



Summary

In the general information that opens this site, one of the first statements I make about John Roach is that **“In all things he was a teacher first.”** That observation was arrived at while putting together his application to the Panther Hall of Fame in 2007. After reviewing and studying all of the material for the square dance section I continue to be convinced of the truth of this statement. Once this quality was “turned on” in 1937 with his first real teaching job it guided just about everything he did right up until he died. I can’t speak directly to what he may have been like prior to 1937, but only through the artifacts and records that remain. In that material there is no evidence that he was involved as a teacher. His life as a boy was all sports and out of doors activities. His life after high school was all sports and what you might call “knocking around,” working at menial jobs with the intent of helping to support his grandparents who had raised him in their home. When they died it was his cue to take care of himself so he decided to go to college. Susquehanna University at Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania was a pre seminary school for a Lutheran denomination and Jack had commented at one time that while there he had considered becoming a minister, but ultimately decided that he could do more good as a teacher. His college life was all classes, athletics and working at a state epileptic colony for his support. He did have the opportunity to be an assistant coach at the university the year after he graduated but part of that year was spent at the University of Minnesota accumulating graduate credits.

It was at the end of the summer of 1937, while at Minnesota, that he made the connection, quite by accident, with the Glencoe school system. He had decided that he didn’t want to go back to Pennsylvania. Not knowing what to do he went to Head Football Coach Bernie Beirman’s office in Cook Hall and mentioned that since summer school was over and he wanted to stay in the area, that he was out of money and needed a job. If they heard of anything they were to let him know. When he left the office he headed out across the football practice field behind Cook Hall (Northrop Field) but was hailed from a window and asked to come back. When he got to the office he found Bierman on the phone with Paul Wilson, Superintendent of Schools in Glencoe. Wilson had just lost his coach, who also taught all of the math courses, and school was due to start in a couple of weeks. Of course, the first thing you do when you lose your math teacher is call the head football coach at the U of M! Wilson and Jack came to an agreement on the phone and Jack was to report August 30 to get the football program going.

I often wondered how he survived in the classroom. No problem on the gridiron. His football team ended the season undefeated and unscored on. But teaching math? All of the math, from elementary to advanced plus business relations. He had never spoken of this to me so when I discovered it I was puzzled. I scoured his transcripts from college hoping to find some evidence of a math course, even if it was disguised under another course heading, but there was nothing. That means that Jack had probably not dealt with higher math since he graduated from high school eleven years earlier in 1926, and that assumes he took the higher math courses in high school. I inquired of a couple of people

who were still around who had been in his first classes and they reported that he did a good job. There are even pictures of him in the classroom that first year and what is on the blackboard is definitely higher math. I can't imagine what it was like to walk in the week before school, coach an undefeated team and try to stay one day ahead of the students in the classroom. As if this wasn't enough to do, he went to the Congregational Church in town and immediately volunteered to be a Sunday school teacher.

This brings me to another observation about this type of teacher. We'll call them, "old time" teachers. Teachers today are specialists. A math teacher is a math major. A music teacher is a music major. They are certified to teach only in a specialty. When Jack went to college in 1932 a teacher was just that, a teacher. The major was education. Jack's minors were social studies and physical education. When a teacher took a job he or she was expected to teach what they were assigned and this may have had nothing at all to do with their minors. They were teachers and had to be able to take the materials in any subject and teach them. My algebra teacher was an old timer and when she came to Glencoe around 1950 she was assigned German. The only German she had ever learned was reading technical German in her chemistry minor, not spoken, conversational German. Talk about pressure! Glencoe is a German community and many of her students came from farm homes where German may still have been spoken by grand parents and many Lutheran church services were still in German. She survived it and eventually got to teach in her specialty. My high school principal came to Glencoe at about the same time as Jack. He was teaching Latin and English but at his previous position had also had to be the band director, just because he had been in his college band.

These people were comfortable teaching in any subject because they were teachers first. More proof of this came in 2006 at the funeral for one of Jack's younger colleagues from the Glencoe faculty. During the service one of his children was describing how they didn't just sit around the dinner table and engage in idle chatter with their father. He would carry on at the table just like he was in front of the classroom, teaching all the time. I just smiled because that was exactly what it was like at home growing up with Jack and that's why he was able to teach math, having no math background. That's why he was able to start and coach a wrestling team, never having been a wrestler. That's why he was able to start and coach a gymnastic team for 20 years, never having been a gymnast. And, that's why he could suddenly become a successful dance teacher. Whether these teachers started out being this way at the very beginning of their careers, or became that way as time went on, I don't know.

Another aspect of Jack Roach was his healthy perspective regarding the activities he taught. Of course, all coaches want to win and winning is important, but it's not everything. What is learned about life as a result of playing the game and having fun doing it was more important to Jack. A high school gymnast friend of mine commented at Jack's induction into the local high school Hall of Fame in 2007, that when he went to the state gymnastic meet in 1965 he did a poor job on his routine. Following the meet the group had supper at a downtown Minneapolis restaurant. With most of the school's coaches table conversation would have been about picking the day apart, what went wrong and talking about what should have happened. Not Jack. After some brief discussion about the routine he reminded the boy that it's just a game. What he really wanted to talk about is what the boy, a senior, was going to do with the rest of his life.

The value of the activity was not the activity itself, but in what the activity did for the people who engaged in it. Did they have fun doing it or had it become a chore? Mabel and Jack were interviewed in a local newspaper in July of 1976 and the writer reported that the two feel that square dancing has added a valuable dimension to their lives. Jack sums it up: “It would be most appropriate to say that it was the means of meeting thousands, and I say literally thousands, of wonderful people and resulted in many wonderful experiences.”

