He has a ‘Nak’ for coaching track
Wayne Nakoneczny went the distance with track and cross country

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTSWRITER

In the late 1970s, reporters huddled around Coach Wayne Nakoneczny at the end of a cross country race. The opponents were already on their bus. The Southington runners had cooled down and were lounging in the late day sun, but Nakoneczny waved off the interview. There was still one Southington runner on the course, so Nakoneczny wasn’t ready to talk about his team’s finish. After all, they weren’t done.

“Wayne was waiting for the kid to come out of the woods. I don’t think he could walk the course, let alone run it, but Wayne would take anybody on his team,” said Jim Benich, former sports writer for The Observer. “The kid makes it to the finish line, and he produced his best time ever. Wayne went nuts. The team went crazy. They picked this kid up and carried him around and walked away. That day, but your attitude is going to be your biggest asset. He is a great human being.”

According to Nakoneczny, that wasn’t always the case. He describes himself as a bold boy in Stratford, a three-sport athlete that went on to compete in track and football in college, but he had yet to learn anything about humility.

He settled in Southington after college and was immediately thrust into coaching. He served as a freshman coach with D’Angelo his first year in town. It wasn’t long before he was promoted to the varsity field as an assistant. He took the reigns in the late 1970s, and Southington coach. “He is dedicated to helping them out. He’ll do anything to help them out. He is a great human being.”

Former SHS athletic director Dom D’Angelo told The Observer in 1992. “He is dedicated to his team. He’ll do anything to help them out. He is a great human being.”

When Coach Nakoneczny spoke about discipline, he told his runners to ‘Speak softly but carry a big whip.’ His former captain Bill Thomson left his coach with this caricature in the early 1980s.

“He was just an exceptionalaly good coach, and I think he was one of the best (physical education) teachers around,” said former Blue Knight coach Joe Orsene. “He had such a good way of getting things across and doing it in a great fashion. Everything about him was great. He’s a loyal friend, a great coach, and a great person. Anybody who was associated with him would tell you the same thing.”

On the field, Coach Nak’s teams began to flourish. His track teams rallied for 12 conference titles. His cross country teams rallied and the new heights. Practices would begin on Queen Street, and his players would race up and down the hill on Loper Street up to 10 times in succession. By the time they reached the state competition, Southington was ready for any course.

“They were the toughest group of cross country athletes that I had the opportunity to coach. They had a very high expectation of what they wanted to accomplish,” said the coach. “We used to have a little motto that hills were our friends, and we would work hills. They’d run up and down, non-stop. They’d sprint up, go around, and come back down.”

At the state meets, they sped past the entire field. They became the first and only cross country team to win a Class LL and state open title.

“Exciting to win championships, no question, but that’s not the exciting thing. It’s the thrill of watching the athletes develop,” he said. “The greatest thrill was to see an athlete—boy or girl—reach whatever potential they could. You could tell if a young man would just fly. All of a sudden, they would improve.

His commitment to coaching and the kids is unparalleled in local sports, and that’s why the Southington Sports Hall of Fame selection committee picked him for the Class of 2011. On October 9, Nakoneczny will be inducted into the Southington Sports Hall of Fame at the Aqua Turf Club in Plantsville.

For 30 years, ‘Coach Nak’ lavished attention on the Southington athlete like nobody else. Good, bad, it didn’t matter. Nakoneczny constantly cared about the competition.

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