

Tribute to Wayne Walker

Written and presented by Garrett Jensen, Coach Walker's student of running and friend (January 15, 2007)

Coach,

I am here to say thank you on behalf of all of us who called Wayne “Coach”. Those of us who were privileged to be coached by him still call him Coach Walker; a testament to the impact he has had on our lives. The poem “His Running, My Running” by Robert Francis explains the influence of a coach:

*Mid-autumn late autumn
At dayfall in leaf-fall
A runner comes running.
How easy his striding
How light his footfall
His bare legs gleaming.
Alone he emerges
Emerges and passes
Alone, sufficient.
When autumn was early
Two runners came running
Striding together
Shoulder to shoulder
Pacing each other
A perfect pairing
Out of leaves falling
Over leaves fallen
A runner comes running
Aware of no watcher
His liveness my liveness
His running my running.*

Coach Walker could run and pace us in practice, but the true measure of his legacy as a coach was how we utilized his teaching in races and the life lessons we learned from time spent with him. The mile, said John Landy, is an event that has a classic symmetry, a play in four acts. In honor of Coach Walker, here is the mile version of our time with him:

The first lap of the mile is the one where all the competitors are sizing each other up. I can still remember the first time the team met Coach Walker. We were surprised to see our new coach sporting a

Fu Manchu mustache. Oblivious to our shock at witnessing his unique facial hair, Coach quickly readied himself for our first run together. However, the men's team was mortified to discover that Coach wanted to run with us in his incredibly short running shorts. We were quite embarrassed to find out that he did not mind showing off his legs, in stark contrast to our running attire of knee-length soccer shorts. But the same thing that led Coach Walker to dance to a different beat also made him a better coach. He came up with ingenious workouts, whether it was a fast 5 x 400 with limited rest, 3 miles worth of intervals to build our strength, or hill repeats on the local trails. Being a great coach was not simply expressed in his good workouts. His true skill was his ability to transfer his passion for running to us. We believed in his training because we saw how much he loved running.

Lap #2 is the lap when reality slaps you in the face. You realize the shocking enormity of just how much physical and mental training competitive running demands. Talent has little to do with running the second lap well. Rather, it is characterized by the discipline that got you there. A coach's job is said to be 20% technical and 80% inspirational. Coach instilled in us a sense of discipline and inspired in us a desire to train diligently, whether we were competing or between seasons. He also inspired us to do better when we encountered less than stellar results. Early on in his coaching career at Sunny Hills we went through a disappointing invitational at one of our league rivals' home parks. Instead of getting down on us, Coach used the race as a learning experience. When we finally reached the championship portion of our season the lessons learned at the earlier invitational allowed us to have personal best races when it counted most.

The third lap is where you feel the farthest away from the finish line. The race is wearing you down physically, but the real toll is the mental anguish associated with continuing to push your body. Coach's hero was Steve Prefontaine. Pre's philosophy was that a lot of people run a race to see who is the fastest. "I run," said Pre, "to see who has the most guts." Guts allow the runner to reach down and push himself to a level he never thought possible. In training, Coach would push us to our limits, and then just a little beyond. He knew from his days as a competitor that this is the lap where his runners needed his guidance the most. He used those tough practices to teach us the courage we needed for Lap 3.

Every runner remembers the sensations that course through his body when the sound of the bell is rung or the gun goes off signifying the final lap. No matter where you are in the race your goal is to finish well. But Coach instilled in us the idea that the last lap was settled weeks, months, and years before on the hill workouts, weekend long runs together, and the morning run missed here or made up there. He let us know that success would only come with ample preparation. No matter what you have left, he said, during the final lap you have to reach deeper than at any other time in the race. You either protect your lead or you move into the outside lane and kick it in. Coach taught us never to have anything left. You expend it all on the race.

But Coach didn't just invest in us as runners. He saw us as individuals who would continue our lives beyond the hills and descents of the fall cross country season and the dirt and rubberized tracks of the spring track season. Several years after his triumph at the Boston Marathon, Jon Anderson said, "Today I definitely qualify as a jogger. I realized that recently when I saw a beautiful golf course and my immediate thought was how great it would be to play on it, not run on it." Several of us still run for fun and the occasional race because Coach taught us that there was more to running than those few short years each one of us experienced as racers. He showed us through his continued running that a person

can enjoy the scenery that only a good run can provide as well as the mental challenge to continue pushing oneself.

Coach could also make us laugh, because he never took himself too seriously, modeling how important a sense of humor is to running the race in life. At the Footlocker Championships, he was overly excited about running in the coach's race, so excited in fact that he forgot to use the restroom before the race. Sure enough, at the half-way point nature called, and Coach was forced to take a restroom detour, which made him finish in the back of the pack. After crossing the finish line in a less than stellar time, he good-naturedly laughed at his failure to follow his own advice.

Each of us has favorite memories of our experiences with Coach. Mine was the NCAA Championships at Rim Rock Farm in Lawrence, Kansas. The course, which was designed by the former coach of Kansas, was specially crafted out of the farmland and featured bank turns, bark laden trails, a covered bridge, and five steel silhouettes of Kansas running greats, including Jim Ryun and Billy Mills. Coach and my dad drove out through the farm country to visit the course the day before the big race. Coach was especially excited to run this dream course, to experience what the runners would face the following day. As it turned out my team was warming up when Coach arrived, and we invited him to run with us. We threw a Dartmouth tee shirt on him, and we all took off for a good run around the course. Coming down one of the hills, we ran in tight formation, and at that very moment, a local photographer captured a picture of our team. The next morning the Kansas paper's first page story featured the NCAA championships. Sure enough, the only photo was the Dartmouth team, complete with Coach in the center of the pack with his Dartmouth tee-shirt, intently striding with the college runners nearly half his age. He was definitely stoked to be a front page story.

The truth is Coach Walker was a front page story for all of us. He was that kind of coach. He was that kind of man. "Long may you run" Coach... "Long may you run."

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