

Sports

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It was no accident that Farmington-based Absolute Class Limousine Service was chosen for this photo session. Annette Ruggiero and John Miller, Athletes of the Year, demonstrated absolute class both on and off the field.

RICK SMITH/staff photographer

Ruggiero and Miller: absolute class

By Chris McCosky
staff writer

FORMER DETROIT Free Press columnist Mike Downey called Boston Celtic guard Quinn Buckner, whom Downey knew as a high school star, the closest high school athlete he'd ever seen. He couldn't believe how mature and poised Buckner was with the cameras and microphones in his face. He marveled at Buckner's in-born leadership qualities. Buckner earned Downey's lifetime respect as an athlete and person.

John Miller and Annette Ruggiero are to me what Buckner was to Downey.

It is no accident that the Farmington-based Absolute Class Limousine Service was used for the photo session. "Absolute class" — there couldn't be a more fitting theme for the 1985 Farmington Observer Athletes of the Year.

Class was John Miller, the two-time all-American, three-time all-state football player from Farmington Harrison, entertaining four or five reporters after the game. Here's a typical post-game interview:

"John, you scored five touchdowns, gained 240 yards and picked off three passes. Are you that good or was the opposition that bad?"

"No, they are a real good football team. I just got great blocking from the offensive line. Anybody could have run through the holes they made for me. It was a team effort. The coaches had us ready to play."

CLASS IS two-time, two-sport all-star Annette Ruggiero from Farmington Hills Mercy slinking the game-winning basket at the buzzer and afterwards giving credit to a teammate for getting her the ball or for springing her free with a bone-crushing pick.

Class is the manner in which these two carried themselves on and off the athletic field — leaders both in the classroom and on the field. Class is the manner in which these two represented themselves and their schools amidst heavy media exposure from their sophomore years on.

IT'S THE regional final in girls basketball. Plymouth Salem vs. Mercy. On the court, Ruggiero is leading Mercy to victory, draining jumpers from all over and weaving through the vaunted Salem defense.

On the sidelines, amidst the Mercy

cheerleaders in a maroon and gold (Mercy colors) varsity jacket is Miller. Miller is on hand for one reason. As he said at the time: "Gotta see Annette play."

The story serves two purposes. One, it shows Miller's nature. How many all-American football players would be seen at a girls basketball game, let alone cheering with the cheerleaders? It wouldn't be considered too macho. But then, Miller doesn't worry about those kinds of things.

The story also highlights the mutual feeling of respect and admiration each has for the other.

THERE ARE an alarming number of similarities between the two, aside from the fact that both are premier athletes.

For starters, both come from very solid, close-knit families. Because of that, and because both have been afforded outstanding coaches, the two have strong personalities with their values and priorities in proper order.

Both are multi-sport standouts: Miller in football, basketball and baseball, and Ruggiero in basketball and soccer. Both excel in class: Ruggiero with a 3.97 grade point average and Miller a 3.4.

It's safe to say the two helped usher in an era of statewide, front-page publicity for high school sports. High school football became front-page sports news in daily papers when Miller led Harrison to the state football title as a sophomore. Ruggiero, along with her Mercy teammates, brought girls basketball to the front page with the miracle state-title win her sophomore year.

The spotlight has stayed on Harrison and Mercy and has since broadened its scope on high school sports in general.

YET, DESPITE all the ink and the film clips, the two athletes have not lost perspective. The spotlight didn't lessen their performances on the field or their humility away from the field.

"That, to me, was the fun part," Miller said of the spotlight. "I liked it, even the recruiting experience. People always say to me, 'How can you stand all that hassle?' But I don't look at it that way. I wouldn't have changed that for the world. Not many people get to experience all the things I have. It never bothered me."

Ruggiero agreed. "You didn't really notice it (the spotlight) at the time. When you're playing, you just concentrate on what you have to do. I proba-

bly think more about it now that it's over. I'll look back on all the big crowds we had. I'll be lucky to play before crowds half that size in college."

WHILE BOTH have enjoyed tremendous success in athletics, they also have experienced bitter defeat. After attaining state championships as sophomores, neither reached the pinnacle again — though they came close twice.

"That hurts doesn't it?" Miller said.

"Yes, it hurts. But, there aren't many who get to experience one state championship," Ruggiero said. "At least we have one. I regret not getting back there, but we did well the last two years. It's not like we just fell apart."

Mercy lost in the state finale in Ruggiero's junior year and in the semifinals last year.

"Our goal as a senior class was to win state titles four years in a row," Miller said. "We got the first two and just missed the next two. You know, the teams I played on the last two years were better than the two state title teams. We just didn't get the breaks."

WITH ALL that is similar between Miller and Ruggiero, the two will travel distinctly different paths to college. Miller will stay home and attend Michigan State. Ruggiero will start anew at Colorado State.

"I thought long and hard about going away and not having any family," Ruggiero said. "You know, when you have something good going, why leave? But, I think it will be good for me to have a new experience, to do something new. It would have been easy to stay. I wanted to challenge myself."

For Miller, his decision to stay home creates a different type of challenge. People will be expecting many things from him. But, he's not about to go in scared.

"I don't think I have to prove anything to anyone but myself," Miller said. "If I start worrying about doing the job other people think I should be, then I'm going to be in trouble. No way am I going to be able to repeat what I did in high school. The caliber of talent is much higher. I just have to go out and do the best I can possibly do."

I'LL BEGIN a bit barren around the prep scene without Nos. 44 and 10 roaming around the area. But Miller and Ruggiero have left a legacy of memories — most good, some sad.

Miller's game-saving, last-minute diving tackle of a Fordson ball carrier in the 1982 state finale. Ruggiero's in-

one-motion steal and behind the back pass to help Mercy defeat Flint Northwestern in 1983. Miller's punt return against Livonia Stevenson last year in which he broke about 10 tackles. Ruggiero's buzzer shot to beat Murray-Wright in the district last year.

Miller, battered and bruised, half-crying, walking off the muddy field after a 13-12 loss to Livonia Churchill. Miller, accepting congratulations from Fordson players with head raised following last year's state semifinal loss. Then turing away and letting the tears stream down his cheeks.

Ruggiero sitting with teammates Amy DeMatteis and Mary Kosowski on the bench as the final seconds of their high school careers ticked away — Benton Harbor was about to knock Mercy out of the state tournament. For several minutes the trio stubbornly fought off the tears. Then, almost as one, the three broke down.

The memories aren't the only thing

this pair has left behind. Annette Ruggiero and John Miller have left behind a standard of athletic excellence and sportsmanship to which all other athletes should strive.

Each year, the Farmington Observer will honor a high school athlete as "The Athlete of the Year."

Those selected will be seniors from either Farmington Harrison, North Farmington, Farmington or Farmington Hills Mercy high schools.

The Athlete of the year will excel in more than one sport as well as in the classroom. The selection will be made by Chris McCosky, the Farmington Observer sports editor.

Last year's winner was North Farmington's Amy Austin.



John Miller: two-time all-American and three-time all-star in football. He was a standout in both basketball and baseball as well at Harrison.



Annette Ruggiero: all-star in both basketball and soccer at Mercy.