



My Hometown's Hall of Fame

Portage, Wisconsin

Russell W. Peterson, September 20, 2003

It's wonderful to be back in my hometown and especially great to be here to be inducted into Portage's Hall of Fame. What an honor! Thank you! Thank you!

When Sean Malone called to tell me about my selection, I was about to ask him, "Why was I chosen?" But quickly I changed my mind. I was afraid they might reconsider.

I immediately accepted and my mind raced back to those memorable years in my hometown. When I hung up, my emotions got the better of me. I thought, "I have to tell Lillian," my beloved Portage partner for 60 years. But she was dead. Then I thought of my seven brothers. They would be so excited. But they were gone, too. I rushed over to throw my arms around my June and asked her to stand in. And she did—with soothing understanding and affection.

Why did this award have such an emotional impact on me? After all, as I believe you know, I have received a number of awards in my life, but never has any other had such impact. Why is that? Why does a recognition by one's small hometown mean so much more than one by a huge national organization? In the latter case, one is lost in a big membership scattered far and wide, few of whom he knows. But one's hometown, a small town like Portage, is full of thousands of memories, most wonderful, some sad. It's the place where I belonged full time for 17 years, where I learned how to live, to love, to win and to lose—a place where I found Lillian—a town I know from one corner to the another, where everyone went to the same high school, and where I had the greatly satisfying opportunity to play on our football, basketball and track teams. It's where my Chemistry teacher, Charles Warren, turned me on to a career in chemistry and my English teacher, Helen Rhyme, gave me money and loaned me some more when I was penniless at the University.

Sean Malone called me last week to invite me to visit your new high school. I told him I had already done so. He asked me, "When was that?" I said, "In 1969 when I came back to Portage for Citizenship Day. It was really beautiful compared to my old school."

"Oh, no," Sean said. "We have a brand new one." So today I visited it. What a great place! What a terrific launching pad for today's Portage kids! You know where to put your money.

I have always been impressed by my hometown. Everything runs downhill from Portage. When I went skinny dipping in the Wisconsin River, some of me washed off and ran down the Wisconsin to the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico and out to the Atlantic Ocean. By following the short trail the Indians used to portage their canoes, I could go swimming in the Fox River where some of me would go down the Fox to Lake Michigan, through the Great Lakes, down the St. Lawrence and into the Atlantic Ocean.

And if you are an environmentalist like I am, you have to be impressed by the fact that just a few miles east of here John Muir grew up on a farm, and a few miles west of here is located the shack where the world-renown conservationist, Aldo Leopold, wrote his *Sand Country Almanac*.

Even the president of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, had a link to Portage. Some of the furniture he built is still out in the old Indian Agency House, where he served as a lieutenant upon graduating from West Point.

Enough of that bragging about my hometown. Let's get on with what we are here for.

I want you to know that I consulted with the other five initial Hall of Famers and got their permission to speak for all of us. Thank you for the great honor you have given us. And thanks to our hometown for the opportunity to grow up and be trained here—for launching us on our rewarding careers.

Frederick Jackson Turner was the first of us six to arrive in Portage. He was born in 1861. He was a terrific scholar, writer and lecturer. After graduating from Portage High, he received his Bachelor and Master degrees at the University of Wisconsin and his Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins. He then taught American History at the University of Wisconsin for 18 years and at Harvard for 14. It was his pen, writing about American History, and especially the expansion of our frontier, that made him shine. For this he received a Pulitzer Prize. He died when I was a freshman in high school. We celebrated his life on that occasion.

It's clear why Zona Gale is recognized as Portage's most famous daughter. A superb and prolific writer in many forms, she also won a Pulitzer Prize. But at the same time she played an important national role as a citizen activist, working for women's suffrage and world peace. When I was a young boy I would deliberately walk by her beautiful home along the Wisconsin River, trying to see this famous person. One time, when her front door was ajar, I peeked in to try to see her—but no luck.

For someone nuts about sports, as I was, it was exciting and thrilling to know that a Portage boy named Archie Hahn had won four Olympic gold medals and held the world record for the 200 meter sprint for 17 years. This led me, when I was 12, to organize a track team on East Cook Street, marking off the sprint distances around our block, making our own hurdles,

pole-vaulting standards and shot-put, and convincing the high school coach to give us a beaten up discuss and javelin. I worked at all of these events, but wasn't much good at any of them. My closest friend, Bill Malisch was. He ~~wanted to~~ become captain of the University of Wisconsin track team.

Can you imagine any small town having two brothers like the Rebholzes, who ~~went on to~~ become nationally recognized football stars? What an exciting and thrilling time it was for us Portage kids to keep up eagerly with their exploits on the University of Wisconsin team. They were our heroes—superb all-around athletes. Russ Rebholz went on to star in Canadian football and was elected to the Canadian Hall of Fame.

Harold Rebholz was one of the University of Wisconsin's all-time best fullbacks—both on offense and defense. His performance in stopping Bronko Nagurski, the powerful, legendary University of Minnesota fullback, was most exciting to us Portage kids. Nagurski had the reputation of being able to pick up 3, 4, 5 yards at will by diving over the line. But Hal Rebholz on defense would also dive over the line, meeting Nagurski in mid-air, bringing him down at the scrimmage line. No wonder he was placed on All Big-Ten Teams and mentioned as an All American.

But by far the most important thing he did was coach me, a 129 pounder when I played on the undefeated Portage High School football team in 1933. I'm probably the only football player who scored every time he carried the ball. What a record! One day when we were trouncing Viroqua, he put me in the backfield where, on the next play, I carried the ball and scored. He immediately put me back in the line. I believe my record still holds.

He was a great coach—demanding—but he made us win.

I wasn't much of a football player, but the next year Coach Rebholz payed me the greatest compliment I have ever received. I was a freshman at the University of Wisconsin. He invited me to attend the homecoming rally held in the high school auditorium. He put me in the front row with all the teachers and all 500 high school kids, including Lillian, behind me. The coach, the team, the band, the cheerleaders were all on the stage, whooping it up. He called me up on the stage, and then asked the assembly, "How many feet of guts does the average person have?" A student yelled out, "Twenty-nine." "Yes," said the coach, putting his hand on my shoulder, "but this guy has 58 feet!"

Wow! That was better than being made an All American.

As I reflect on where we six Hall of Famers have come from, and where today's kids strive to go, I conclude that my hometown sets a good example of what's required in the pursuit of happiness: Caring, love, togetherness, education, and opportunity.

On behalf of all six of us, thank you.