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Schroeder-Watt inducted into state HOF

By Ryan Nagelhout Niagara Gazette

Grand Island track coach Don Sauer still points to a spot in the grass no one's reached in almost 20 years.

"It's still out there," Sauer said. "That's where I tell my kids 'That's how far you have to throw to get that state record.'"

The record, 172 feet, is the discus mark that Stacey Schroeder-Watt set in 1992 and still holds to this day. One of the most successful Viking athletes of the '90s, Schroeder-Watt was inducted this summer into the New York State Public High School Athletic Association's Hall of Fame.

"It was out of left field a little bit," Schroeder-Watt said. "It was nice because when I found out about the award I was on the field with my sister enjoying one of the track and field meets. It was a nice way to celebrate my career overall."

Schroeder-Watt and her family traveled to Lake Placid on Aug. 3 for a banquet, where she was introduced to a crowd of over 200 people. A brief presentation highlighted each inductee's career, and Schroeder-Watt said she was humbled by the event.

"It was absolutely amazing," she said. "I've gotten a ring and a trophy and a beautiful memory that will stay with me for a very long time."

Schroeder-Watt is modest about her achievements on the field. Those that saw her perform, however, are happy to offer praise.

"If we did start an athletic Hall of Fame she'd be the first female to be inducted," Grand Island athletic director Jon Roth said. "She came along at a time when Grand Island athletics were at an all-time high. We had exceptional programs in everything."

Few would argue with her status as one of Grand Island's greatest student-athletes. Schroeder-Watt won the Section VI shot put championship five times and was crowned in the discus four times, adding to it eight Niagara Frontier League track and field championships.

She won her first NYSPHSAA State Championship in the shot put in 1991, then won both shot put and discus the next year, shattering the state discus record with a mark no one has matched since. Schroeder-Watt was named an All-American in 1991 and 1992 and was ranked number one in the country her senior year.

After graduation, Schroeder-Watt accepted a scholarship at the University of Florida, where she was a two-time All-American and SEC champion until a hamstring injury ended her career. A microbiology major, Schroeder-Watt graduated and went on to receive her doctorate from SUNY Upstate Medical University in Syracuse.

Schroeder-Watt is now a pediatric anesthesiologist at Women and Children's Hospital in Buffalo and said her long hours at the track have paid off in her career.

"I picked that field because it was most like an athletic event," she said. "It brings together quick thinking, intensity, working hard and being a team player. Even though you're an individual taking care of a patient you're also member of a team."

Schroeder-Watt was also first team all-NFL in volleyball and second team all-NFL in basketball as a center. One sport she didn't play was football, but that doesn't mean it never came up. Grand Island football coaching legend Gene Masters had a soft spot for the track star.

"I was in gym class and the girls were doing the football session. I remember coach Masters came across gym floor, grabbed hold of the football and told me go long," Schroeder-Watt said. "I ran out and caught the ball and I remember bringing it back to him. He looked at me and said 'God I wish you could play football.'"

Roth, who was Masters' assistant coach at the time, said Schroeder-Watt's name came up more than once.

"He absolutely loved Stacey," Roth said. "Joking around he often said if Stacey came out for football they'd be that much better, that she could have helped the football team."

A football career wasn't in the cards for her, but Schroeder-Watt said being recognized as an athlete by Masters was an honor. That same pride goes with being inducted into the Hall of Fame.

"It was amazing to see the community of athletic individuals that are supporting the cause," Schroeder-Watt said. "Being an athlete is so much more than going out and throwing a discus and a javelin and running a 100-yard dash. It's going forward and really setting your sights on being better, and that's a structure for life."

"I love to see that's being brought forward," she added. "I'm so very happy to be honored by a community that values the same things I do."

Schroeder-Watt's achievements and success after graduation have become a teaching tool for her former coaches. As a doctor and mother of two still living in her childhood home on Grand Island, she's happy to be a role model for future athletes.

"She's done well, just to see her progress," Sauer said. "Seeing her in high school in the

90s, going down to Florida and winning SEC championships, an All-American. It's great, it's great to see that."

As for her discus record, Schroeder-Watt hopes she's there to see it broken one day; especially if it's a fellow Viking.

"I hope it goes to someone who works for it," she said. "Someone who really cares about the events and really wants it as bad as I did. That would be a nice thing to happen to not only the sport, but the record itself."

If no one can break 172 feet in the next ten or so years, there's always Schroeder-Watt's two daughters. Alexandria, 4, and Audrey, 2, are already impressing their Hall of Fame mother at a young age.

"I'm going to let them pick their own events, but I have a strong feeling that my oldest is going to be a pentathlete," she said. "The way she can throw things and run away from me at a moment's notice.

"She'll be better than I ever was."