



**Your on the  
Street Reporter**



**Uyless Black**

**Hall of Fame**

## Hall of Fame

**November 13, 2012**

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. Tonight I attended a ceremony held at the Event Center in Lea County, New Mexico. My brother Tom was inducted into the Lea County Athletic Hall of Fame. Another product of the county, Ray Birmingham, was also an inductee. I'll assume Ray's fans are writing about him, so this report will focus on Tom.

This program was initiated in 2008 through Jim Harris and the Lea County Museum. For that year, eight people were inducted. Thereafter, two per year are selected.

Lea County is a very small part of America, both in geographical size and in population. But it has had its share of famous athletes. You may recognize the names of some of the members:

**Bill Bridges:** An all-American basketball player from the University of Kansas. He played 13 seasons in the National Basketball Association. He won an NBA Championship with the Warriors in 1975 and appeared in three All-Star Games. **Personal note:** In my senior year of high school, our local Lovington Wildcats team was being routed by our nemesis, the Hobbs Eagles. Our coach (Ross Black, my brother) put me in at the end of the game to help this bench warmer gain some experience. I had the dubious distinction of going up against Mr. Bridges on a couple of plays. I was small. Bill was very big. I went back to swimming. Bill went on to basketball fame.

**Tuffy Cooper:** A champion calf roper, and the (1950) National Intercollegiate Calf Roping Champion. He won the National Calf Roping Finals Championship at the Cow Palace in San Francisco with an overall score that was forty points more than the closest competitor. He is the father of two world champions and grandfather of a world champion.

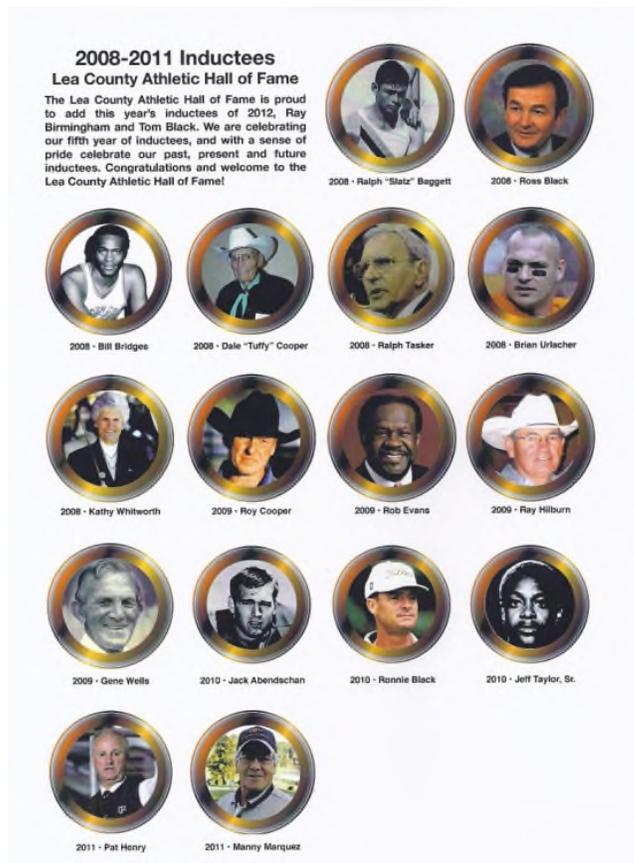
**Roy Cooper:** He won eight calf roping world titles and qualified for the National Finals Rodeo 32 times.

**Kathy Whitworth:** Kathy Whitworth has won more LPGA golf championships than any other woman on that tour. She was one of the first female professional golf stars and laid many bricks onto the LPGA foundation that exists today.

**Ralph Tasker:** He won twelve New Mexico Boys' State Basketball Championships. He held the national record for the most wins by a high school team. He was chosen for the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame Morgan Wooten Award. **Personal note:** In 1960 when I was playing with Ross and Tom on a basketball team in an industrial league game in Hobbs, I had an uncharacteristically high scoring night. As a point guard, I did not play the conventional position. I sort of meandered to the two far corners of the court. I was fed the ball and made four uncontested long shots in about two minutes. Shortly, the defense took note, and I remained scoreless thereafter. Coach Tasker was in the stands. Later he commented to my former coach (brother Ross) that Ross should have played me more as a shooter. The problem was I could shoot well, but I could not do much of anything else.

**Brian Urlacher:** An all-pro football player for the Chicago Bears (and a generous contributor to Lovington's athletic programs).

**Ross and Ronnie Black:** My brother and nephew respectively. Both men did pretty well in their chosen athletic endeavors. Their exploits are told in other reports.



**Figure 1. Hall of Fame Members.**

Figure 1 shows the members of this entourage, with Ray and Tom not yet depicted.

I like the old saying of, "I woke up one morning and found myself famous." The reason I like it is because of a counter saying, "I woke up on morning and found myself obscure." I like this second saying because it pertains to people who somehow think that once they achieve fame, it stays with them; even if they beat their spouses, abuse themselves, and generally insult their fans. The now obscure ass who played on "Two and a Half Men" comes to mind. I can't think of his name.

I know (or knew) five of the members of the Lea County Hall of Fame: Ross, Ronnie, Tom, Kathy Whitworth, and Ralph Tasker. I did not know Mr. Tasker well enough to judge his temperament, but I heard he was a kind and wise man. Kathy is a wonderful woman, a class act.

I can attest to the non-arrogant and unassuming natures of the other four people. Of these four stars, I think it fair to say Kathy is in a fame class by herself. But you would never know it. She carries her fame with dignity and a gentle demeanor.

I also think these four folks would subscribe to this thought by Emily Dickinson:<sup>1</sup>

*Fame is a bee  
It has a song---  
It has a sting---  
Ah, too, it has a wing.*

<sup>1</sup> Emily Dickinson, "Fame is a Bee," undated, in Leonard Roy Frank, *Quotationary* (New York: Random House, 2001), 268.



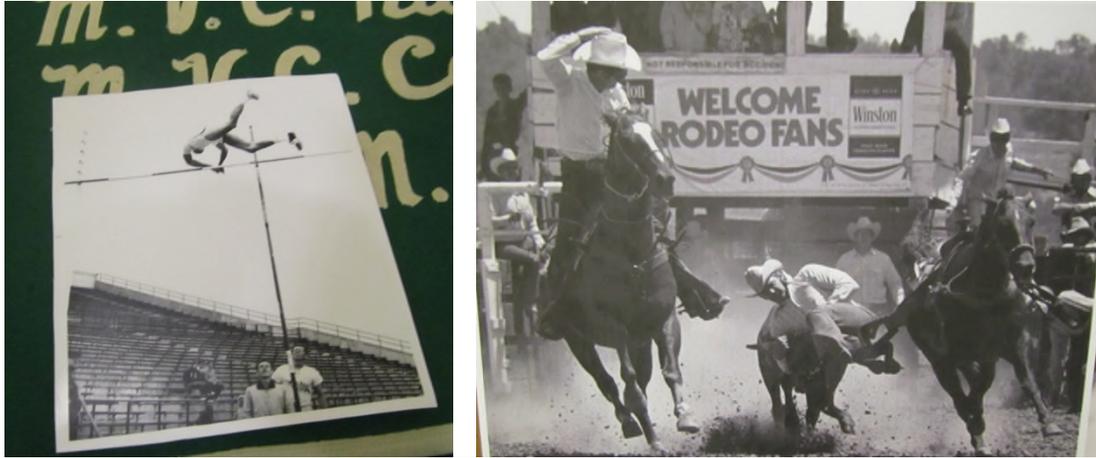
Figure 2. Kathy gets another putter.

Kathy was the guest speaker this evening. She spoke about her career and how she got her start in golf (by giving up tennis, which is beyond me) on a course in the small town of Jal, New Mexico. She told golfing tales that had the duffers in the audience transfixed. After her talk, she was presented with a putter by the folks who run this show, as seen in figure 2. I could not see why anyone would give this woman a putter! She has the pick of the lot. I learned from Tom that she played her entire career with one single putter, including of course her 88 wins. This gift was that type of putter. Can the golf readers fathom what I just said? I'm told weekend golfers change their putter every weekend, even during a round.

Tom is one of the best all-around athletes I have known; maybe the best and I've come across some pretty good ones. Here are examples of a few of his feats:

- ◆ He was a three-year letterman in football, basketball, and track in high school.
- ◆ During his two years at Howard College (Big Spring, Texas), he was defeated only one time in the pole vault at the National Track and Field Championships where as a freshman he finished second.
- ◆ He avenged that one loss in 1957 by winning State, District, Regional, and National Championships, earning All American status in doing so. He also medaled in the 120-yard high hurdles and ran on the silver medal winning 440 yard relay team.
- ◆ He was once entered in eight events at a one-day meet against Odessa College and won them all.
- ◆ He was a three-time Border Olympics pole vault champion.
- ◆ In 1956 and 1957 he qualified for six events in the National Junior College Track and Field Championships.
- ◆ While in Big Spring, Tom once scored 69 points in a basketball game.
- ◆ He was the Missouri Valley Conference pole vault champion and the North Texas Relays Champion.
- ◆ It was thought that Tom had a good chance to make the 1960 Olympic Decathlon Team, but a severe ankle injury eliminated that possibility.
- ◆ In 1960 Tom vaulted over 15 feet with a steel pole when 15 ft. 5 in. won the 1960 Olympic Gold Medal, and the world record was 15 ft.9 ¼ in.

- ◆ After college Tom was the A.A.U. Pole vault champion three times. He continued to compete until he started steer wrestling and decided the two activities were not a good mix. Observe Tom's actions in these sports:



**Figure 3. Tom in action.**

- ◆ He was president of the Western State Rodeo Association (WSRA) and the finals steer wrestling champion in 1964.
- ◆ He later became a member of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) and was two times the steer wrestling champion at the Lea County Fair and Rodeo.
- ◆ Tom started making furniture in the late 1960s and continued until he began making custom knives. His knives have won awards from coast to coast and are considered by many to be some of the best made. During this time, Tom was also restoring classic cars. He restored a 1956 Ford Thunderbird that was once given an unheard of “perfect score” at a prestigious classic car show.
- ◆ At the age of 41, he started playing golf and has shot his age or better 48 times.
- ◆ In 1967, he coached the track and field team at Del Norte High School in Albuquerque. This team went undefeated and won the state track and field championship.
- ◆ And for the most impressive feat of all: He was my assistant life guard at the Lovington Country Club swimming pool. There, he managed to save several lives without entering the water. Using his former skills as a roper, he successfully tossed lasso-attached life rings to the distressed swimmers. His most coveted trophy (from my perspective) is a Dixie Cup embossed with a felt marker homage, “Swimming Pool Employee of the Summer.” Given my generous nature, I presented this trophy to Tom on his last day of employment at the pool.



In closing, I speak on behalf of family and friends to say we are proud for Tom, seen on the left giving his acceptance speech

But in the end, it is Tom Black that is in the 2012 Lea Country Athletic Hall of Fame, not relatives, or friends. We helped, but he did most of it himself.

That fact alone makes Tom famous in the eyes of his loved ones.

**Figure 4. Tom in action on the podium.**

Emily might have put it this way:

*Fame is a bee  
It has a song---  
It has a sting---  
And with Tom, it has great wings.*