



# *Enjoying Life: A Conversation with* **John Pfitsch**

by Andrew Walsh '09

Photos by Jim Heemstra

A conversation with John Pfitsch can take you places you never thought you'd go.

Stories about the legendary Grinnell coach have already filled many pages. After all, in a Grinnell career that spanned more than 50 years, he coached just about every sport, including basketball, football, soccer, tennis, baseball, and golf.

I recently sat down with him on a wintry afternoon at his home in Grinnell, where he lives with his wife Emily. In the free-flowing stream of anecdotes and recollections he shared with me, I learned far more than I ever could have anticipated about his profound impact on several generations of Grinnellians.

Although his influence on Grinnell College is well documented, people don't always realize the extent of his contributions to the larger community. John Pfitsch has inspired people throughout the town to commit to a life of wellness and activity. His dedication to extending his knowledge and expertise beyond the boundaries of campus exemplifies the bond Grinnell College strives to maintain with the community of which it is a part.





The dedication of Pfitsch's Pfishes is legendary at the PEC (l to r): Ken Tedrick, Pat Emmert (front) and Judy Cook, and Art Heimann are among those who regularly work out to the commanding voice of John Pfitsch.

## In the Swim

In just about every story Pfitsch tells, a connection between the College and the community emerges. Sometimes it requires a rather long journey to get to that point, however. A good example involves swimming, a sport he never actually coached at the collegiate level. At age 90, Pfitsch continues to lead a popular water aerobics class known as "Pfitsch's Pfishes," in which he motivates and instructs a group of senior citizens in the PEC pool.

The story of how this arrangement came about dates all the way back to the 1950s.

After becoming Grinnell College's basketball coach in 1948, a young Pfitsch started working a summer job at the Grinnell Country Club, giving swim lessons to children. After a few years, he also began to manage the city's youth swim team. Nancy Baumgartner, Grinnell native and now administrative assistant for the athletic director, remembers how Coach Pfitsch made a swimmer of her.

"John Pfitsch taught me how to swim when I was 7 years old," Baumgartner says. "I didn't even know how to float and could barely put my face in the water. On the third day of class, John told me that I was no longer in swimming lessons. Instead, he put me on the swimming team!"

"I protested that one needed to be able to swim the length of the pool to be on the team, and that I couldn't do that," she continues. "What a stupid thing for me to say, because John took it as a personal challenge. He immediately made me attempt the dreaded one length. I remember making it halfway, lifting my head and yelling, 'I can't make it!'"

"Yes you can!" John yelled back, laughing.

"No, I can't!"

"Yes, you can!"

"No, I can't!"

"Quit yelling and start swimming!" John yelled to me.

"So I put my head back down and swam the rest of the way," Baumgartner says. "I've been swimming ever since."

Pfitsch had a great ability both to identify and develop

talent for the competitive team, Baumgartner explains, and at the same time allow everyone involved to exercise and enjoy themselves, regardless of their ability.

"He really cared about everyone he instructed," she says. "I completely trusted John Pfitsch, felt very safe, and wanted to do my absolute best for him. Keep in mind that this was the 1960s, so what John was doing was a really unique opportunity for girls. The swim lessons and teams were our only outlet for competition of any sort."

## Pfitsch's Pfishes

The community swimming activities led by John Pfitsch continued to evolve over the next few years. "A group of five mothers of the kids I taught asked if I could teach them how to swim," he explains. "They suggested I start a class for the mothers, and I thought it was a great idea."

After just a few lessons, the women had learned all the basic strokes and wanted a new challenge. "I tried to think of something else to do," Pfitsch says, "when I remembered a YMCA camp in San Antonio where they did synchronized swimming. Although they didn't know what it was at first, we worked hard on their routines, and they ended up really enjoying it."

One day, a woman brought in a tape of a class in California where they performed exercises in the water. Pfitsch liked what he saw, took some of the ideas, and designed a water aerobics program to teach in Grinnell. In the years that followed, it gradually became a wellness program for seniors from the Grinnell community, which is still very popular today.

"They pay \$25 for the whole year, and there is a class every day Monday through Friday," Pfitsch says. "It's amazing that so many of them have the energy and fire to come in at 8 a.m. every single day."

A few years ago, four men showed up at the class, having recently moved to the Mayflower. After a few

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For more photos of Pfitsch's Pfishes, visit [www.grinnell.edu/magazine](http://www.grinnell.edu/magazine) and click on "Extras."

minutes of swimming, one of them turned to Pfitsch and said, “You don’t know me, do you?” Pfitsch replied that he didn’t. “Well, I was in your swimming class in 1954,” the man continued. “You taught me to swim.”

Pfitsch is now leading his third generation.

The group of “Pfishes” does more than just swim together, as Art Heimann, one of the most dedicated members, explains. “After class, we’ll go out and have breakfast together about once a month. And we have a bigger breakfast event about three times a year. I coordinate one that we hold at the Mayflower, and we also have one in October around Pfitsch’s birthday, and another over the holidays.”

At the holiday party, Pfitsch gives out wooden fish that he has carved to each participant to put on their Christmas tree. “I like to give them something to represent their effort and show off what they have accomplished,” Pfitsch says.

“I have been doing this for 20 years,” Heimann continues, “and I’ll turn 88 in March. It’s a wonderful exercise program, and it’s part of what keeps us young.”

## A Community of Wellness

Many of Pfitsch’s actions have had a significant influence on the very concept of wellness in Grinnell, as well as the College-town relationship. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Pfitsch got the city to approve the very first recreation program with its own budget and a recreation director. At the beginning, the position was a just a summer job, and the first few directors were Grinnell College students. In the decades that followed, the recreation program grew exponentially, and today it offers an incredible variety of programs and services.

But it all started with John Pfitsch.

Other Pfitsch anecdotes begin with intercollegiate athletics and eventually incorporate the community. At one point during our conversation, he said, “I started baseball at Grinnell because I promised it to a player.”

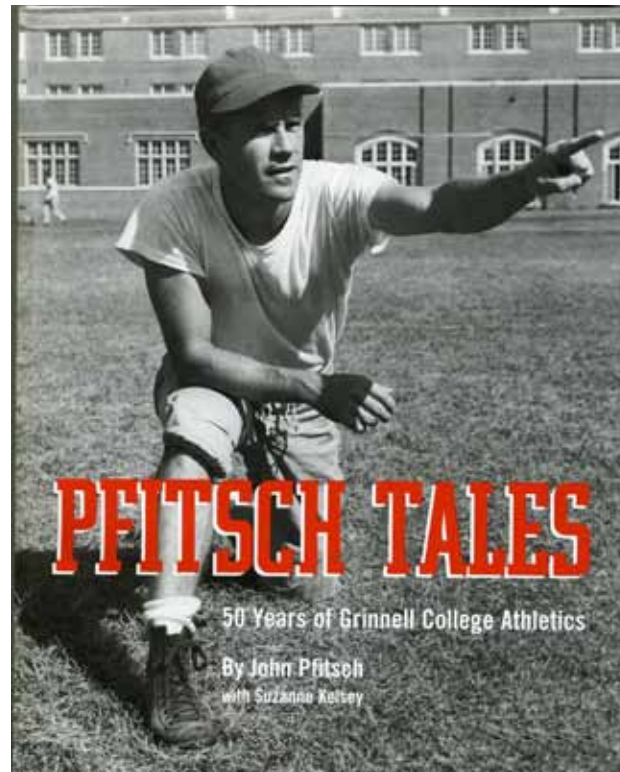
Pfitsch revived the sport after it had been absent from the College for 41 years. He told me the story of how it happened.

**Dick Crowl ’57**, a basketball recruit who was making his college decision, told Pfitsch, “You have a great place, but there’s no baseball team. I’d love to play baseball wherever I go.”

Pfitsch didn’t know why they didn’t have a team and promised Crowl he’d make it happen.

Crowl believed in Pfitsch, and he came to Grinnell and became a standout basketball player. Pfitsch went to the College president to talk about the idea of a baseball team. The president said that Pfitsch would need to come up with \$1,000—most likely, Pfitsch believes, with the idea that facing such an obstacle, Pfitsch would soon forget about baseball.

But Crowl’s father contributed the money, and Pfitsch went back to the president to present his case about how



**John Pfitsch's stories were published in 2003 as *Pfitsch Tales: 50 Years of Grinnell College Athletics*.**

the team would benefit the College and the whole town. The faculty voted and approved the addition of the team.

Although it was a major victory, the team still needed a place to play. One day Pfitsch was discussing the situation over a round of golf with Frank Funke, the president of Donaldson Muffler in Grinnell.

“You can have our front yard,” Funke said. “It’s a nice spot of grass and it’s definitely big enough.”

“That yard is where we played, and that’s where lefty starting pitcher Dick Crowl won five games in his senior year,” Pfitsch recalls with a smile.

Pfitsch has encouraged lifetime wellness in Grinnell throughout his storied tenure, and he certainly practices what he preaches. Even though today health issues sometimes keep him from participating in all the activities he would like to engage in — Pfitsch’s Pfishes now work out while his voice booms out from a CD player — he’s still working hard at fitness.

The very day after I spoke with him, I ran into John Pfitsch in the PEC. It was another bitterly cold day, but he was heading to the weight room to get in a morning workout. He pointed to the exercise bike he always uses and told me a little bit about his routine.

As I looked back at him, I remembered something he had said the day before that sums up his philosophy. “Enjoying life. That’s what these aerobics classes, and exercise in general, are all about.”