

A book to honor Browning Ross | Bob Shryock

By [Bob Shryock | For NJ.com](#)

Jack Heath has written the definitive book that chronicles the vast achievements of Gloucester County's only two-time Olympian: "Browning Ross: The Father of American Distance Running."



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The well-written and thoroughly documented 343-page book is filled with anecdotes of Ross' long and fruitful career, including his training regimen, that was highlighted by his appearances in the 1948 and 1952 Olympic Games as a steeplechase participant.

I'm proud to be included for writing an obituary tribute to the life-long Woodbury resident after his passing:

"Gloucester County Times columnist and long-time friend Bob Shryock wrote, 'and while the hearse was delivering legendary Browning Ross to his final resting place, members of the Gloucester Catholic High School track team he coached so proudly jogged alongside in a tear-provoking, gut-wrenching tribute.'"

Heath had countless memories of his good friend, and none more poignant than the spring of 1998.

"On March 11, the South Jersey AC running club held a testimonial dinner for Browning that brought back many of his friends. I was seated next to Browning and when he accepted a plaque from the organizers my first thought was of the hundreds he had won or had engraved to give out as prizes.

We coached track together that spring and he called me on a weekend in April to tell me he was officiating at the Penn Relays. He joked about his upcoming birthday and asked I had time to pick out anything expensive for a gift.

"On April 27, my phone rang at home and the voice identified themselves as being from the Gloucester County Times, said a brief apology, and asked if I had a comment about the news that Browning had just passed away. I was stunned."

Browning had died of a heart attack. And the phone kept ringing in Jack's house, all of the callers in complete and utter shock.

"Besides being a close friend," Heath wrote, "he was more than a mentor, literally the sun around whom the whole South Jersey running world revolved."

Said another running legend and close Ross's friend, Tom Osler. "I saw more grown men crying at Browning's funeral than I have anywhere else in my life. I was much too grief-stricken to speak at his service."

The Gloucester Catholic track team dealt with their grief by donning their track uniforms after the service and accompanying Browning one last time, Heath wrote, running the mile alongside the hearse from the church to the cemetery.

One of Ross' athletes, Sean McClenachan, wrote a poem he called "An Ode to Browning."

It read, in part,

"Never was there a humbler man,

"No mention of the awards or the meets you ran,

"The people you knew, the lives that you touched,

"How badly we ran never seemed to matter much,

"In our hearts and minds, you'll always be number one,

"We'll be thinking of you each and every time you run,

"They're calling you now, call you by name,

"The angels know that they're running with fame."

More from Tom Osler: "His memory lives on in those who were fortunate enough to know him personally. No other runner has influenced me more. Part of him became part of me, and I am the better for it."

Browning was inducted into many halls of fame, including Gloucester County, Woodbury High, Villanova and the National Distance Running Class of 2002.

Heath's excellent book does him justice.