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Herb Mols, 'The Father of the Western Region,' has turned his home into an office.

Mols: There from the start

By MARK GAUGHAN

The one person in Western New York who was involved in the Empire State Games before anyone else is Herb Mols, "The Father of the Western Region."

Mols was there at the beginning, at a meeting of Gov. Carey's Commission on Sports and Winter Olympics at Plattsburgh State College in 1976. Carey had appointed the commission to assist in planning for the Lake Placid Olympic Games and to explore ways to encourage amateur athletics programs in the state.

Mols, then head of the Niagara District of the Amateur Athletics Union, was present as an advisor. "They went around the room, giving everyone an opportunity to speak, and when it came to me, I jumped in with both feet and said it wouldn't be that difficult to stage an 'Olympics of New York State,'" Mols recalled.

"I wasn't worried in the slightest that it could be pulled off," said Mols. "We already held state championships in many of the sports — track, swimming, judo, wrestling, boxing. I predicted that while it may not be a snap, the framework to initiate it was in place."

Shortly after the conference, a plan for the Games was drawn up and implemented by Carey. The governor appointed Mols director of the Western Region, and Mols has held the position ever since.

Mols' connection with the Empire State Games, of course, is just the latest in an amateur athletics career that has stretched six decades and taken him from the running tracks of Fosdick Masten High to the Olympic Games in Munich, West Germany.

Born in Buffalo in 1915, Mols went on from Fosdick Masten to play football at Cornell, from where he graduated in 1936. After serving as a Navy radar specialist in the Pacific in World War II, he joined the Park School, where he would remain until 1973. In addition to being athletic director, he coached football, basketball, baseball and track, as well as teaching biology, chemistry and physics.

In 1946 he began officiating track meets, and soon after became involved in the administration of amateur sports.

After rising to the top of the Niagara AAU, he became a national AAU official, and in that capacity

traveled to the Soviet Union, Finland, Germany, Puerto Rico and several South American countries.

His most memorable trips were as a member of the U.S. Olympic Basketball Committee, with the highlight coming in 1972, when he served as manager of the Olympic basketball team in Munich.

That was the team that lost the famed, 51-50, gold-medal game to the Soviet Union after scoring an apparent victory. Disputes resulted in three extra seconds being added to the clock, which allowed the Soviets to score the winning basket at the buzzer.

Mols wrote a detailed report on the officiating of the game, which was widely distributed. Olympic President Avery Brundage "didn't carry the ball for us on a legitimate protest," Mols said at the time.

Mols retired from the AAU in 1981, but left with one vow, that he would see the Empire State Games come to Buffalo.

"Once we got enough beds at UB-Amherst, it was inevitable," Mols said.

"The help of Dennis Gorski and William Hanbury (of the Chamber of Commerce) were the key factors. We started to develop a plan and submitted a bid in 1982, but were rejected.

"The next year, I really felt it was going to come, we just had to eliminate a couple technical difficulties."

Mols also credited University of Buffalo President Dr. Stephen B. Sample in bringing the games to Buffalo. "It also couldn't have been done if he hadn't put all his weight behind it. He visualized the value of bringing them to UB."

"For one thing, the construction of the stadium at UB certainly was quickened by the fact the Games were coming.

"I'm sure this year is going to be the biggest and best Games ever," Mols said. "But that's not a reflection on Syracuse. I think it's important that we not compare ourselves too much with Syracuse. We're benefiting from the seven years of experience there."

And, undoubtedly, the Western Region wouldn't be the same without the 70 years of experience of Herb Mols.