

Paul Malone Grist, D.H. 1898-1982: Molder of Men Through Sport

J. EDMUND WELCH

West Virginia Institute of Technology

Paul Grist came to Selma, Alabama, in 1919 from Atlanta, Georgia, to be the Physical Director of the Young Men's Christian Association. He did all of his professional work in that relatively small city in central Alabama. His work as Physical Director and then General Secretary for the next 45 years was so outstanding that he was selected for the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame in 1975. A plaque outlining Grist's contributions to physical education, athletics, recreation, and camping is posted in the Hall of Fame Section of the Birmingham Civic Center, along with other great sports figures such as Paul "Bear" Bryant, Ralph "Shug" Jordan, Wallace Wade, Frank Thomas, Hank Crisp, Don Hutson, Fred Sington, Joe Louis, Sam Byrd, and Jimmy Hitchcock.

Grist taught and coached numerous sports at the Selma YMCA and at four different summercamps he directed. These sports included football, basketball, baseball, volleyball, wrestling, swimming, golf, boxing, tennis, and gymnastics. He was known especially for the coaching of two age-group basketball teams—the "Blue Devils" and the "Flying Y". These teams won state YMCA championships and captured post-season games in Georgia, Mississippi, and Louisiana. They constituted "farm clubs" for the varsity team of Selma High School (also known as Parrish High School).

Between 1944 and 1947, W. Comer Sims was basketball coach at Parrish High School. Paul Grist was advisor to Sims and sat on the bench for all games. The PHS team won 87 straight games, a record which still stands in Alabama high school basketball. The team won two state championships. In 1947 the University of Alabama basketball team had three members from Selma; Auburn University had three; and Davidson College had one. All of these players learned their basketball fundamentals from Grist at the YMCA.

It was more than being a physical education teacher, a coach, a camp director, and executive which set Paul Grist apart. He was the finest of role models, both for youngsters and adults. Indeed, he was known as Selma's "number one citizen".

Grist was fiercely loyal to "His Boys", and they, in turn, reciprocated in their devotion toward him. At the same time, he was a disciplinarian. Billy Eastep, who won the Selma YMCA Golf Championship against mature golfers when he was only 16, wrote, "Grist would do anything for those of us 'raised' at the Y. Yet he chewed me out many times."

Paul Grist created a legion known as "Grist's Boys". The most famous was Ralph "Shug" Jordan, who coached Auburn University to a National Football Championship. But there were many more who shall never forget this man – a congressman; the mayor of Selma; a federal judge; a college dean; a professional entertainer; top executives in business; medical doctors; attorneys; college professors; a school principal and coach; high-ranking officers in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force; and a World War II hero. But Paul Grist loved his "ordinary graduates" and those who "got in trouble" just as much as he did his "stars".

In addition to being inducted into the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame, Grist won the

following honors: Alabama Academy of Honor; honorary Doctor of Humanities degree from the University of Alabama; and honorary membership, O.D.K., University of Alabama. A room in Robert E. Lee Hall, YMCA Blue Ridge Assembly, Black Mountain, North Carolina, was dedicated to him. The Selma YMCA was renamed "Grist YMCA". and the boarding camp was named "Camp Grist". The Alabama legislature renamed Valley Creek State Park the "Paul M. Grist State Park". Selma's annual "Boy of the Year" trophy is named after him.

Grist died of a heart attack right after attending the 1982 Liberty Bowl Football Game in Memphis. He had told a close friend, W.M. Turner, Sr., of Selma, "If I can die at an athletic event, I shall be at the top of the mountain." God granted this great leader his final wish.