

Five Years in the Life of Bill Bowerman

Bill Bowerman disliked being called a “coach”, even though he filled that capacity for the track program at the University of Oregon for 24 years. He was, he maintained, a “teacher.” Certainly, many of his former athletes would attest to the transforming educative influence he had on their lives.

When he died in his sleep on Christmas Eve, 1999 in Fossil, Oregon –an ancestral home -- Bowerman left behind a legacy of accomplishments, not only in track and field, but in entrepreneurship and philanthropy.

He was a bundle of complexities and ironies:

- He starred in high school as a football player and first made his name in coaching taking high school football teams to state titles. But he became a legend as a track coach.
- Bowerman had a special knack for working with gifted athletes, many of them Olympians, such as Steve Prefontaine. Yet he was equally proud of starting the All-Comers track meets in Eugene, which were open to everyone, young and old, buffed or flabby, and which continue to this day as a model for a community’s involvement in track competition.
- He virtually created the jogging craze in America, but his own experiments with running shoe designs left him partially crippled and unable to run.
- Bowerman’s involvement with Philip Knight and Nike resulted in a personal fortune, which he distributed as generously to opera festivals as he did to high school track programs.

To get a sense of the life of Bill Bowerman, consider five years:

1926 – Bill Bowerman, a sophomore at Medford High School, is verbally flayed and expelled for rowdy behavior by E.H. Hedrick, Medford school superintendent, in a meeting that Bowerman credits as a turning point in his life. Hedrick suggests that Bowerman get involved in sports as a way to channel his energies. Bowerman plays

football during his junior and senior years under coach Prince Callison. Bowerman's team wins the state football championship the two years Bowerman competes. Bowerman also plays clarinet in the band, serves as editor of the school paper, and makes the honor roll his senior year.

In 1929, Bowerman enrolls at the University of Oregon, following Coach Callison, who becomes the freshman football coach. Bowerman initially competes in football and basketball, but not track, because it conflicts with spring football practice. (Bowerman never saw a track meet until his sophomore year in university.) Bowerman played football four years, first as an end and then as starting quarterback. He was also sports editor of the student newspaper, vice president of the student body, headed the campus music committee as a senior, and operated and owned a local gas station (on the corner of what is now 11th and High).

While at the University of Oregon, Bowerman meets Bill Hayward, head track coach (from 1904-1947), in Hayward's capacity as trainer for the football team. Bowerman turns out for track when his football eligibility ends and runs the 440. Bowerman is not a champion runner -- Hayward once said Bowerman was so flat-footed he could be heard running all over the stadium -- but he is encouraged to go into coaching by Hayward.

1948 -- Bowerman returns to the University of Oregon, as head track coach and freshman football coach.

It is the second coaching offer the University of Oregon makes to Bowerman. The first was an offer to be head coach of the university's football program, an offer made on the basis of Bowerman's twelve successful years coaching Medford High School's football teams (three state championships), and it is an offer Bowerman declines.

In his coaching career at Oregon, Bowerman will have a 114-20 mark in dual meets, 10 unbeaten squads, four NCAA championships (1962, 1964, 1965, 1970), and finish in the top 10 of NCAA championships in 15 of his last 20 years. Bowerman will coach 24 individual NCAA champions, 64 All-Americans, 33 Olympians, and 22 world record holders, including Steve Prefontaine.

1962 -- Bowerman and his world record University of Oregon four-mile relay team are invited to New Zealand. While there, he meets track coach Arthur Lydiard and studies his training principles. In late December, Lydiard invites Bowerman to go on a jog with a local running group. Bowerman finds himself left behind by the others, until only a 70-year-old man is running with him, staying behind so that Bowerman wouldn't be alone. Bowerman is reported to have blurted out, "That old man! He had to wait for me! That's not going to happen again."

When he returns to Eugene, Bowerman places a notice in the local newspaper for interested people who would like to start a jogging program, expecting maybe a couple dozen to show up; 2000 people turn out. He then distributes state-wide – Bowerman claims it cost him \$1500 – a four-page mimeographed handout on jogging.

Five years later, Bowerman writes the book, *Jogging*, that will sell over one million copies.

1973 - Bowerman, having lost a race for the Oregon House of Representatives by 815 votes and recently retired as track coach at the University of Oregon to devote time to fundraising, receives a diagnosis that he has incurred nerve damage as a result of two nerve-poisoning agents in the glue used in his experiments with running shoes. The founder of jogging in this country is now limited to walking and swimming.

The experiments with glue and running shoes had started with Bowerman using his wife's waffle iron – now in the Oregon Sports Hall of Fame in Portland -- as a template for running shoe sole patterns. Bowerman's experiments with the design of running shoes also leads to an entirely different outcome, a partnership with Phil Knight, a former member of Bowerman's track team. Over a handshake and an initial investment of \$500 each, the two form Blue Ribbon Sports, the precursor of Nike, Inc. In the early 1980s, Bowerman's ownership of the company is estimated at 435,000 shares.

1999 - Bowerman dies in his sleep at the age of 88, while living in an assisted care facility in Fossil, Oregon, the town founded by his mother's ancestors, when they came across the Oregon Trail.

Bowerman's father, a lawyer, was president of the Oregon State Senate and served briefly as acting governor of Oregon (1910-1911).

When Bowerman was two years old, his twin brother Thomas died in a freakish elevator accident. Soon afterwards, Bowerman's parents divorced. Lizzie Bowerman, a schoolteacher, took the children to Fossil, a small ranching town in Central Oregon, and raised the family by herself. Bowerman did not see his father again until his senior year of high school.