

Remembering Browning Ross, 'Father of American Distance Running'

Gloucester Catholic cross-country coach Jack Heath's 'labor of love' is book on the former Olympian, a legendary runner and coach and tireless promoter of the sport.



Gloucester Catholic cross-country coach Jack Heath has written a book on his former coach and mentor, Browning Ross. David Maialetti/Staff photographer

by Phil Anastasia | Columnist

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Browning Ross landed in lots of places in the long course of his running and coaching career — from England and Finland to compete in Olympic Games, to Sao Paulo, Brazil, for a torch-lit New Year's Eve race, to Ethiopia, where he had to watch his step in front of Haile Selassie's pet lion.

But one of the most unlikely was the 300 block of Ridgeway Street in the row-homed heart of Gloucester City.

"Serendipitous," Jack Heath said, still shaking his head in wonder that such a world-class figure would deem to coach a high school track team without a track and a high school cross-country team without uniforms.

Oh, and the Gloucester Catholic Rams of the early 1970s also didn't have a bus for transportation, meaning runners without their own wheels had to pile into Ross' well-traveled Buick Skylark for rides to meets and practices.

Plus, the cross-country team's course was soon paved over to make way for the Deptford Mall.

"What luck," Heath said. "How could a person like that end up coaching at a place like Gloucester Catholic?"

The late, great Ross was a Woodbury native, Villanova University star, two-time Olympian, Pan Am Games champion, tireless competitor, ground-breaking publisher, and indefatigable meet director whose life-long contributions to the sports of track and cross-country nearly defy measurement.

Heath, the cross-country coach at his alma mater of Gloucester Catholic, takes his best shot as author of *Browning Ross: The Father of American Distance Running*, a meticulously researched and richly sourced 336-page ode to his coach, friend, and inspiration.

The book is available through Amazon and barnesandnoble.com and should be in stores later this month, Heath said.

"I always used to tell Browning, 'You should write a book about your experiences,'" Heath said. "But he was too humble and too busy."

Heath fretted that too many of today's runners and coaches were unaware that such an important figure in the history of distance running spent his entire life in South Jersey, save for his service in the Navy in World War II and his countless days on the road in search of another race.

"I felt his legacy was fading," Heath said. "I felt like not enough people were really aware of his impact on running, especially around here. I thought, 'I want to get his story out there.'"

Heath interviewed more than 50 people during a "labor of love" that took five years to complete. He had lots of help from Ross' family, especially his daughters Bonnie and Barbara, who supplied "boxes and boxes" of scrapbooks filled with reports of their father's feats.

"For a long time, I kind of had it hanging over my head, 'When are you going to be done?'" Heath said. "But it was weird. In a way, I was able to get close to him again. I knew a lot, but it wasn't until I was able to step back and see the big picture that I realized how remarkable he really was."

"When he was alive I would find out about how years ago he won some two-mile indoor race in New York and the next day won a 10-mile in Canada, and I'd ask him how he could do that and he would deflect, 'Oh, the only thing I remember about that was that I had to hitchhike in Buffalo and it was really cold.'"

Ross grew up in Woodbury, starred at Woodbury High School and Villanova, and made the 1948 and 1952 U.S. Olympic teams as a 3,000-meter steeplechaser. He won the 1,500 meters at the 1951 Pan Am Games, finished first in the Berwick (Pa.) "Marathon" — a grueling, nine-mile race that annually drew some of the nation's top runners — an astounding 10 times and captured enough trophies and plaques over a lengthy career to fill three attics to the rafters.

Heath agrees with "Barefoot" Charlie Robbins, an 11-time AAU national champion, who called Ross the "most versatile runner of all time."

Ross' contributions to the sport stretched well beyond his own achievements in competition. In a real way, Ross laid the groundwork for the running boom that began in the 1970s and continues to this day.

He published the first nationally distributed magazine on distance running, the Long Distance Log, starting in the mid-1950s. He used to write articles and reprint race results on the back of test papers and use the mimeograph machine during his time as a teacher at Woodrow Wilson High School in Camden.

In the late 1950s, Ross was one of the founding fathers of the Road Runners Club of America. He also coached the United States cross-country team in the late 1960s.

But he probably affected the most people as a meet director and coach. Ross was a tireless promoter of the sport, staging "all-comers" events and organizing countless track and field meets, from Summer Sizzlers in July to Snowball Series gatherings in January.

He would set up a table and register competitors. He would lay out the course and set up the field events. He would time results. He would supply and present awards. He would meet and greet and treat everyone the same, from top-level athletes to below-average runners.

"He did everything at these meets, for years and years," said Heath, a 1977 Gloucester Catholic graduate who ran competitively at Glassboro State College, now Rowan University. "I don't think there's been an all-comers meet since he stopped holding them. And he did so many of them."

Ross agreed to become Gloucester Catholic's track and cross-country coach in 1972. He stayed associated with the sports at the school until his death in 1998 at the age of 74.

To Heath, it was Ross' relationship with Gloucester Catholic, a school with no facilities and little in the way of running tradition, that underscored the essence of the man — his humility, his

generosity, his sense of service, his willingness to help anyone learn to appreciate the wonders of his sport.

"He was just such a nice person," Heath said. "He was this world-class athlete and he did it all the right way.

"He treated people so well. He had a great sense of humor. He helped so many people. I just think people should remember him."



Born and raised in South Jersey, Phil Anastasia prefers standing on the sidelines at high school football games on Friday nights to sitting in the press box at Eagles games on Sunday afternoons. He's a graduate of Rowan University with a degree in English.