

A legend comes home

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Relays founder returns to scene

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is part of an occasional series about people or teams that help or inspire someone.

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Saturday, the coach comes home.

And it's amazing how, nearly 30 years after he left Charlotte, Stuart Allen is still touching lives. A former track coach at Myers Park High, Allen won 11 state championships in 16 years. From 1955-71, Allen's team lost one regular-season meet - in his first year.

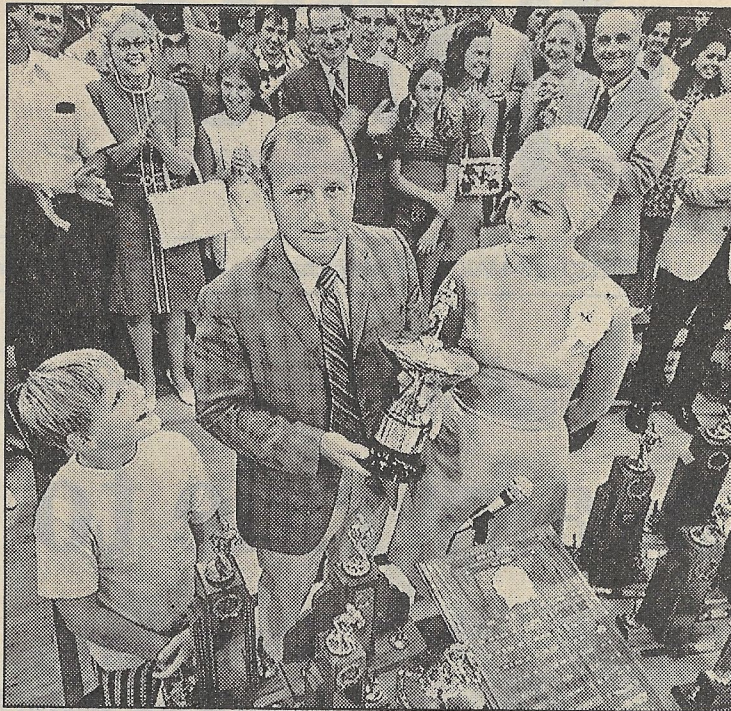
Amazing? Sure.

What's more amazing is how many lives Allen changed, how they still call the coach in tiny Winchester, Va., to ask the 74-year-old retiree about his family, his life. It's amazing that - 29 years after they gave him a big send-off one August Saturday in 1971 - many of his former players invited Allen to return to the event he founded, Saturday's Queen City Relays, and for a dinner in his honor.

"Everybody that was under him just loves him," said Nick Karres, who was on three consecutive state champions from 1965-67. "Being in high school with him was like being in a good college program. I went on to do track at Chapel Hill, and believe me, there was no comparison."

Allen threw the javelin in college at Emory & Henry, and after two stints in the Army - where he trained troops in World War II and the Korean War - he ended up at North Carolina, working on a graduate degree.

He became close to Leroy Walker, the N.C. Central track guru who would coach the U.S. Olympic track team in



1971 File Photo

Stuart Allen contributed more than just 11 state track titles in 16 years at Myers Park High. He founded the Queen City Relays.

1972 and would eventually serve as president of the U.S. Olympic Committee.

When Allen came to Myers Park in 1955, he kept up with his friendship. Allen also did what Walker kept encouraging: Just work hard.

He started the Relays and invited teams from North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee. He figured it wasn't enough if a kid was the best in town. Allen wanted more competition. Apparently, so did other top schools. The Queen City quickly became a marquee event.

And under Allen's steady tutelage, Myers Park became a marquee team.

"Nobody could compete with Myers Park because he was head and shoulders above everybody else, and I guess his coaching was the reason," said former Harding High coach Dave Harris. "He was outstanding. His teams were outstanding. He proved that with all those state championships. I've never seen a streak like his and I doubt I ever will."

Richard Prince followed Allen at Myers Park and won the state title in 1972. The Mustangs won one more - in 1980.

"He was a man of boundless energy," Prince said of Allen, "and he certainly was a pioneer of the sport and he had a great eye for talent. He could put the right kids in the right spot. I don't think there's been many since him that could do as well as he could."

Today, the coach is still working at track meets as a starter and keeps score at the occasional prep wrestling match in Winchester. His phone rings constantly and every now and again, he's asked why he left Myers Park, and all that success. The answer is the same as always:

Family.

He and his wife, Jean, whom he married in 1954, moved back to Virginia to be near their parents, to help them as they got older. The coach took a job at Winchester High and won a state track title in 1975. Sure, he says, it was hard to leave Myers Park. He'd do it

again if he had to, but his memories still burn bright, even after all these years.

"Once you start rolling, and the boys began to believe in the program," Allen said, "the families would be drawn in close to the program and keep their children coming. The parents really supported me when I was (in Charlotte), more so than any place I've ever been in my life."

Apparently, they still do.

Saturday, many of Allen's former players will honor him again. Karres hopes to find as many as possible. It's something he feels compelled to do.

"Any successful coach," Karres said, "has an impact on his players. But he coached JV football and always had a good team. He coached wrestling. Had a good team. Everything he touched was successful. He was just one of those kind of guys. He's a special person who meant a lot to a lot of people in Charlotte."

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WANT TO GO?

Saturday's 44th Queen City Relays begins at 10 a.m. at Myers Park. Admission is \$5. Finals begin at 1 p.m. Fifteen teams are expected, including several Mecklenburg County teams, state power Watauga, Northwestern (S.C.) and other teams from South Carolina and Georgia.

■ The North Rowan Invitational is also Saturday. That meet features some of the area's top teams.

■ Former Myers Park track state champion Nick Karres is trying to get as many of coach Stuart Allen's former athletes as possible for a dinner Saturday evening in the coach's honor at The Smokehouse on Montford Drive. For information, call Karres at (704) 376-1446.