while continuing to coach swimming. He and his wife Deborah (Gagnon) from nearby Pepperell eventually landed in California where they raised two daughters, Sonya and Grace who have graciously presented them with three granddaughters Lily, Sadie and Marky. Today John is retired but of course, he still swims and plays a little golf while actively supporting the Lions Club in Fresno, California.

Congratulations John Sultan for your induction into the Fitchburg High School Athletic Hall of Fame. Excellence in the sport of swimming took place for a very short period of time in the 1960's, but the efforts of kids like John Sultan, Mike McNamara, Jeff Wilkinson and John Marion were certainly of the quality which calls for induction in the FHS Hall of Fame. John represents a truly unique brand of FHS athlete, so once again congratulations.