

# 3 To Join YHS Shrine

## Fitzsimmons, Johnson And Smith To Enter Athletic Hall

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**W**hen Dan Fitzsimmons was in high school out in Middle Island, New York, he wasn't accustomed to the kind of history he later saw while in Yankton. He had graduated from a relatively new school, and in 1986 was hired as gymnastics coach at Yankton High School which had a rich athletic history.

"When I came to Yankton and started coaching, that was in the infancy of the Hall of Fame," he said. "I was mesmerized by that kind of history that Yankton High School and the community had."

"At the time, I never would have imagined I'd be (part of it). That will now become a reality for Fitzsimmons."

He, along with two former athletic stars, will be inducted into the YHS Athletic Hall of Fame next Friday during a 5 p.m. ceremony in the high school commons.

The 2015 class will include Fitzsimmons (former cross country and gymnastics coach, now at the University of South Dakota), Shari Johnson (basketball and volleyball) and Nick Smith (wrestling).

Here is a look at all three inductees:

### DAN FITZSIMMONS

In the coaching world, there's usually a cycle: New coach comes aboard, is mentored by experienced coaches, then becomes a mentor for someone new. Dan Fitzsimmons knows all about that cycle. He lived it for two decades.



"It's kind of the Yankton way," he said. "It works."

He is living proof. Fitzsimmons, a 50-year-old New York native, came to Yankton High School in 1986 as a recent graduate of the University of South Dakota, where he was a standout track athlete. He had applied for a job in the Britton-Hecla school district and had also thrown his hat in the ring for the head gymnastics coaching position in Yankton, with the idea that if he didn't get either job, he could go back to USD — where he would've had a fifth season of eligibility.

As fate would have it, Fitzsimmons was offered the position in Yankton, where he would spend his entire tenure (1986-07) as head gymnastics coach. For all he did for the Yankton High School cross country and track programs, gymnastics is where he got his start.

"I had my first success as a gymnastics coach," Fitzsimmons said. "If I look back, that's the one thing I miss at this position (at USD), I miss coaching gymnastics."

"I was the head coach the whole time in Yankton, so I'd like to think part of the induction is because of that."

A large part of Fitzsimmons' success in Yankton is due, he said, to mentors such as Yankton's Gene Bormann, Bob Winter and Jim Miner, as well as Mark Upward at Vermillion High School, another long-time gymnastics coach.

Fitzsimmons later became a varsity assistant coach for cross country in 1989, and a year later became varsity assistant for track. Such opportunities became available, as Fitzsimmons remembers, because Winter took over as YHS activities director in 1989.

"Everyone has their time, it takes a lot of humility," he said. "But sometimes it takes someone to step down to give someone else an opportunity."

It was much the same story when Fitzsimmons accepted the position as head cross country coach at USD in 2008 — a long-time dream of his, he said.

A pair of Yankton assistants then took over head coaching duties, Dave Dannenbring in cross country, and Luke Youmans in gymnastics and track.

"I remember thinking, if I stay the whole time, they would never get the opportunity," Fitzsimmons said. "Everything was lining up for me to make that happen."

During his stay in Yankton, Fitzsimmons developed the Bucks and Gazelles cross country programs into a national powerhouse.

The Gazelles won five straight Class AA state championships and the

Bucks won three in a row. Yankton also had four consecutive combined team titles, not to mention three runner-ups, two third-place finishes and four fourth-place finishes.

Yankton was also a force on the national scene, as the girls competed in all four Nike Team Nationals (now known as the Nike Nationals), while the boys' team made one NTN appearance.

Outside of the national meets, perhaps the biggest test for Yankton was annually competing for the Eastern South Dakota Conference (ESD) crowns. In Fitzsimmons' tenure, Yankton won 19 ESD team championships and were second four times.

Success in consecutive years became the talk of the state, as Fitzsimmons remembers other coaches saying to him over the years.

"You just don't hear of competitive conferences where teams are able to be successful one year after another," Fitzsimmons said. "They hold a little more of a special place in my heart. I don't think there's a conference in the country you could compare it to."

And even now that Fitzsimmons is in his eighth season at USD, he still finds himself accidentally referencing the ESD while talking to his runners.

"They look at me like, 'What?'" Fitzsimmons joked.

The legacy of Fitzsimmons still lives on at YHS, where the Bucks and Gazelles remain perennial contenders for state cross country titles. That, he said, was his ultimate goal when leaving in 2008.

"Since I left, that's probably the thing that makes me the most proud: I didn't leave them an empty cupboard," Fitzsimmons said.

### SHARI JOHNSON

Competing for championships became something Shari Johnson was familiar with during her athletic career.

She won a state basketball title and was part of a state runner-up volleyball team while in high school, not to mention a handful of soccer titles, and came up just short of a national championship while in college. Does she often think back to those moments?

All the time, said Johnson, now 35 and living in South Minneapolis, Minnesota, where she is a physical therapist.

"My friends are having kids now and they're going through high school, so it's such a different world," she said. "I couldn't imagine being there for all those times without my teammates. It was a great time; I wouldn't trade it for anything."

Johnson, a 1998 Yankton High School graduate, may not rank among the all-time leaders in Gazelles basketball history, but she was nonetheless a valuable piece to a program that was a perennial title contender at that time.

Yankton, then coached by Doug Pesicka, won three Eastern South Dakota Conference crowns and captured the 1996 state Class AA championship, beating long-time nemesis Sioux Falls Roosevelt.

Johnson, a junior that season, remembers clearly being excited to win a championship with best friend Katie Heine.

"To win that with her was pretty exciting," Johnson said. "Plus, we beat Roosevelt — it was a little gratifying."

"All those bus trips; staying in the hotels with your friends, I think about it a lot," she added.

Volleyball may have not been Johnson's primary sport, but she nonetheless helped the Gazelles reach the 1997 state Class AA championship match — in addition to two conference titles during her career.

One moment she remembers clearly from her volleyball days? Playing a new sport and doing so in Spandex, Johnson said.

Yankton began playing volleyball during her eighth grade year and by the time she was a senior, the Gazelles began wearing Spandex — "literally the end of the world," Johnson joked.

"Ginger Larsen was our coach at the time, and she made us put them on," Johnson said. "It was



hard that first game, trust me."

After graduation, Johnson moved on to South Dakota State, where she played basketball for the Jackrabbits — two seasons for coach Nancy Neiber, then two seasons for Aaron Johnston.

The Jacks won 28 games during Johnson's senior season (2001-02) and reached the NCAA Division II National Tournament semifinals. A season later, with Johnson gone, SDSU won the national title.

"I like to say we brought those freshmen along," Johnson joked.

### NICK SMITH

It has only been 11 years since Nick Smith graduated from Yankton High School, but his legacy on the wrestling mat still lives on.

Smith, a 2004 graduate, put together one of the most dominant athletic careers in the long history at YHS. He had a career record of 145-5, with four Eastern South Dakota Conference titles and four state championships (2001-04) — the only Buck to ever win more than two state titles.

And in the eyes of his former coach, Smith could've been inducted into the Hall of Fame almost immediately.

"He's a kid, with all his accomplishments, he could have been inducted the day after the state wrestling tournament his senior year," former YHS coach Murray McGlone said. "There was never a doubt in my mind."

What does Smith remember most from those years? "Just the friendships I made, that really stands out now," he said.

Smith also had the opportunity to capture a state championship alongside his brother, Ben.

It was 2002. Ben was the 112-pound state champion, while Nick then won the 119-pound title. And also that year, their younger brother Nathan was a wrestler for the Bucks.

The trio was far from alone in helping the Bucks during those years. "I was very fortunate going into a team where we had some great talent around me," Nick Smith said. "We had a pretty deep team, so it wasn't all about me, it was about the camaraderie."

When Smith graduated, he was only the second Class A wrestler in state history to capture four championships.

"That's quite an accomplishment," McGlone said. "Wrestling is pretty competitive in this state, and for him to do it like he did it, that speaks a lot to his God-given talents."

Smith also graduated with the Yankton program record for career wins, and while that total is likely to be passed this season by Spencer Huber, Smith's career continued at the college level.

He spent one semester at Northern Illinois University and then transferred to Minnesota State Mankato where he wrestled from 2005-08, and was twice an All-American (2006, 2008). Smith finished second at the NCAA Championships in 2007-08 and was third in 2005-06.

Having to adjust from high school to college was certainly a challenge, Smith said.

"The level of competition day in and day out was a lot better than what I was used to in high school," he said. "There was a lot more accountability for yourself. If you needed to get in an extra workout, it was more on you personally to get it done."

Smith, who has a 7-year-old daughter, lives and works in Yankton.

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Home One: 426 Yankton Street, Tabor, SD - Home Two: 326 W Chicago Street, Tabor, SD

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**HOME 1:** Located at 426 Yankton Street, 4 blocks west of Catholic Church, Tabor, SD. This property consists of a 2054 sq ft 2 story 4 bedroom home with 985 sq ft basement and 1 car attached garage. This home offers electric furnace, central a/c, recent roof, full bath on main floor, 1/2 bath upstairs, a 3/4 bath in basement, hardwood floors, large kitchen, master bedroom and a large dining and living room, all situated on a 95x150 corner lot.

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