THIS WEEK IN TRACK & FIELD

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02/10/11

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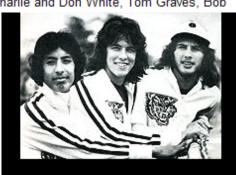
This Week in IL Track & Field

Mitch Johnston (right) and the Winged Foot Foundation receives the Illinois Track & Cross Country Coaches Association Recognition Award in 2010 from Don Helburg. Photo Cassandra Geiger

Any young distance runner growing up in the south suburbs should know the names Dave Merrick, Dave Walters, Rudy Chapa, Carey Pinkowski, Tim Keogh, Charlie and Don White, Tom Graves, Bob Hicks, Dave Kaemerer, Chris Loring, Jim Galen, Mike and John Sullivan, Mike Kirk, Mike Sokolowicz, John Capriotti, Leo Lenting, Jeff Small, Terry and Rusty Bauer, Dave Carrizales, Mike Keane, and Ken Staggs. Those were the top runners in the 70's in Illinois and they all hailed from the South Suburbs. Lead by the Bloom teams of the 70's, it was commonplace to hear the names of Bloom, Thornton, Thornridge, Thornwood, Homewood Flossmoor, and Sandburg in the lead at the top meets of the day. The highlight of the 70's for the south suburbanites arguably was the inaugural Two Mile Relay at the 1976 State Track Meet. That meet saw three south suburban teams break the state record and one, Thornton, break the national record and set the State Meet record that still stands to this day. Less than four seconds separated Thornton from

Dyestat Achieves Photo

Rudy Chapa, Tim Keogh, and Cary Pinkowski Although from Hammond, Indiana, this trio had an influence on the Chicago South Suburbs as they all broke 9:00 for two miles while at Hammond High.

6th place finisher and district rival Thornwood. It is debated among track historians as the greatest race in track and field history. The final lap saw Thornton's Don White come from behind to nip Rockford East and Lyons for the win and the new record. White went on to win the 400 later in the day.

Notably absent from the 1976 two mile relay was Thornton's Mitch Johnston. Johnston ran 1:56 for 880 yards at the 1975 State Track meet. In the summer of 1975, Johnston traveled with a group of south suburbanites, coached by former Thornridge (current North Park University) coach Skip Stolley and former Bloom (current retired Nike executive) coach Steve Miller, and competed at the Dortmund Invitational in Dortmund, Germany where he ran 1:53 for 800 meters. "Unfortunately for me my senior year, I was injured late in the outdoor season and was unable to compete at State." recalled Johnson "Luckily we had great team depth and Bill Moran filled in for me. Only a sophomore, Bill teamed up with seniors Steve Ibarra, Mike Clark and Don White to win the State 2-Mile Relay Championship."

Johnston attributes the competitiveness of the south suburbanites to the camaraderie that they had. "The South Suburbs in the 70's was a highly competitive area for high school middle distance and distance runners. Each team's success fueled the resolve of the next team to do better. Each team realized the necessity for significant mileage and running 40-60 miles a week was the norm. We made the best of the training facilities we had available to us in the South Suburbs. And we constantly ran into other teams while training on the roads or in the forest preserves. Our favorite place to run on Sundays was the forest preserve in Southwest Cook County. We'd park at the Little Red School House or Maple Lake near 95th Street and run a 10 mile loop. All the south suburban runners were very competitive but we also had fun socially. And the camaraderie we shared in the 70's continues to this day."

Johnston went on to compete at Murray State for Coach Bill Cornell and alongside Olympic 800 meter finalist David Warren of Great Britain. Post-collegiately Johnston ran with Ted Haydon and the University of Chicago Track club. In college he netted PR's of 1:51 on the half and 3:49 for 1500 meters.

Like most folks, his running days were put aside while he started a career (30 years with the Chicago Tribune) and a family. During that time, the south suburbs saw economic hardships, and many of the great track coaches of the area had since retired. The steel miils in Gary and the Ford Plants in Chicago Heights all suffered layoffs and cutbacks which severly affected the area. Other industry fled for Northwest Indiana or the Western Suburbs.

It was a chance meeting with Thornridge Coach TJ Shirley that got Johnston back involved with South Suburban Track & Field.

"In 2004, I was at the funeral of my sister's father-in-law, Joseph Roque, and met TJ Shirley, Thornridge Track Coach. Later we discussed the condition of South Suburban Track & Field and its challenges. I asked TJ how I could help and he expressed the need for new or used trainers. My first delivery of shoes at Thornridge was really rewarding. When I saw that genuine appreciation from the kids, I realized I was providing a valuable service. I then spoke with the Thornton & Thornwood coaches and learned that they too needed help with shoes/gear. I have been adding schools to our network by referrals."

Photo by: Bob Geiger

Thornridge Coach Shirley, "This has made a major impact on our track and field team."

"The WFF has been a tremendous help assisting track and field athletes by getting them training shoes and competition shoes; many of these student athletes would not be able to afford training shoes and competition shoes." recounts Coach Shirley. "This has made a major impact on our track and field team."

Bloom Coach Andrew Schmitt agrees. "Mitch's assistance with shoes in invaluable to our program, without his help many kids would have nothing more than high tops to train in." "We refer to Mitch as our Santa Claus".

Johnston formed the Winged Foot Foundation and has expanded to 18 high schools and 8 Jr. High Schools.

Johnston has been able to rely on many of the south suburban alumni he competed against to help maintain the foundation. In addition, the Winged Foot Foundation has partnered with several area shoe companies including Runners Edge, Road Runner Sports, Dick Pond Athletics, Runners Soul, Naperville Running Company, and Midwest Promotional Group. They have also received a few donations directly from Saucony & Nike.

"From my own experience, I know how vital it is to train in quality equipment, primarily shoes. Running in trainers that are severely worn can lead to a long list of potential injuries.   If an athlete is training hard during the season, it is probable that the trainers will need to be replaced. And let's face, trainers are expensive, it is a financial burden on any family to buy multiple pairs of shoes. This is where we come in, keeping kids in quality trainers; this is the primary function of the Winged Foot Foundation. We are always looking for quality new/used trainers. We clean up the used shoes, replace the insoles/ laces and distribute them to the coaches at economically challenged schools. This is my way of giving back to the sport that has given me so much."

The Winged Foot Foundation is a non-profit 501 C 3 charitable organization that has been created exclusively for charitable purposes. The goal of the Winged Foot Foundation is to assist student athletes in the Chicago area by offering athletic equipment and academic programs to help strengthen the educational & sports activities in their communities.

Providing motivational speaking by mentors, hosting family appreciation events, donating sports equipment, organizing sports events and assisting with the process for promoting higher education are the primary functions of the Winged Foot Foundation.

"We believe the lessons learned in the classroom and in athletic competition are beneficial in the development of young people. In the Winged Foot Foundation logo, the winged foot represents the sport of track & field, the triangle represents pillars of strength: Faith, Family and Friends."

The foundation doesn't stop at just giving away shoes. With more corporate, retail and local road race shoe donations, the foundation hopes to distribute more new/used trainers & spikes to more schools in need.

The foundation also hosts special events like our 'Parents Appreciation Night Dinners' that bring parents-faculty & students together to celebrate the kid's academic/athletic accomplishments and recognizing the parent's support in making it all possible. They also offer incentive for higher education in the form of mentoring speeches and college grants.

"Ultimately, we'd also like to create a 'welcome to the real word' program for graduating seniors that bridges the gap from graduation day to their first day at college or in the work force."

Every month the Winged Foot Foundation recognizes one of its athletes as the WFF athlete of the month. This past May the foundation honored State Triple Jump Champion and current Michigan State Spartan Ashley Stacey of Thornton, who guided her team to a third place finish at the State Championships. In addition, its website lists an honor roll of the athletes from the schools where the WFF has donated.

Like any charity, the Winged Foot Foundation is always looking for support. In addition, the foundation has room to expand to other schools with athletes in need. If a coach is at an economically challenged school, all they need to do is send Mitch Johnston an email at mjohnston@wingedfootfoundation.org.

To raise funds, the foundation hosts a track meet in June. Celebrating the rich tradition of successful track and field in the south suburbs, the Winged Foot Foundation is proud to present a specialized track meet for sprinters and host it at Bloom HS in the South Suburb of Chicago Heights.

This event has been created primarily to offer South Suburban sprinters at the Junior High and High School levels an opportunity to compete at a high level in the same prestigious meet. It is also an opportunity for the participants, their families & friends to enjoy the camaraderie of the Southland's competitors and alumni. It is also an opportunity for the participants, their families & friends to enjoy the camaraderie of the Southland's competitors and alumni.

On Saturday, June 18th, they will be welcoming sprinters from all over and even inviting a few of Illinois' top performers for invitational events.

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