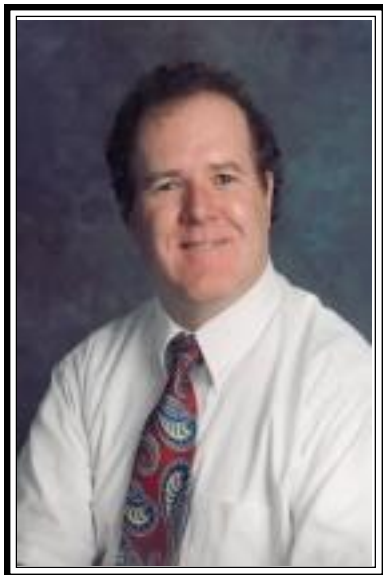


## Stephen “Shifty” LeBlanc



In the early 1960's Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys wrote that one had to be "true to your school" in one of the many songs which American youth of the Kennedy era took as their youthful credo. Steve LeBlanc of the FHS Class of 1966 must have been a true fan of the Beach Boys and their California sound for he was really "true to his school" for nearly 35 years as a teacher and coach at Fitchburg High School. If one went to an athletic event at which FHS was competing between 1971 and 2004, one could be sure to see Steve LeBlanc either showing a sprinter how to place their feet in the starting blocks for an upcoming sprint, collecting tickets on Thanksgiving morning at the Circle Street gates as thousands of the faithful poured through the gates, or showing a photographer which basketball player should be highlighted for The Boulder, FHS' beloved yearbook. The general public sometimes refers to school teachers as 8:30am to 2:30pm people, who get their summers off while getting paid. Those critics should have been forced to follow Steve around for a few days during the years from 1971 through 2004. Those same critics could probably only keep up the pace for a few days before they collapsed in exhaustion.

One of Steve LeBlanc's very favorite places in this whole universe had to be Crocker Field. "Shifty" as he was called by one and all, probably should have rented a room in Mr. Crocker's clubhouse. It would have saved him lots of times, and lots of money for gas mileage. In 1971 the United State Congress passed the Title IX Act and altered athletics in America forever. Now the young female athletes of the United States could compete on a level playing field with their male counter parts, which resulted in athletic careers for the likes of Paula Goodchild, Lauren Maxfield, Robin King, Pam Briggs, Cindy Coleman, Lynsday Angus, Sara Thomas, Shelley Richards and hundreds of local females in the north county region. Steve almost immediately jumped at the opportunity to coach young ladies for the Fitchburg High School track and field program. For a quarter of a century "Shifty" was the head coach for the FHS outdoor and indoor track programs, but more importantly he became a major advocate for his girls, and all the female athletes of Central Massachusetts. Steve fought the good fight so that his lady athletes would get their fair share of the pie.

This entailed thousands of hours of practice at Crocker Field in the cold and damp days of April and May in the New England spring. And it also included countless hours of practice in the corridors at Fitchburg High School's long corridors in the Academy Street facility throughout the 1980's and 1990's. It also meant early Saturday morning meets in the dead of winter at locations like Marlboro High and South High in Worcester. That's tough dedicated work for anybody, and Steve was up to the task for which the females of FHS should be forever grateful. Steve would work the Friday night basketball games at the Brickyard, where "Grutch's" guys took on the best, usually coming away with a victory. The fans went to Slattery's to laugh with the public, and have a jolly good time. But Steve would be counting the gate receipts, getting the money to the bank and heading home to await that 5:30am alarm clock so that he could get his girls on the road for the 8:00 am dual meets or the 7:30am District Championships. That's being "true to your school!"

During the 1980's "Shifty" and his energetic assistant coach Kathy Eckley had quite a bit of success in the Mid-Wach League and in the District Championships in both indoor and outdoor seasons with great athletes like Louella Earley, Danielle Holland, Yolanda Lewis, Cindy Coleman, Karma Tousignant, Kim Crute, Anita Schoenig, Lori Lareau, Lisa Vitelli, Joanne Marshall and other fine competitors. But there was always that "800 pound gorilla in the room" called Shrewsbury High girls track and FHS along with the rest of Central Massachusetts could never overcome the Colonials. The FHS girls would win individual events in the championships, but the depth of the Colonial machine always gave Shrewsbury the upper hand.

A terrific FHS squad during the 1983 indoor season clobbered all their opponents with thirty plus point victories, but their depth particularly in the long distance events. But “Shifty” and his ladies never stopped trying to knock Shrewsbury off their perch.

Steve LeBlanc had a special place in his heart for those two indoor and outdoor track squads, which represented FHS in the 1982-1983 seasons. Although this group of girls would finish second to Shrewsbury in both the indoor and outdoor seasons to Shrewsbury, “Shifty” has always liked to point to the quality of the competitors on those squads. Girls like the Earley sisters; Louella and Leona, Yolanda Lewis, Lori Lareau, Kim Crute and Lisa Vitelli could run, throw or jump with the very best in Central Massachusetts and even at the state level. Steve is quick to point out that FHS captured 3<sup>rd</sup> place in the Martin Luther King Relays in 1983. This event had schools from throughout the Commonwealth, and he always said his kids did not have to take a backseat to any squad. That’s what an advocate always does for his kids. When the FHS Hall of Fame was first begun, “Shifty” want to make sure that ladies of FHS track and field would receive their honored place upon the Wall of Fame. He fought for Louella Earley and Cindy Coleman-Donelan to become members of the Hall just like Dennis LeBlanc, Craig Cormier or Joe Hannon. And today those ladies are honored members of the Hall.

When I talked recently to Steve in his home in Florida, he emphasized strongly to me not to forget his indoor track squad of 2001, which had broken Shrewsbury’s long winning streak in the Mid- Wach League. He was very proud of the efforts of his kids as they rolled through the league undefeated and captured the Mid-Wach Championships which was a first for FHS. That squad had super talent like the enthusiastic Martha Oliver who could win first in the shot put or the 50-yard dash, “Kate the Great” Guenette who was unbeatable in the hurdles in her junior and senior seasons, whether it was indoor or outdoor. Oly Wirtz a fabulous middle distance runner and Sally Girouard who was a wonderful long distance runner for the Red and Gray. But “Shifty” did not want people to forget the other contributors like Crystal Andy , Kerry Kazanjian, Danica Forest, Caitlin Brennan, Angela Masciarelli and Jessica Blanchette, who helped make this truly unique team a champion.

Steve LeBlanc was much more than a coach and ticket manager during the twenty-five year period from 1975 through 2000. If a job needed to be done, and it would make the life of the kids better, Steve was there to do the job. During the fall months as the students walked into the cafeteria at FHS on Academy Street, one would see signs, extending along all the walls, cheering on the football team to capture a victory that Friday evening or Saturday afternoon. That was the work of the Booster Club and of course their sponsor was Steve LeBlanc, and then there was the organization of that unforgettable Thanksgiving Rally for the Turkey Day Classic, which was also directed by “Shifty” that was Mr. LeBlanc making the school a better place for the kids.

The Boulder was always loaded with the pictures of kids who wore the Red and Gray for FHS. Teams had their pictures taken, individuals had their pictures in the yearbook and also their thoughts on being a member of the team and there were also great action shots of the athletes. That was the work of “Shifty” and his loyal Boulder staff, creating memories for the future.

After receiving notification that he had been elected to the FHS Athletic Hall of Fame, Steve stated that as a teacher, coach and advisor his goals were to always serve my city, and especially the students and athletes of FHS. He stated that he always received tremendous pleasure teaching, coaching and advising. It was for this type of attitude the Hall of Fame takes great pleasure in welcoming Steve Leblanc into our midst. Thank you “Shifty” for everything you did for the kids at FHS.

Today “Shifty” is enjoying his well-earned retirement in Punta Gorda, Florida, with his wife Colleen, and says that those warm sunny days in January and February are just perfect. But Steve has not forgotten about his old high school; he has helped put the Hall of Fame program together for the last three inductions. He is still “true to his school” and his contributions to FHS and its kids have made him a welcome addition to the Hall of Fame. Congratulations Steve!