

Legends Court

Honoring the coaches who shaped generations

On a sunny—though brisk—Friday afternoon, a small group gathered quietly at the home of former Girls' Basketball Coach *Dan Thurston '50. The visit was meant to feel casual, just friends stopping by, but an undercurrent of anticipation filled the room. When former Boys' Basketball Coach Layne Higgs arrived moments later, the surprise was set in motion. Smiles, warm handshakes, and familiar banter followed, though Coach Higgs sensed something unusual. "There must be a reason you have us all here," he said.

There was.

Across high schools and colleges nationwide, naming athletic facilities after influential coaches has become a meaningful way to recognize mentorship, character-building, and lasting impact. Inspired by this tradition, a group of alumni and friends came together to explore how the court in Alumni Gymnasium could honor our championship coaches who use the court as their daily practice and competition space, celebrating not only their successes but also the legacies they built and will continue to build within these walls.

This naming idea quickly took hold. Soon after initial discussions, an anonymous donor stepped forward with a \$500,000 matching challenge, launching a mini-campaign toward a \$1 million naming opportunity: Legends Court.

As Coaches Higgs and Thurston learned they would be among those recognized, the living room filled with emotion. Laughter mixed with tears as stories resurfaced—one memory triggering another. For decades, Alumni Gymnasium has been more than just a court. It is a classroom, a proving ground, and a place where young people learn to lead, collaborate, persevere, and grow. In that moment, it became clear that Legends Court is not only a tribute to championships but also an opportunity for generations of athletes to express their gratitude.

St. Johnsbury Academy Trustee Tom Sherrer '72—a former point guard and captain under Coach Higgs—put words to what many were feeling. "You both were amazing coaches," he said, "but your influence extended far beyond the hardwood."

That influence shaped an entire basketball culture at the Academy. Tony Higgs '87, who helped spark the idea for the court naming, reflected on how his father and Coach Thurston transformed both the girls' and boys' programs, as well as the surrounding community. They ran camps, held open gyms, worked with younger players, and built a system that made St. Johnsbury synonymous with basketball.

"As a player, it wasn't always easy to play for my father," Tony admitted, "but the lessons I learned—on and off the court—became clear later in life."

For Coach Higgs, the honor carried deep meaning. "It's a tremendous honor to be recognized," he shared. "My coaching years were spent in Alumni Gymnasium, and to have my name connected to that place is especially meaningful." In addition to coaching, he served as a teacher and director of guidance, retiring in 2007 after 35 years of service.

The outpouring of gratitude extended well beyond that afternoon. Tammy Amour Rainville '84, a member of the 1981, 1982, and 1984 girls' championship teams, felt her heart melt when she called Coach Thurston after

Legends Court Coaches

Boys' Basketball

- Stewart – 1905
- William Gibson – 1909
- Layne Higgs – 1981, 1982, 1997
- David McGinn – 2019

Girls' Basketball

- Virginia "Ginny" Kimball Johnson '43
- Dan Thurston '50 – 1981, 1982, 1984, 1985
- Jack Driscoll – 2010, 2018, 2019

Wrestling

- Sandy Murray - 1970

hearing the news. “True to form, he immediately deflected the praise, saying it had been his honor to coach us,” she recalled. “He was tough, but we respected him. He took care of us on and off the court.”

His son, Doug Thurston '78, sees that legacy everywhere. “Whenever we go out to eat, someone inevitably stops by the table to say thank you or share a story about the impact Dad made on their life,” he said. “It isn’t always about basketball. Dad taught math, coached baseball and girls’ soccer, and helped run after-school and weekend programs at the Academy for over 40 years. He touched a lot of lives during that time.”

As conversations in the living room stretched across decades, they naturally turned to the pioneers who shaped the game at a time when opportunities looked very different—especially for female athletes.

When Vermont transitioned to full-court, five-player girls’ basketball in the early 1970s—and Title IX became law—it was Virginia “Ginny” Johnson '43 who coached the Academy’s first girls’ varsity team under the new standard. Over a 30-year career as a physical education teacher, coach, and guidance counselor, Ginny became a champion not just of the game but of opportunity itself. Her son, Michael Johnson '68, noted, “My mom never coached for awards or attention. She’d insist colleagues like Rosina Wallace and Sarge Morrison '39 were essential partners in championing female athletics.”

That shared history opened the door to honoring additional championship coaches whose impact continues to shape the Academy: Jack Driscoll and David McGinn.

When Jack Driscoll learned of the Legends Court naming, in quiet Jack fashion, he smiled and shared a warm note of thanks. Over the years, he coached boys’ basketball, taught science, served as Dean of Students, and, in 1995, took the lead of the girls’ varsity basketball program. For those who played for him, a smile, a pat on the shoulder, or a simple “good job” was high praise.

“He continued the winning tradition bringing home titles in 2010, 2018, and 2019,” shared his daughter, Diantha Driscoll Jones '00, “while teaching countless young people the importance of hard work, accountability, and community. In his gym, ‘fun’ had a different definition—the satisfaction that comes from disciplined work and a whole lot of grit. When that grit leads to state championships, he thinks that’s quite fun too.”

David McGinn heard the news and immediately shifted the focus away from himself when informed about Legends Court, instead expressing honor at being included alongside coaches he deeply respects: Thurston, Higgs, and Driscoll. McGinn joined the Academy staff as athletic director in 2011, coaching varsity baseball before taking over the boys’ varsity basketball program in 2016. Over five basketball seasons, he guided teams to three championship appearances, capturing the state title in 2019.

“Coach McGinn brought teams together, built camaraderie, and got the best out of us,” said Alex Carlisle '19, a member of the 2019 championship team. “That championship reflected his commitment to his players and the program.”

Basketball isn’t the only sport to thrive in Alumni Gymnasium. Sandy Murray established the SJA wrestling program in 1968 and went on to win over 200 dual meets, producing 23 individual state champions and one individual New England title over 19 seasons. He also led the Hilltoppers to their lone team wrestling championship in 1970.

“If you coach wrestling at the Academy, you’re working to reach the heights he achieved,” said Mike Verge '87, who spent 15 seasons leading the team before stepping down in 2019. “Coach Murray is an icon in the Vermont wrestling community, but most of all, he fought hard for the sport and those of us who had the privilege of wrestling for him.”

Honoring Coach Murray alongside the basketball stars underscores the purpose of Legends Court: to celebrate the championship coaches who used Alumni Gymnasium as their main stage, shaping generations across all sports with mentorship, excellence, and community impact.

Legends Court: A Tribute of Gratitude

Legends Court will stand not only as a record of championships but as a testament to teamwork, courage, and community. It will honor the coaches who believe in their student-athletes and the athletes who learn to believe in themselves. In the true spirit of teamwork, championship coaches recognize and acknowledge the vital role of junior varsity and assistant coaches who work alongside them, as well as the many athletes, fans, and supporters who contribute year after year. The court continues to echo with familiar sounds—the squeak of sneakers on mats and hardwood, the rhythm of the dribble, the referee’s whistle, and the cheers of the crowd—but even more enduring is the invisible work: the encouragement, discipline, compassion, and integrity that have shaped and will continue to shape entire generations.

This naming initiative is not a one-time honor. Legends Court will evolve, adding future championship coaches as they earn their place in Academy history.

The naming of the court is one part of a larger plan to upgrade athletic facilities and reshape and enhance student life and wellness programming at the Academy. As part of that larger plan, another active fundraising initiative, launched by gifts from faculty, staff, and students of SJA after the passing of one of Vermont’s well-known and decorated track and field coaches, Arlan “Chip” Langmaid ’80, is underway to name the indoor track.

As we progress with these fundraising initiatives, alumni, families, and friends are invited to join in celebrating the leaders who built and continue to build the Academy’s legacy. Legends Court and Langmaid Indoor Track will be a tribute written not just in wood and paint—but in gratitude.

For more information on how you can get involved with Legends Court, Langmaid Indoor Track, or learning more about ways to support SJA, contact Tammi Sullivan Cady ’88 by email at tammi.cady@stjacademy.org or by phone at (802) 751-2011.

**Since this article was written, Dan Thurston passed away at the age of 93 on December 28, 2025.*