

Oaks Park bids farewell to an icon

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Dale Pritchard retires 'for the last time'

CLACKAMAS - Oaks Amusement Park has lost an icon.

Longtime Clackamas resident Dale Pritchard, 87, has announced that he is retiring from working at the park 'for the last time.'

'I've retired five or six times before,' said Pritchard, who has worked at the park in some capacity for most of the past seven decades. 'But this time I mean it. This is the last time.'

'He retires every week,' said Oaks Park skating coach Susan Richardson, who trained under Pritchard. 'It's not permanent. He'll be back.'

'He may be retired,' said Oaks Park operations manager George Kolibaba, who also took lessons from Pritchard. 'But I won't be surprised if he doesn't show up at the door again. It's not easy to say you're done. [Skating] becomes a part of you. 'It wouldn't surprise me if he might come back for a little more. And we'd like to have him back too.'

'I think this time he means it,' said Oaks manager Norma Willison. '[Each time he retires] I always say, 'I'll give you two week's vacation.' And he's back in two weeks. This time it's been two months, so I think it's true.'

'It's time,' said Pritchard. 'It's time to retire. It's time to enjoy my bride and my home. I call [Jeanne Pritchard] my bride, because that's exactly what she is.' Sweethearts for 67 years Dale and Jeanne celebrated their 67th year of marriage in February of this year. 'Jeanne's my best friend,' Dale Pritchard says. 'I don't know what I'd do without her. She's my life.'

Dale and Jeanne met at the Oaks and they went on to become two of the most knowledgeable and respected skating coaches in the Northwest and in the nation.

'At one time Jeanne and I had coached all of the skating coaches who were coaching at the Oaks at that time,' Pritchard says.

Present Oaks skating coaches George Kolibaba, Joan Dreyer, Susan Richardson and Tiffany McKinnon all took lessons from Dale.

Jeanne Pritchard, who was then a cashier and a snack bar worker, recalls the first time she noticed Dale when he first showed up at the Oaks Park Skating Rink in the 1930's:

'I thought he was an idiot. He'd go as fast as he could, kick his feet out and slide across the floor. And he was wearing white corduroys, which would turn black.'

The clamp-on skates worn in the late 1930's came with aluminum wheels, which turned the Oaks Rink floor black, Pritchard observed.

Pritchard learned how to skate on Water Street, which was a block behind his childhood home in Southwest Portland. He'd play hockey with a makeshift stick and puck, and perfect various dance steps in the street.

'I didn't have formal lessons, but I knew how to skate before I ever went to the roller rink,' Pritchard says. 'I learned from a young neighbor on Water Street. We'd do the cakewalk, back cut, collegiate and the grand march step....'I'd wear out a pair of skates every year playing [street roller] hockey.'

Pritchard's introduction to the Oaks Skating Rink was quite by accident. He was a delivery boy for Portland's long defunct News Telegram newspaper and he won a sales contest, which had a skating party at the Oaks as a prize.

'I went to the Oaks, but the route manager didn't show up,' Pritchard says. 'I had a quarter in my pocket, which was what it cost to skate at the time. So I went skating on my own quarter, and from that time forward, I was hooked.'

The Oaks became Pritchard's home away from home. He'd skate all day on Sundays, from 1 p.m. to 10:30 p.m., for 45 cents. He convinced his mother that he needed money for shoe skates, and in early 1938, he purchased his first pair of shoe skates at the Oaks for \$18.95.

Later that year Pritchard was hired to wash windows for the fall opening. And not long after that, he got a job as a box boy, where he'd sit on a stool and put clamp-on skates on customers' shoes.

Promotions came quickly, and he moved up to skate-room boy. 'I'd look over the counter at people's shoes and use my guesstometer to determine what size of skate. It needed to fit the shoe, and I'd usually guess right.'

From paper boy to skating instructor

Manager Bob Bollinger recognized Pritchard's skating skills and soon gave him another promotion, this time to skating instructor.

'Bob said go over to the practice isle and help people skate,' Pritchard recalls. 'I remember one time I was helping people learn to skate, and I was helping this girl, when this big guy came over and wanted to know what the hell I was doing with his girl....' I went over to Bob afterwards and said I needed some kind of ID. He made me a badge with my name on it that said 'Skating Instructor.'

'Bob and Ruth Bollinger had no kids,' Pritchard says. 'In my personal opinion, Jeanne and I were like their kids. We were always included in everything that was happening. And it seemed like we were the first to get promoted.'

Pritchard soon quit his job as newspaper delivery boy, content on hauling in 25 cents an hour - 75 cents a night - as a skating instructor. He attended Lincoln High School, but dropped out of school a year short of graduating. 'School wasn't doing me any good, because I was doing what I wanted to do, and that was skate,' Pritchard says.

Pritchard's skating career was interrupted by World War II. He was drafted and served as ball-turret gunner in a B-17. He flew 35 missions out of Nuthamstead, England.

After the war he got his GED, and soon afterwards his coaching career at Oaks Park blossomed.

He and Jeanne were working at Roller Land in Renton, Wash. in 1950, when Pritchard got a phone call from Bob Bollinger, inviting the couple to come back to coach at the Oaks. They accepted the invitation, and the rest is history, as they became well loved and respected fixtures at Oaks Park for years to come.

Jeanne retired in 1986, but Dale has been working at the Oaks in some capacity since then - except for occasional short breaks when he 'retires.' Dale Pritchard has been Oaks Park rink and park manager. He's been a teacher, judge and announcer at nationals for artistic roller skating; he's coached speed skaters; and Pritchard was instrumental in popularizing international roller hockey at Oaks Park and around the nation. 'I was national hockey administrator for two years in the 1960's,' Pritchard says. 'I went all over the country, setting up the next year's games, overseeing contests, and announcing.'

After retiring from Oaks Park management in 1986, Dale Pritchard worked in customer relations at Oaks Park, helping out in the picnic office and doing odd jobs, driving a cart around the park.

The face of the Oaks Roller Rink-And most recently - for most of the past decade - Pritchard has been the face people see when they enter the roller rink, working as cashier and greeter.

'I learned a lot of things from Dale,' said Willison, who was hired by Pritchard in 1986. 'Most importantly, how to run the rink properly, and how to work with the public and make them feel

welcome. I will miss his guidance and the friendly atmosphere that he brought to the door at the roller rink.'

'The Oaks has hosted the Northwest Regionals [skating championships] every year since 1950 because of Dale,' said Rick Gustafson, who learned to skate under the tutelage of Dale and Jeanne Pritchard, along with brothers John and Ron, in the early 50's. 'He built one of the best [skating clubs] in the country. He did such a great job hosting regionals and it was such a nice facility, people always wanted to come back.'

'Dale was as much a life coach as a roller skating coach,' Gustafson said. 'He had such a positive outlook on life, and he had a way of helping you keep things in perspective.... He had a commanding voice, but was always positive, friendly, and he had a loving spirit. He cared about the people he coached and became part of their lives.'

Although he coached a number of skaters who became national champions and many skating coaches who have coached national champions, Pritchard has never skated competitively - except for a single Portland area high school event that he participated in as a youth. His only medals are from that 1941 Portland schools competition, where he was part of a winning relay team, placed second in a 24-lap 'endurance race,' and placed third in the circle waltz.

'I never competed because once they paid me [to give lessons], it made me a professional, and at the time [USA Roller sports] competition was not open to pros.'

Mostly self-taught, Pritchard says he received very little formal training, except in the early 1940's, when professional Tony Mayo stopped by the Oaks Park Rink to help start competitive skating classes. 'In the early 1950's, the Bollingers sent me to a skating school in Greeley, Colorado,' Pritchard says. 'But I ended up doing more teaching than learning.'

'Dale has meant a lot to Oaks Park, because he's a fixture,' said Kolibaba. 'Everyone looks up to and respects Dale. He was my first coach....'He didn't just give a lesson and walk away. He took an interest in and cared about his students. He was a part of your life.'

Kolibaba continued, 'Dale was instrumental in our changing to popular music and getting away from organ music. If we hadn't done that, kids wouldn't come [skating].'

One complaint

'My one complaint is the amateur skating community today is holding onto the past far longer than they should,' said Pritchard. 'Modern day music is nothing like the 30's, 40's and 50's - fox trots, waltzes and tangos. That's not the type of music our young people are listening to. They need to use popular music and put steps to it....'There didn't used to be solo dance, but now there aren't enough boys to pair with, so they have solo dance.'

'Dale is Oaks Park,' Susan Richardson said. 'You can't think about Oaks Skating Rink without thinking about Dale, because he was there for so long....'

'He was always the announcer at nationals. He had a really strong voice. He was loud and he had a great sense of humor. He has a very loud contagious laugh. You could hear him all over the building.'

Dale Pritchard is known for his ever-present sense of humor. 'One time the coaches were going to have a race and Dale came out with a gasoline motor on his back,' said Willison. 'He said it was to make him go faster. He never left the start line, but he lined up with that motor on his back.'

'When I was 15, we were doing a floor show where me and my partner [Terry Wallen] were both cats,' Richardson recalls. 'We had a little white house as a prop and Dale called it Suzy's Cat House. I heard about that for a long time.'

'Dale is well known in roller skating, not just at the Oaks, but around the country,' said Kolibaba. 'He's in roller skating halls of fame. He's had many, many awards for meritorious service....'

'He's taught a lot of teachers, preparing them for their gold medal test, which is the highest level of achievement. He's well known and respected as a teacher of coaches.'

In the early 1960's the national association for artistic roller skating named its first group of lifetime teachers, and Pritchard was in that group. He is among a select group of coaches that holds lifetime memberships in both the amateur roller skaters and amateur roller skating teachers associations. He has also been certified to judge roller skating competition at the highest level.

A teacher of coaches

'I've been coaching 45 years because of Dale,' said John Gustafson, who owns Auburn Skate Connection, with his brothers Ron and Rick. 'The three of us took lessons from Dale and Jeanne....'I've been involved in skating 61 years and it's all because of Dale. I love him dearly.'

John and Rick Gustafson both went on to win national titles, and John has continued to coach competitive skaters. One of his speed roller skating students was Apolo Ohno, who earned multiple titles as a speed skater in Olympic ice-skating.

Ron Gustafson says, 'Dale not only served as a successful teacher, coaching beginning skaters and national champions, he was also an inspirational mentor of judges, coaches and parents throughout his teaching career....'He created, produced and starred in several roller skating shows, as well as managed and officiated local and regional championships.

'Whether it was a meet, a conference or a party, the occasion was always enlivened by his enthusiasm and his infectious, distinctive laugh. No one excelled his ability to make a memorable time out of each occasion that he attended....

'But most of all, his conduct was always of the highest moral, ethical, and human quality that any of us could hope to achieve. While he can retire from his many activities, Dale will never abandon his genuine love and respect for his fellow human beings. Those of us who know him, we admire this superb gentleman.'

Pritchard explained the reason for his good humor and temperament:

'I figure I have a choice each morning when I get up. I can be an old codger and a grouch, or I can have fun. I prefer to have fun, and so a laugh, mostly at myself.'

Pritchard added, 'It's been a fabulous life! I don't think I'd want to change anything.'