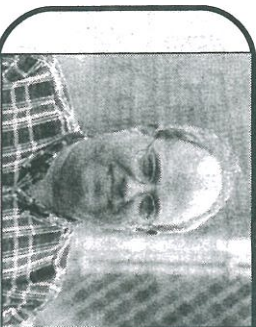


**Devil's Den****Teammates Thank Ketcham  
For All the Great Memories**By **BRUCE JOHNSON***Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times*

They came from all over the country to the tiny little Reformed Church in Kinnelon, Morris County. "Uncle Joe" Della Badia, the coach, came down from New Hampshire. Todd Rothbard, the team manager, made the trip from California. And the others, Steve McCoy, Dave and Pete Demarest, Don Mutz, Fred Lieberberg, John Ricker, all of Johnny Ketcham's teammates and friends from those great WHS swim teams of the mid-1960s. And so many others, including Gary and Glen Kehler, Jim Hely, Lee Hale, swim teammates from Wesleyan College and hundreds of his friends from a life well-lived.

It was sad, because to many of those in attendance, John Ketcham was the embodiment of those dominating WHS teams. Powerful, perfect technique, humble, intelligent. He would go on to excel at Wesleyan College, nearly make the Olympic team, eventually marry Jody Davies, and raise a family in the woods of northern Morris County. John Ketcham even helped build the church in which his funeral was held.

But it was also not a sad occasion. His friends — including former Pingry star Vic Pfeiffer, a former Wesleyan teammate — came to praise John Ketcham, their friend and their leader, captain of the 1966 WHS swim team that many consider the state's best team ever. There were remembrances of the great meets against the Princeton and Yale freshmen, and Lawrenceville Prep, and the Eastern Interscholastics, which was the big meet every year for those WHS teams. And of the time he downed an "Awful, Awful" at Bond's in 11 seconds, just one more record for John.

Rothbard, he of the amazing statistical memory, recalled the splits of all four swimmers on that legendary Ketcham-Dave Perkowski-Harvey Gerber-Peter Heesch medley relay — 41 years ago! And he proudly retold tales of the great 1966 win over the Princeton freshmen, avenging the only loss of 1965, when Uncle Joe moved sprinter Doug McOwen into the backstroke for a stunning 1-2 finish. John Ketcham was the 1 in that race.

Mike Ketcham told of when he was 8 and had his backstroke record broken by 6-year-old brother John. "A lifeguard came up to me and asked me how it felt to be a has-been. I was 8!" But that would be a precursor of the rest of their swim careers, Mike setting the records at the Westfield Y, Westfield High and Wesleyan, and John coming along and breaking them. Mike told of his last meeting with John before cancer beat him, and how Mike, the older brother, couldn't help crying and how John whispered in his ear, "It's OK, bro, it's OK."

(By far the tallest person in attendance was 7-0, 270-pound Michael Olowokandi. The 7-foot, 270-pounder is a center on the Boston Celtics, and a former (1998) No. 1 draft pick in the NBA by the L.A. Clippers. He is married to John Ketcham's daughter from his first marriage.)

*Devil's Den* And as the late morning turned into mid-afternoon in the beautiful lake-filled countryside, the members of one of the great athletic teams New Jersey has ever seen said one last good-bye to their friend, and headed back to their lives, richer for the memories.