

The memories and the legacy of West Van's track

By Len Corben

West Vancouver's only running track has quite the history.

The question is, "What does its future hold?"

Built in 1948, the facility is now almost 70 years old. Dating back to its early days as a cinder track in the 1940s and '50s when cinder was the model for an up-to-date facility, and then into the 1960s and '70s when local athletes regularly rose from its black ashes to compete on the world stage, this multi-sport venue tucked in below West Vancouver Secondary has an amazing legacy that bears being told.

Refreshed somewhat with a rubberized track in 1990 which allowed for training, although not up to the standard required for sanctioned competition, the entire facility is now outdated and badly in need of total replacement with the addition of lights in order to enable the next crop of local thinclads to shine – from elementary and secondary school students to those with community clubs like the NorWesters (founded in 1960), West Vancouver Track & Field Club (since 1995) and Hershey Harriers which cater to all ages from pre-teens to masters. And that's to say nothing of soccer, rugby and football which would then also have a drainage-improved, state-of-the-art synthetic turf field to use.

Now with six lanes on the straightaway and only five encircling the drain-poor infield, the present layout severely limits training for what is essentially 15 diverse sports: from hurdles, shot put and pole vault, to relays, high jump, the sprints and distance races, to racewalk, long and triple jumps, steeplechase and more, which are all rolled into the one we call track and field, or athletics as most of the rest of the world titles it.

But back to that history.

North Shore names from the 1950s and '60s come to mind, all of whom would have run or jumped at the West Van track during training or in mini-meets: Harry and Valerie Jerome, Mary and Judy Kaffka, Paul Winn, Don Basham, Helen Sewell, Jennifer Chapman, Warren Hamill, Ted Quirk, Yvonne Breeden, Dave Goff, Mike Dowty, Bob Amann, Rosemary Spray, Jay Dahlgren...

And more... Tom Howard, Arlene McLaughlin, Greg Yorke, Brenda Eisler, the Pickerings, Dianne, Sue and Barb; Jana Lundy, Doug Bromage, Peter and Paul Martineau, Stephanie Berto, Kathy Thompson, Toni Lindsay, Julie Beddall, Peggy Busch, Maureen Crowley and others.

Many of these names as well as their accomplishments have been lost in time, but they were the stars of the huge and tradition-laden Vancouver & District Inter-High School Track Meet which dominated the sports pages of the daily papers in May each year as crowds of up to 24,000 spectators flocked to Empire Stadium to witness the city's biggest annual sports event.

And it was the West Vancouver Highlanders, with a team of coaches under Roger Kronquist, who won an astonishing five consecutive V&D meet championships (1960-65) and a total of seven team titles during that decade.

The BC high school championships were resurrected in 1967 from an earlier version in the late 1940s and it was McLaughlin who came up with the outstanding female performance by winning the 100- and 220-yard dashes and starting West Van High's 4x110 yards relay champions.

Some of the North Shore's best, including the Jeromes, Breeden, Dahlgren, Howard, McLaughlin, Eisler, Berto and Crowley, went on to compete in the Pan-American, British Commonwealth, World University and/or Olympic Games through to the end of the 1970s.

They gave way to others such as West Vancouverites Lloyd Guss, Alison Hayward and Brit Lind-Peterson (now SFU's head coach as Brit Townsend) forged their way onto Canadian international teams in the 1980s after high school graduation in the 1970s.

At the high school level in the 1970s, West Vancouver's now-demolished Hillside Secondary dominated the prestigious V&D meet as head coach Bill McKittrick's team topped the overall standings for five straight years from 1975-79 and went on to claim first or second in three BC championships between 1977-79.

The Highwaymen were led by boys like John Mendgen, Roger and Mike Pennington, Blair Beaton, Jim Boothroyd, Doug Taylor and Mike Parker along with its girls (Highwaywomen?) Brenda Robins, Judy and Val Duncan, Teresa Sparling, Louise Morris, Sue Boothroyd, Cindy Grant, Gwyn Soule, Kathleen Mayrs and Tania Gleave to name a few who had been inspired by the achievements of John Hill and Jean Sparling in the early '70s.

Other stalwarts during that period were the likes of Sentinel's Pam Medland, Hugh Wilson and Birgit Otto and West Van's Cathy Carlile, Ron DeCamillis, Robin Smith, Pat Harrington, Caroline van de Poll, Jessi Smith, Tom Staples and Doug Vicic plus North Van's Linda Rossetti.

And we haven't even touched on the 1980s when the headliners were Leslie Beckerman, John Crowley, Penny Philip, Boyd Mason, Alice Woolley, Sarah Pike, Sara McGladdery, Scott Findlay, Dave Wilkinson, Lisa Parish, Tim Slater, Steve Dong,

Graham Morfitt, Mike Anderegg, Carolyn Reeder, Luke Meyer, Catherine Greyell and Graeme Bowbrick. Sentinel's team under head coach Wayne Desjardins won back-to-back BC championships in 1985 and 1986.

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So many athletes with so many stories and so many memories.

We managed to track (that's a pun folks) some down to see where they are now, what they've been up to and what memories they have of that old West Van track.

More than 50 years ago, Dave Goff was one of the early members of the Nor'Westers Track and Field Club (they later dropped the apostrophe). He's now the pastor of Chinook Bible Church in Pincher Creek, Alberta.

A call to him the other day, not long after he'd returned from one of his regular mission trips to Mexico, sent his thoughts racing back to his days on the North Shore when he made the daily trek to Vancouver to attend St. George's school and by night worked out with the local club. He immediately recalled a rain-soaked dual meet on the West Van track between St. George's and West Van when he was in Grade 12. That was 1964.

Reaching into his mind's eye, he reminisces, "I remember starting the 220 kneeling in a puddle. That's indelibly marked in my mind."

Track was a big part of his growing up and he went on to run in junior college in Washington State. So maybe it's not so hard to believe that he had his track scrapbook so handy he was able to instantly pull out two newspaper clippings about that West Van meet titled, "High school track meet was a swimming success" and "St. George's best on muddy track."

One stated, "Wet shorts and cold feet provided the incentive for an excellent track and field meet under horrid weather conditions Tuesday. St. George's school beat West Van high school 71-57 in a two-school meet in driving rain. The track events were run off on a West Van cinder track that was under inches of cold rainwater but David Goff of St. George's put on an excellent display of marsh running, clocking 10.4 to win the senior boys' 100 yards and in winning the 220 in 23.5..."

Yes, memories... memories.

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Lloyd Guss is a senior geologist with an environmental company in Long Beach California.

Into track by age 12, he was the NorWesters most outstanding athlete in 1975 and 1976. In high school at West Van, his 1977 records in the North Shore 400m hurdles (53.26) and the V&D 400m (48.7) and 400m hurdles (53.5) have never been broken. He won the 400m at the BC championships in 1977 and the 400m hurdles in both 1976 and '77.

He ran for the University of California at Berkley (where he met Connie his wife who, not by coincidence we can assume, also ran the 400m for the Golden Bears) and for Canada in the 1982 Commonwealth Games in Brisbane and 1986 in Edinburgh, taking fifth and third respectively in the 400m hurdles. He had sixth at the 1983 Pan-Ams in Venezuela.

After running the 400m hurdles in the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984, he switched to bobsleigh for the Calgary Olympics in 1988, making him one of just five Canadians and 20 worldwide to have competed in both the Summer and Winter Olympics.

He promptly returned my call to relive those days on the West Van track and to relate his latest feat, proving unquestionably that track is a life-long sport and adding another story to the legacy of that track.

“I have plenty of memories,” he says of the track. “It’s really the first one I ever ran on. I was in fifth grade at Hollyburn Elementary. My mom wanted me to get involved with track and field because she ran track when she was younger and there was this track club in West Vancouver and we had just moved there.

“One of my first memories is when I went out to see about joining the NorWesters. It was a cinder track then. We were running across the field and there was this big box of track spikes. One of the coaches said, ‘Go and pick out a pair of spikes. They’ll help you because the track isn’t that well maintained.’ There were places where water runoff had weathered some grooves in it and there were weeds in the last lane... I put the spikes on and it made a big difference. I instantly had traction and the wind was running through my hair. It was glorious, almost like a movie... That was my introduction to track.”

More than 40 years later, in 2013 in Turin, Italy, at the World Masters Games, Lloyd and his younger brothers David and twins Chris and Tim (all three of whom are West Van grads now living in Calgary) became celebrities when they entered as the All-Guss 4x400m relay team.

“That was unusual to have a brother relay and so the novelty kind of got around when we were there. A lot of people were asking to get their picture taken with us. We had our own little fan group. That perpetuated a little bit more of a buzz. When it came time for us to run it became the big Guss show. Lo and behold we won the gold medal. It took us over an hour to get out of the stadium because everybody in the whole place needed another picture with the medals.”

They then decided to go after some Canadian indoor and outdoor 4x400m and 4x800m age group records and they've since done that too.

Now at 57, he says, "We're just having some fun, staying in shape..."

And it's just one story that testifies to the legacy of the West Van track.

"I've coached track and field and I know that having a good facility is really important," he adds. "It would be nice if it [the West Van track] could be turned into a facility that can be used not only for training but also for holding meets. I'm sure that would just perpetuate the legacy of West Van track and field and there'll be events and memories that others will have years down the road because of it."

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Maureen (Crowley) de St. Croix is a retired Semiahmoo secondary school home economics teacher living in Crescent Beach. The former Hillside star is what you would call a track and field lifer.

"Actually going to a track was pretty cool and how much fun it was," she recalls of her younger school days.

In Grade 12, she won the inaugural BC high school cross country title in December 1970 and the BC 800m the following spring. Running for SFU, she captured the 800m at the 1973 Canadian championship and the 400m in the 1974 Canadians. She was sixth in the 800m at the 1974 Commonwealth Games in New Zealand and fifth in the 1975 World University Games in Rome.

She's never stopped running, competing and sometimes even winning masters middle distance events in such far flung places as England, Australia, Puerto Rico, Spain and Buffalo and Sacramento in the USA. She's being recognized as Sport BC's master athlete in 2001 and the YWCA's Woman of Distinction in the Health, Wellness and Athletics category in 2013.

All along she coached her school's track team.

Though now retired as a school teacher, she's still the head coach with Ocean Athletics in Surrey, BC's largest track and field club, which she founded in 2006 when South Surrey's marvelous eight-lane track, complete with lights, was built.

"There's tons of kids," she notes, "I think track and field is making a resurgence as a matter of fact."

Maureen represents those with a West Van track history who have not only continued their own running and fitness but also have dedicated themselves to coaching and encouraging others in the sport.

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Birgit (Otto) Weaver ran track and cross country for Sentinel in the 1970s. She now lives in North Vancouver and has a dentistry practise in Vancouver with her husband.

“My first memories [of the West Van track] were doing the elementary school mini-meets. I was at Westcot then. For me that was so much fun.”

She won all but one of the 12 North Shore cross country events in her Grade 10-12 years and claimed the Canadian junior cross country championship in 1978 in Stanley Park and in 1980 in Halifax as well as both the 800m and 1500m at the 1979 V&D meet. That led to competing for the University of Alberta where she was the school’s cross country MVP in 1980-81 and established the meet record for the 1500m at the Canadian junior championships in 1980.

When her three children became interested in track and joined the NorWesters, Birgit was drawn back into the sport where she has now headed up the club since 2009 as president of the organization which has seen its membership double over the last three years, echoing the experience seen in South Surrey.

Joanna Baxter, West Van Track & Field Club’s vice-president and a former track athlete at Sentinel in the early 1990s, indicates her club’s membership is on the rise too.

Cindy (Grant) O’Krane, Hillside’s BC champion in the 1500m in 1980 and the 800m in 1981 and who is now a coach with Hershey Harriers, confirms the same with her club as well.

Gerry Karvelis, co-ordinator of athletics for the North Shore Secondary Schools’ Athletic Association, has also seen a gradual increase in interest in school track lately.

Construction of a new track facility in West Van might be coming at just the right time.

Len Corben is the North Shore’s premier sports historian. He has lived here for more than 70 years, 31 as co-ordinator of athletics for the North Shore Secondary Schools’ Athletic Association as well as 26 as a sportswriter/columnist with local community newspapers and the author of three books on local sports history.