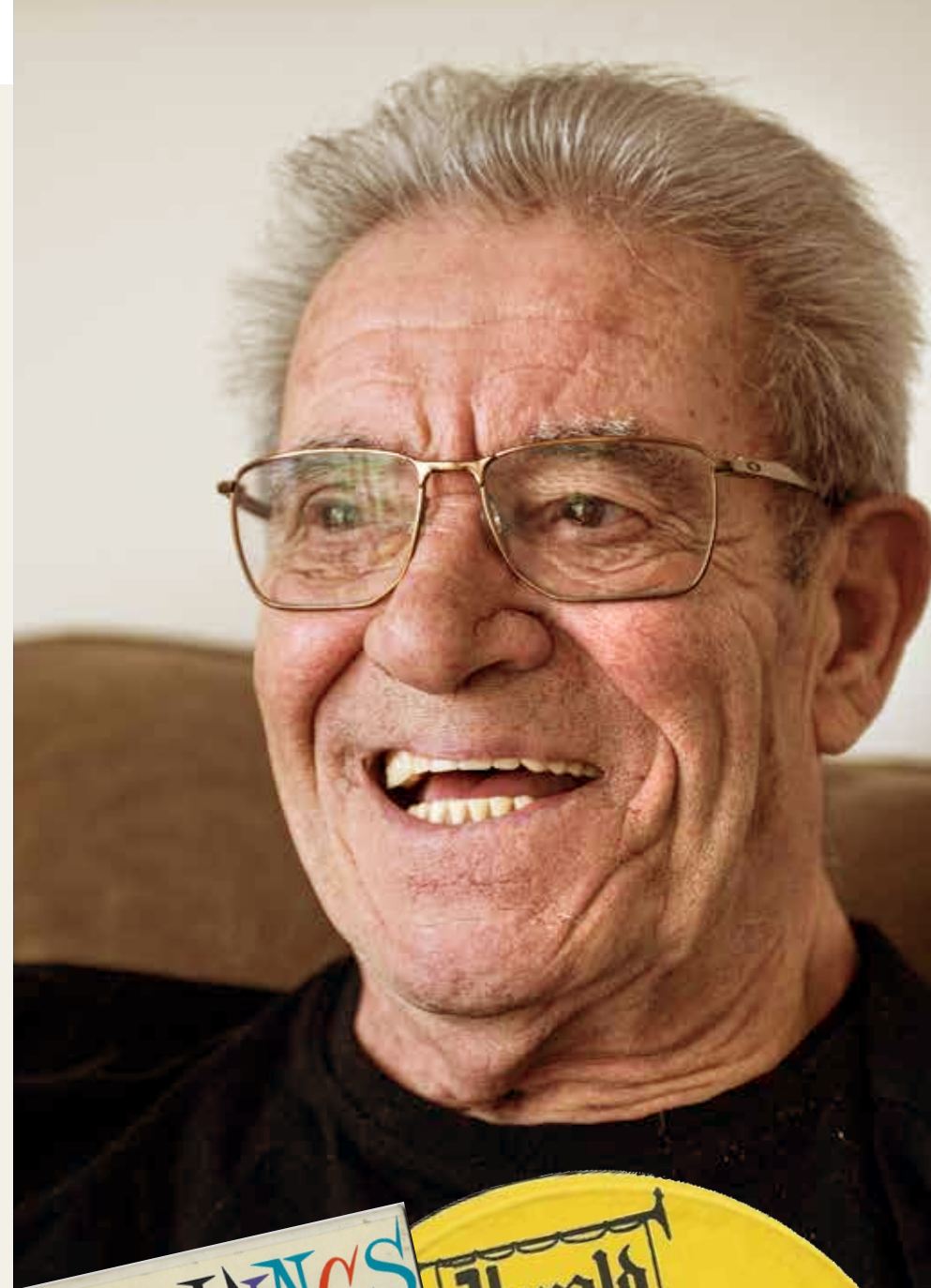


Meet Our

Mello-Kings

Ashburn octogenarian was once a star of the doo-wop world

BY CHRIS WADSWORTH



Just about everyone at Belmont Country Club knows Neil Arena. At least all the golfers do. Arena has been a starter at the club since it opened more than two decades ago – greeting golfers, keeping them organized and getting them to the right tee at the right time to keep play moving smoothly.

But not everyone knows that the man sitting in his golf cart with a clipboard and pencil is a bona fide international celebrity, a pop star who once entertained screaming audiences and received fan mail from around the United States as well as Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands and other far-flung lands.

In fact, he had a hit with the first single he and his pals cut.

“It was crazy,” Arena recalled. “We didn’t know much about [the] Cashbox [music charts]. We didn’t know much about Billboard. We just knew the guy who wrote the song was sitting outside the record company – Herald Records. He stopped us and said, ‘I wrote you guys a hit.’ He picked up Billboard Magazine and said, ‘Your song is No. 9 in 10 major cities.’”

Sure enough, a song that Arena and his buddies in the fledgling doo-wop group “The Mello-Kings” had recorded a few weeks back in that summer of 1957 was making waves on radio stations and music charts across the country.

It was called “Tonite, Tonite,” and it may have only reached No. 77 on the national charts according to “The Billboard Book of American Singing Groups: A History 1940-1990,” but it went much higher in individual cities such as Boston, New York and Washington. It even made it to No. 1 in Philadelphia.

Arena loved music from a young age — and quickly discovered others did, too.

“I started singing ‘Happy Birthday’ to the girls in grade school and they got a big kick out of it,” he said. “My teacher Miss Cochran called me aside and said, ‘Don’t you know that you have a good voice? One of these days you’re going to be able to use that voice for good purposes.’”

It seems Miss Cochran was prescient. A few years later – during

BY ASTRI WEE OF ASTRI WEE PHOTOGRAPHY

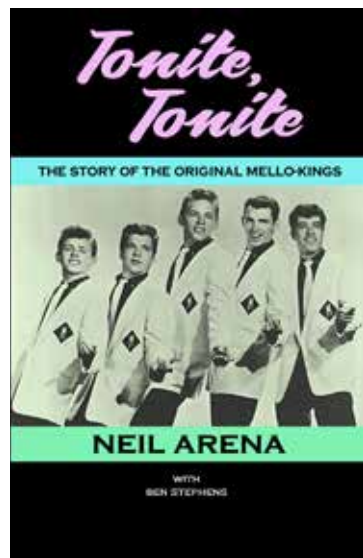


Arena's sophomore year at A.B. Davis High School in Mount Vernon, N.Y. — a friend told him about some fellow students, brothers Bobby and Jerry Scholl, who were forming a music group and holding auditions.

Arena went along — he thinks he performed “Why Do Fools Fall in Love” by Frankie Lymon & The Teenagers for his audition — and the next thing he knew, he was in.

“They said, ‘See you Monday at 7 o’clock at the Boys Club. We’re going to start rehearsing,’” Arena said.

Arena was just 15 and in the 10th grade when the group formed. For the next two years, he would live a lifetime of experiences and create the memories that form the foundation of a new book, “Tonite, Tonite: The Story of



Mello-Kings Cut Their Teeth On Their First Record

MELODIOUS Mello-Kings are pictured above listening to their first recording, “Tonight Tonight.” On the flip side of the disk is “Do Baby Do,” written and arranged by Richard F. Levister, the group’s piano accompanist, manager and director. Mello-Kings, formerly known

as the Mello-Tones, have been heard frequently throughout the county and will be one of the featured acts in the Showtimers Variety Show to be given at the Westchester Woman’s Club tomorrow night for the benefit of the Mount Vernon Boys Club. Organized almost a year ago, after

several changes in personnel, the singers now boast of a fan club with more than 500 members from Mount Vernon, Yonkers and New Rochelle. After five months of rehearsing at the North Side Boys’ Club, the vocalists auditioned for Herald Records, which cut their recordings and

awarded them a two-year contract. Shown left to right are Andrew Semansco, executive director of the Boys’ Club; Robert Scholl, second tenor; Eddie Quinn, first baritone; Jerry Scholl, first tenor; Larry Esposito, bass; Neil Arena, second baritone, and Richard Levister, director.

the Original Mello-Kings,” he authored along with writer Ben Stephens.

Larry Chance, a musician who occasionally played drums with The Mello-Kings back in the day, before going on to form his own group, The Earls, said Arena “is a brilliant musician who taught us so much.”

“[Neil’s book] has brought to life a bygone era when every neighborhood had kids singing on the streets,” Chance added.

The Mello-Kings, a quintet, was originally signed by Herald Records, a small record label of the 1950s and 1960s. A staff writer at the company gave the teens “Tonite, Tonite” to perform and they went into the recording studio.

“We were so fine-tuned by the musical director. Note by note, one at a time, one guy at a time, one note at a time, then hitting it all together. It was just phenomenal,” Arena said. “Something told me that I was doing something special. How special, I didn’t really know.”

The record spent more than 10 weeks on the pop charts and led The Mello-Kings to record a handful of additional singles that met with more modest success. And then — despite still being in their teens — they hit the

road touring.

Modern concert goers are used to seeing one main headliner and perhaps one or two opening acts. But in the mid-20th century, as pop bands proliferated, concerts would often feature anywhere from five to 10 acts — sometimes more. The Mello-Kings may not have received top billing themselves, but they toured with some of the biggest names of the era.

“We got on a tour with Jerry Lee Lewis,” Arena recalled. “The man was phenomenal. The whole auditorium was shaking. He was the headliner — the closer. We would go into the wings and watch him.”

Then there was the time in Youngstown, Ohio, when The Mello-Kings met famed musician and actor Bobby Darin just before he became a household name.

“We came out of the elevator at a hotel,” Arena said. “He had on a gray overcoat, and he called us over and

said, ‘I heard you and you guys are great.’ He said, ‘My name is Bobby Darin. You don’t know me now, but you will later.’ Not long after that — guess what came out: ‘Splish Splash.’”

That song went on to be Darin’s first million-selling single and made him famous across the country. “Just meeting him and shaking his hand has stayed with me to this day,” Arena added.

There must be something about elevators. Arena also bumped into iconic singer and actor Dean Martin in an elevator and the teen was so starstruck, he couldn’t utter a word.

Other acts the group toured or performed with included Paul Anka, Frankie Avalon, Andy Williams and The Del-Vikings.

But despite the fans and fun, Arena found touring difficult. Constant travel. In and out of hotels every night. Bad food. Trouble keeping up with schoolwork. Another member of The Mello-Kings left the group, and Arena made a similar decision soon thereafter. He dropped out and went back to Mount Vernon to finish high school.

“Too bad we were so young and →



COURTESY OF BELMONT COUNTRY CLUB

Neil Arena sits in his starter's cart at the Belmont Country Club.

got beat out of a lot of money. I think we could have been smarter, and I would have stayed longer," Arena said ruefully. "Tough lifestyle."

He was good at basketball – really good – once scoring 33 points in a game. He played for a local community college, hoping he might get scouted

by a bigger school. But that didn't happen. Arena ultimately went on to a career in the insurance industry. He married, divorced, raised his young son and daughter, then remarried – and through it all The Mello-Kings were a happy, but ever more distant, memory.

The group went on without him, and with a variety of new members over the decades has continued to perform on the oldies circuit right up to the present day.

Today, Arena is 82. He came to Loudoun County in the 1980s and moved into the Potomac Green neighborhood in Ashburn about 15 years ago. He has sung to the ladies at the pool. He has sung to friends while playing cards. He even was part of a rock-and-roll group with local residents.

His doo-wop pop star past was never a secret, but with the publishing of his recent book, Arena says he is approached a lot more by folks wanting to talk about it, including Belmont Country Club members who approach him in his starter's cart.

"All of a sudden people are coming around – they come over to me and

say, "I just got a scoop on you. I didn't know about this," Arena said.

Member Tony Keyes, who lives in Ashburn, first found out about Arena's past more than a decade ago. "My mind was blown," he said.

The two men bonded over a love of music. "I would come to the club for my tee time, and I would sing a short phrase from a song and Neil would complete it," Keyes said. "Over the years, he told me many stories about his life on the road and the people that he worked with."

Looking back, Arena knows he was part of a unique time in American history – the postwar boom, the rise of teenage culture and the proliferation of pop music. And his spot in one of those pop music groups – no matter how fleeting – is a special memory and a claim to fame that he still loves to reminisce about.

"I would do it all over again." **A**

You can find music from Neil and the Mello-Kings on the internet. If you would like to hear their biggest hit, go to: tinyurl.com/mellokingstonite.

ICE CREAM DREAMS



ASHBURN FAMILY FINDS SUCCESS ONE SCOOP AT A TIME

BY CHRIS WADSWORTH
PHOTOS BY ASTRI WEE



It was a dream 30 years in the making. In the late 1980s, Joel Smart took his girlfriend, LeAnne, to his favorite ice cream shop and told her about his dream to one day open his own shop.

One butter pecan cone later, LeAnne agreed. Together, his dream became their dream – and life went on.

The duo married in 1989 and started a family. They had two daughters, Kylene and Bri. They worked busy, demanding careers – him in sales at USA Today, her in the ministry and coordinating events for a large church. They moved all over Loudoun County – first to Ashburn, then Leesburg and Hamilton and finally back to Ashburn.

But they never forgot their goal of one day getting into the ice cream business.

“It would come up every few years,” Joel said. “But there were always things – the challenges of raising children, financial obligations at various stages in life – that seemed to get in the way.”

Many Ashburn residents who are fans of frozen treats know how this part of the story ends. In May 2020, the Smarts, with their now adult daughter Bri as the operations manager, finally fulfilled their dream — opening a

Bruster's Real Ice Cream shop at the Broadlands Village Center in Ashburn.

“Ashburn is home,” said Bri, who graduated from Stone Bridge High School just up the road. “We knew that’s where we wanted to plant our roots.”

Good choice. The shop was an immediate hit.

“I just remember looking outside and there were lines down both sides of the store,” Bri recalled about opening day. “We couldn’t make enough ice cream to keep up at first.”

That first weekend, they scooped 10,000 cones. They went through nine

buckets of mint chocolate chip ice cream alone on the first day. Each bucket holds about 100 scoops. It was the highest opening weekend volume for any non-drive-thru Bruster's location.

The shop's fans are legion. With its fresh-made Caramel Crackle, Lemon Blueberry Cake, Peppermint Stick and more than 150 other ice cream flavors, Bruster's Broadlands location was voted Best Ice Cream in Ashburn Magazine's Best of Ashburn 2023 contest for the third consecutive year.

The Smarts have built on the success of that first location, opening three more locations in less than three years. Their ice cream empire now stretches from Ashburn to Leesburg, Fairfax and most recently Aldie.

“In all honesty, we had a deal with Bruster's for just one location. We wanted to be fiscally responsible in case it didn't work,” Joel said. “But →



(Left to right) LeAnne, Bri and Joel Smart — owners and operators of Bruster's Real Ice Cream in Ashburn.



after 60 days, we knew it was going to be successful.”

While the business side and all the success are nice, Joel, LeAnne and Bri say the best part of the job is the relationships they build with customers, many of whom are regulars at the windows of the Bruster's in Ashburn.

“I've had customers bring their baby – after seeing them pregnant at the window for months – for their child's

first taste of ice cream,” Bri said. “I've seen a middle school boy bring his little brother for ice cream and count out coins just to get him something sweet.”

Being so close to the community also means that the Smarts listen to the wishes of their clientele. This includes launching what they call international flavors for the area's diverse cultures. Examples include Chikoo ice cream, flavored after a fruit popular in India, and Sitafal, a custard sugar apple flavor. They also have Ube, a ice cream inspired by a purple sweet potato that has a “very marshmallow-y flavor,” according to the Smarts.

“On one particular evening, three families were at our window and ordered one of the international flavors,” Joel said. “We had just made our first batch of Sitafal [ice cream], so I took a couple of dishes out for them to taste-test. One spoonful and one of the young women began to cry. She said, ‘I just went back to being 5 years old in India and sitting on my grandfather's lap. He used to take me for this flavor”





ice cream,” said Amy Lee, struggling to find the perfect words to describe Bruster’s ice cream. “I love the Butter Brickle and my fallback is always Oreo. My husband loves the White Raspberry Truffle. The kids there are friendly. They’re quick. They never screw up the orders. And it’s right down the street. You can’t beat it.”

That’s music to the ears of the Smart family – and it’s music they probably intend to spread. They’ve already added two ice cream trailers and a food truck to their business offerings. Although they are coy about plans for future locations, anyone who has opened four ice cream shops in three years is unlikely to slow down anytime soon.

“Interestingly, we continually have landlords reaching out to us based on the vibe they [feel] we bring to the centers where we ... operate,” Joel said. “Ice cream is – after all – a happy experience.” **A**

every Friday when I was young.”

Amy Lee and her husband, Chris, are big fans of Bruster’s ice cream. The Broadlands couple has more free time these days as empty nesters, and Amy jokingly says much of that time is spent at Bruster’s.

“It’s fresh – they make it right there. It has this rich cream... buttermilk... I don’t know what the hell it is – but I think it is heads and tails above other

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GAARDER

Local Olympic fencer looks back on his sporting life

BY BILL KENT



It's one of the first things people notice. Anyone who shakes Ed Donofrio's hand encounters "The Grip." When he folds his hand around yours, he has you until he wants to let go.

"My right hand's bigger than my left," said Donofrio, spry and energetic for his 72 years. "In fencing, you have to have just the right grip. Not too

loose. Not too tight. The rest of you stays loose so you can parry and lunge. But the grip has to be just right."

For more than 50 years, Donofrio has been a titan of the sport of fencing. And for all that time, this Olympian, two-time national champion and USA Fencing Hall of Fame member hasn't gone a day without

using that grip. But these days, his oversized right hand is more likely to clamp down on a leash when his dog wants to chase a squirrel around his Belmont Green neighborhood in Ashburn.

"Her name is Happy and she's a rescue," Donofrio said. "She just turned 11 and she gets walked incessantly – probably more than she wants. Dogs are great animals. I just love 'em."

Learning The Sport

Although swordplay is nearly as old as the use of weapons, modern fencing has its roots in the late Renaissance, when instructors developed distinct training styles to teach poise, balance, strategy and agility while keeping students alive and unhurt.

The epee, foil and saber swords used in

today's fencing are not sharp and the ends are blunted. Fencers say "En garde" as a match begins. Points are scored when the blade touches ("Touché!") an opponent.

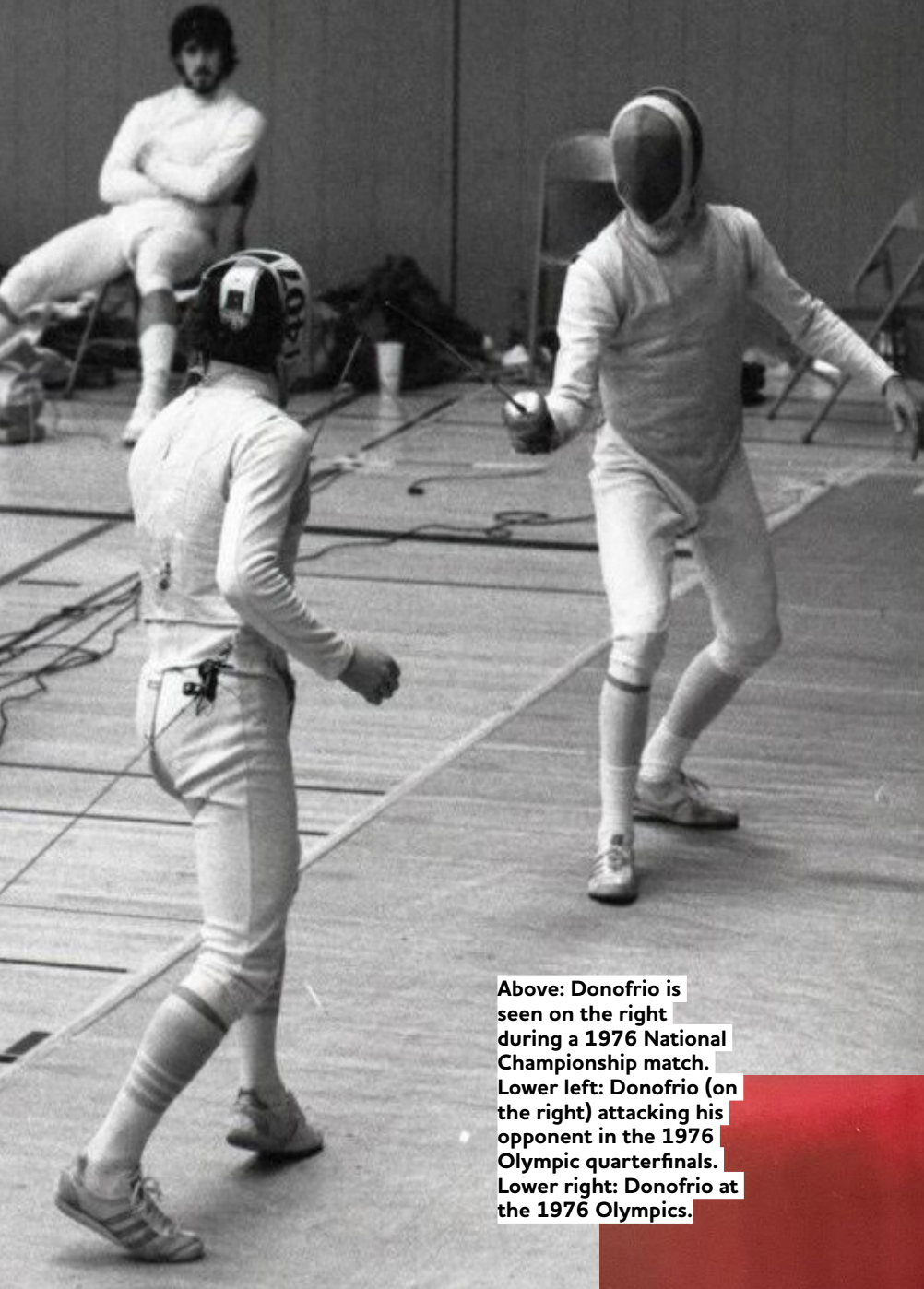
Of course, Donofrio had no idea about any of this when he first heard about fencing. Born in Brooklyn, N.Y., and raised on Long Island, his inspiration came from the silver screen.

"I was 14. My best friend heard about it, and I thought I'd be like Zorro," he said.

He joined the fencing club at his junior high school and continued to fence in high school. He found it less like the adventures of the famous swashbuckling Zorro, more like a group of really "great people" who connected him to other fencing teams and other players. One of those fellow fencers was a young Neil Diamond. ➔



A photo of Ed Donofrio wearing two gold medals he won during National Championship competitions.



Above: Donofrio is seen on the right during a 1976 National Championship match. Lower left: Donofrio (on the right) attacking his opponent in the 1976 Olympic quarterfinals. Lower right: Donofrio at the 1976 Olympics.



Donofrio says he and the “Sweet Caroline” singer/songwriter still keep in touch. “We didn’t fence against each other, but we went to the same club in New York,” Donofrio recalled. “He fenced saber, I fenced foil. Every Christmas, a group of us still get together, and every year he comes. He wouldn’t miss it.”

The Climb

For Donofrio, who wanted to be an engineer, fencing was just something cool to do as an extracurricular activity.

“For years, I lost just about every match I entered,” he said. “One of the first things fencing taught me was not to take losing seriously. You learn from your mistakes and move on.”

And learn he did. He began to study the fencers who had bested him. And to his surprise, he started to win. “I was in my senior year, and everything I learned from making mistakes began to come together. I still lost matches, but I started winning more.”

Donofrio went to the U.S. Naval Academy, where he joined the fencing team. And just like in high school, he continued to distinguish himself. Still, he never could have guessed that he would soon become a national champion, compete in the Olympics, and play poker with a member of the Rolling Stones.

Becoming An Olympian

At a competition in Cherry Hill, N.J., that would crown the national champion and determine who would represent the United States at the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal, Donofrio found himself on a winning streak.

“I was doing so well in points that at the semifinals, people started to come up and congratulate me ... I couldn’t figure out why,” he said. “Then I saw I had more points than anyone else. I was going to the Olympics.”

Three weeks later, he was in Montreal at the Olympic Village. “I was wearing the United States team uniform, and people were coming up to me asking for my autograph. I saw President Gerald Ford there, George Foreman and Mike Spinks. Mick Jagger played poker with our team. He got a pass to be in the village and he was around the whole time. Good guy.”

Donofrio doesn’t remember who won the card game, but he knows he won many of the fencing matches he entered, finishing as a semifinalist out of some 140 Olympic fencers from around the world.

New Coach In Town

After graduating from the Naval Academy, Donofrio did a tour of duty in Vietnam and then left the Navy to take a series of manufacturing design jobs. But he kept on pursuing competitive fencing – a passion that took him to France, Germany, Italy, Canada and Argentina, where, coincidentally, he met actor Guy Williams, who once played Zorro on television.

Donofrio eventually moved to Ashburn with his wife, marketing executive Donna Seeker, and their six children. Wanting to be his own boss, he started a commercial and residential property inspection company with his son, Joey. In his free time, he polished up his golf game and started volunteering as a fencing coach at his beloved Naval Academy.

He also coaches aspiring fencers right here in Ashburn.

“When Ed walked into our club, I had no idea who he was,” said Dr. Amy Papadopoulos, the founder of the Loudoun International Fencing Club. “But I knew he was somebody. He has a presence.”

She remembers Donofrio observing one of the club’s instructors. “He stood there for a long time and said nothing, but I could tell Ed didn’t like what he saw,” Papado-



Left: Donofrio with his wife, Donna Seeker, and their dog, Happy. Below: Donofrio stands between his sons, Jason (left) and Joey (right).



poulos said. “He came to me and said that if I fired that teacher, he would teach that class, and continue to teach – and coach – for free.”

She did, and Donofrio taught and coached at the club until it closed due to the pandemic in 2020. “Ed was the best,” Papadopoulos said. “He could relate perfectly to teenagers.”

‘Not Just Fencing’

The word got out that one of the best American fencers was living in Ashburn, and Ed began to get requests from parents to coach their kids.

One student he took on was Ryan Rodriguez, son of Dr. K. Michael Rodriguez, a physician with Broadlands Family Practice.

“I used to sit and watch him coach the kids,” Rodriguez said. “There were a lot of life lessons about tenacity, competing, striving to improve, sportsmanship, but also friendship and – through example – giving back to your community. All these things add up to helping kids gain confidence in themselves – not just in fencing.”

This summer, Donofrio and his family

flew to Phoenix, where he was inducted into the USA Fencing Hall of Fame. Donofrio’s son, Joey, who now lives in Brambleton, teared up when he introduced his father to the audience.

“My father is my hero,” he said. Preparing for the speech had helped this son, who never caught the fencing bug, realize just how focused and dedicated his father was to his chosen sport.

“All my life, my father had just kept telling me whatever you want to do you can accomplish if you put your mind to it,” the younger Donofrio said. “You learn that no one is born great. Becoming great takes a tremendous amount of work.”

Ed Donofrio is as surprised as anyone by his success and the accompanying accolades. In addition to the USA Fencing Hall of Fame, he has also been inducted into the Naval Academy’s Athletic Hall of Fame.

And there are other honors, too.

“I’ll tell you when I knew I had finally made it big,” Donofrio said with a chuckle. “A sweatshirt I wore to a competition – I don’t know what happened to it or how



Above: Donofrio (right) spars with a student he is coaching at the U.S. Naval Academy. Below: Donofrio (right) with his son, Joey, after his induction into the USA Fencing Hall of Fame in Phoenix.



they got it – is now hanging in the Museum of American Fencing in Shreveport, Louisiana. Honestly, how can you top that?”

Bill Kent is a prolific writer and author whose articles have appeared in The New York Times, the Philadelphia Inquirer, Kirkus Reviews and elsewhere.