

Patterson keeps runners on track

Written by Tom Fruehling

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As a veteran high school track official, Jim Patterson is a stickler about holding up cards to let runners know how many laps they have to go in the long distance races.

“When I was a senior in high school I got fifth in the mile run at the state meet,” explains the 71-year-old longtime Cedar Rapids teacher and athletic official. “And let me tell you how that happened. It was at the old Fieldhouse in Iowa City on the 220 track, and it took eight laps to make a mile.

“Well, the officials messed up. Some kids ran seven laps, some ran nine. They had two heats, a fast one and a slow one, and they decided to declare winners from each heat.

“I was in the slow heat and finished fifth and got a medal even though all 25 kids in the fast heat ran faster than I did.

“My buddy, he was in the fast heat, and he didn’t even place. But, hey, we just laughed about it. Times were different back then.”

Look for no such snafus at his week’s girls and boys state meet at Drake Stadium, where Patterson will serve for the 10th time as one of the officials. He’s been working high school track meets for 42 years now, but that’s just a pastime.

In the fall, he also is the area’s busiest cross country starter and recently was named state high school official of the year. For almost 30 years he was a well-respected football referee on crews that called nine state championships games. He coached Taft Middle School teams for 27 years.

Among other honors (including the state’s first elementary physical education teacher of the year in 1978), Patterson was inducted into the Iowa High School Athletic Officials Hall of Fame the same year he retired from teaching in 2002.

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It is as an educator, even today though he's no longer at school, that he staked his real claim to fame.

A self-described "farm boy" from Kalona who paid for college working at a turkey plant, he started teaching at Grant Wood grade school in Cedar Rapids when he graduated from the University of Iowa in 1966. The next year he moved to the brand new Coolidge Elementary on the far west side of town.

"I was there when the first spade of dirt was dug," he says.

And he never left, staying there for 35 years through seven principals and thousands of Coolidge kids who still call him "Mr. P."

While he was nine hours short of doctorate and earned the credentials to be an administrator, Patterson preferred to stay in the gym.

"I was having too much fun doing what I was doing," he points out.

Besides, a principal he once worked under convinced him long ago he was better off as a teacher.

"Back in those days the difference in pay was \$5,000 a year you had to work a longer year.

"And he said I got to spend all day with the 95 percent of good kids while he was with the five percent of bad kids."

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A physical fitness guru who still works out six days a week, Patterson left his mark on many more than the three generations he taught at Coolidge.

With fellow phys ed teachers Hal Garwood and Tom Benesh, he started the West Side Gymnastics meet in the early 1970s for grade school students. The spring event still draws several hundred boys and girls.

“Back then, we weren’t saturated with AAU sports like we are now,” Patterson says.

And then, as now, every competitor received a ribbon.

“We charged a dollar entry to pay for the ribbons, and it was actually a little money maker for the schools. But then the ribbons got to cost more than the fee, so last year it was free.”

Patterson three decades ago also began the annual fifth grade Fun Run which brings students from every Cedar Rapids grade school to Noelridge Park for a day in May.

What may be his most lasting legacy, however, was the formation with Garwood of the Iowa Skippers jump rope troop in 1989. The group originated with just a few of their own grade schoolers as a way to promote exercise.

Now, there’s a jump rope camp each summer and dozens perform all over the state. The team is a staple at the girls state basketball tournament. They gained nationwide exposure when they entertained at the televised NCAA women’s tournament in Iowa City in March.

And while the reigns of the Skippers were turned over several years ago to Patterson’s onetime Coolidge student teacher Kathy Szabo, he and Garwood still take part.

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“It’s like a family,” he says. (In more ways than one, since his own 12-year-old granddaughter Lizzie Haars is one of the jump ropers.)

Patterson and Garwood together also stay active in local elementaries by coordinating the SWITCH program, a family-oriented wellness curriculum involving all third graders from 12 Cedar Rapids schools.

“Being involved with young people keeps me young, “ Patterson says. “I feel very lucky to be around great kids and their families all these years. I loved it from the day I started out, and I’m still having fun.”