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Woog's World - Honoring Hoover - Dan Woog

Staff Reports

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The Web site brims with photos. There is Hoover with hordes of athletic men and beautiful women. Hoover smoking a cigar, at a skating rink and a costume party. Hoover celebrating, smiling -- always smiling.

Who was Hoover?

When Scott Wilder -- the only time he will be referred to in this column by his real name -- died late last month, he was quite possibly the most popular 53-year-old in Westport. His nickname -- bestowed back in Bedford Junior High School -- was apt; Hoover drew people in like a vacuum cleaner. He maintained friendships with the boys and girls he grew up with; he gathered others into his orbit later, and no one ever seemed to fall out of it. He was always surrounded by admirers and kept in constant e-mail touch with those who were physically far away.

But what his many fans and friends remarked upon most often after his death, from complications following surgery, was that never, in the 34 years since an automobile accident rendered him a quadriplegic just a few days before he was to begin his sophomore year at Babson College, did he complain. No one ever heard him pity himself or ask for pity.

On the contrary, though the only thing he could control physically was one hand, and with it a peg on his wheelchair, he knew how important it was to control his own mind, and his spirit. Through that,

he controlled the world.

Word of Hoover's death spread quickly among his vast universe of friends. Although any quadriplegic's health is always precarious, Hoover seemed in many ways indestructible. A person whom doctors had predicted would not live to see 30 made it more than two decades beyond. What's more, he did it with grace, dignity, good humor and not a little amount of bawdiness. Everyone thought Hoover would be here forever.

Within hours after Hoover's death, the tributes poured in. Dana Hollingsworth -- born just a couple of months after Hoover, and who while growing up next door on Manitou Road was his best friend, wingman, fellow competitor in driveway basketball and street hockey games, and partner in boyhood pranks -- asked another classmate, Chip Stephens, to design a Web site. The result -- www.scotthooverwilder.com -- is a living memorial to a man whose spirit never died.

On and on the stories scroll. Dave Squires described a cookout at Sherwood Island for wheelchair-bound patients Hoover exercised with. When the sun set, Hoover invited everyone over to Manitou, where he lived with his parents. The party continued in full swing. "I vividly remember sitting on that deck, crowded with wheelchairs, with me being a minority, thinking wow, this is something else," Squires wrote.

"Hoover was, and still is, a true hero to me," he continued. "He was a gift to all of us, the glue, the magnet, the nucleus."

Hoover had a special way with females. Arlene Scanlan said that "He made all of the women he knew feel especially pretty and exceptional." On his many forays to the Patio Bar at Splash, he'd chat with the ladies for hours. They loved his kindness, sense

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of humor and shy smile; they loved him.

Hoover reached people of all ages. From his wheelchair he taught Patti DePalma Slesinski's 7-year-old son how to golf. D. Scanlan -- who describes himself as "almost 15 years old" -- wrote: "Hoover was our sports guru. Whenever me and my stepdad or brother got into one of our many fights about sports, we just called Hoover. It saved a lot of time and fighting. He was my personal cheerleader, coming to my football games and always calling and asking how the team had done. I'll miss his cheering me on, but I know his spirit will always be with me. Love ya Hoover."

The first time Dana Hollingsworth's son Cooper, 17, saw Hoover's room, he was in awe. "Everywhere you looked there were sports posters, race cars, autographs, rare baseball cards, and girls."

Cooper's brother Chase is only 11, but he too was a Hoover fan. One of Hoover's many passions was the New York Giants. He died a few days before the Super Bowl, and Chase spoke for many when he made this poignant connection: "So Hoover, I hope you got good seats for the big game Sunday."

Many of the comments on Hoover's Web site came from classmates -- now middle-aged -- who knew him when they themselves were 11. Peter Dickstein, a childhood friend, wrote: "He was a great sixth man in hoops and in life, always providing a spark that produced excitement and entertainment. He endured tragedy in youth but somehow, very remarkably, was able to enjoy and thrive. If that's not a profound lesson for all of us mobile and reasonably healthy ones, I can't think of what is."

Sports were a constant theme throughout

Hoover's life. Though he played soccer, baseball and golf (and, growing up directly behind Longshore's third hole, tales of his links escapades are legion), he is most closely associated with basketball. He was, as Dickstein noted, Staples' sixth man -- the player who leaped off the bench, injecting energy into the game while sending thrills through the crowd. Thirty-five years later, Hoover's game-winning, buzzer-beating shot at Ridgefield lives on in the memories of hundreds of Wrecker fans. He was skinny and small, but -- as he proved throughout his life, long after his basketball-playing days were done -- he knew how to win.

The last words, fittingly, belong to a man who grew up with him, and a woman who met him after his accident. Art Corrigan's daughter Kristin, one of the many children of friends whom Hoover doted on as they grew from infancy to adulthood, called Hoover "our angel on earth. He made everyone he touched a better person."

And he touched everyone. Chip Stephens said, "On the day he died he still had every friend he ever made." He always will.

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