

Marty Lewis:

A Remembrance

By Marc Bloom



It might seem odd to say that Marty Lewis, who died last May 12 a week past his 80th birthday, was a quiet hero because his booming voice and barking manner were always in evidence on the track or cross-country course or on the bus taking Foot Locker finalists to check out the race course in San Diego. Marty Lewis, a New Yorker to the core and one of the originators of the Foot Locker Cross Country Championships in 1979, was not exactly quiet. But in his various capacities as a championship coach, devoted teacher and ground-breaking administrator—whether address-

ing athletes, coaches, meet officials or parents—Marty wanted to be heard above the chatter because he wanted things done right. He wanted athletes paying attention, on time and following the rules; he wanted coaches setting their athletes straight; and he wanted officials conducting themselves with authority, dignity and consideration. Marty wanted student-athletes to learn and grow and get stronger with good values and a feeling for what track and cross-country had to offer. He was old school. If as a young person you did the right thing, you could achieve anything.

Marty lived in Brooklyn, was married for ___ years to Helene, had three children (Frank, Nancy and Jimmy) and four grand-children. Marty was Mr. PSAL. The Public Schools Athletic League of New York City, the largest such entity in the country with over 100 schools in the five boroughs, is like the city itself: a high-strung, unwieldy melting pot with numerous competing interests that at times seems impossible to manage. Marty served as the PSAL's commissioner of track and cross-country for over 20 years. He saw the league—and its many nationally-ranked athletes and teams—through some hard times amid city-wide budget cuts that restricted or cut programs. Marty coached city championship winners at Boys High, Commerce High (later named Brandeis) and South Shore High. In 1970, he helped open South Shore. He was the school's first track coach and P.E. department chairman. Marty helped create many new events including the Martin Luther King Relays.

When in the late '70s Foot Locker (then Kinney) started organizing the first high school national sports event, one of the first people company executives turned to for advice was Marty Lewis, who became the Northeast Regional director, a position he held for 27 years. Marty took great pride in his Foot Locker role (enlisting sons Frank and Jimmy as able helpers), and at the nationals in San Diego always shared colorful stories of coaching in the rough-and-tumble PSAL with other regional directors and those on hand in California.

Marty's genius was that he could be a nurturing and tough love guy all at once. He could give you a hug and let you know you

messed up at the same time. You always knew where Marty's heart was: in service to the kids. Marty nurtured great coaches who would succeed him at South Shore: Andy Ferrara, who eventually moved to Texas where he continued producing great teams, and Phil Zodda, who also succeeded Marty as Northeast Regional director after assisting him for many years. Many of Zodda's athletes and teams achieved city, state and national honors.

"Marty was a master teacher, a top administrator and honest man as well as a mentor to many," said Zodda. "He was a true friend to the running community. He believed that every athlete regardless of ability deserved the opportunity to participate."

Last May, shortly after Marty's death, Zodda's South Shore team dedicated its performance in the PSAL city outdoor track championships to Marty. Andy Ferrara was also in attendance with some of the athletes he'd coached in the '70s. In a dramatic climax, South Shore won two relays to win the title. Among the South Shore contingent, there was not a dry eye in the house.

I first met Marty as a high school athlete myself in the early '60s. When I lined up with teammates at the Armory for a mile relay, Marty the track marshal made sure we youngsters sat attentively in close order as though in a classroom. If you slouched, you heard Marty's booming voice. When I started my track writing soon after high school, Marty helped nurture me, made sure I had the results, drove with me to meets and was a ready source on PSAL and city-wide issues. In 1965, Marty the league commissioner raked the Randalls Island long jump pit at the PSAL meet when a lanky kid named Bob Beamon soared over 25 feet. Soon I was meeting Marty to go together to Eastern States indoor seeding meetings. We would stop for a sandwich. I always learned something talking to Marty.

When in the early '70s, we started the high school boys mile at the Millrose Games, I made sure Marty was on the selection committee. When in the late '70s I rode the press bus at the New York City Marathon, I saw Marty in Brooklyn supervising an aide station. When in the late '80s Marty retired from the Board of Education, I continued seeing him manage his baby, the Northeast Regional, and beam with a fatherly glow on stage at the Foot Locker nationals when the all-American athletes took their places at the awards ceremony.

When Marty moved to a retirement community not far where I lived, I often saw Marty officiating at meets. He still loved the sport, still wanted to serve. Despite his illness, Marty still worked this year's Millrose Games in February and other, early outdoor events in the spring.

As high school track and cross-country continues thriving today beyond all expectations—continues giving opportunities to all athletes from Van Cortlandt Park to the Armory to Randalls Island and beyond—we must remember the influence of Marty Lewis, who helped start it all with a caring hand and, yes, booming voice. The quiet hero: loud and clear.