Press Release

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Fort Drum track memorialized for legendary coach, 10th Mountain veteran

FORT DRUM, N.Y. (Aug. 29, 2022) -- The track and field outside Magrath Sports Complex is known today as Bowerman Field, following a memorialization ceremony that honored William “Bill” Bowerman – the celebrated coach, mentor, innovator and leader, who also served in the 10th Mountain Division during World War II.

“Today we get the opportunity to celebrate William J. Bowerman, a man who fought in some of the most physically demanding terrain of the second World War, then came home to teach that same physical mental toughness to thousands of student-athletes and designed the shoes and athletic gear to allow them to do it,” said Brig. Gen. Jason Curl, 10th Mountain Division (LI) deputy commander for operations. “It is such an honor to have the 10th Mountain Division’s track complex named after a man like Bill Bowerman.”

Bowerman is best known as the University of Oregon and Olympic track coach who trained record-breaking teams and athletes and as the Nike co-founder who innovated athletic footwear for generations.

He coached one of the most dominating collegiate track and field programs in history, winning four NCAA championships from 1962 to 1970. Throughout his career, Bowerman coached 33 Olympians, 38 conference champions and 64 All-Americans. He is credited with bringing the U.S. Olympic Trials to the University of Oregon’s Hayward Field in 1972, and then he coached the U.S. team in Munich.

Bowerman had many memorable quotes attributed to him during his career, among them: “The real purpose of running isn’t to win a race, but to test the limits of the human heart” and “If you have a body, you are an athlete.”

He would take his runners’ feet measurements to customize their running cleats and experiment with fabrics and materials, which became the template for the modern running shoe he would invent as co-founder of Nike.

“Bill Bowerman never liked being called a coach, though,” Curl said. “He saw himself as a teacher and expected his athletes to excel in the classroom and apply the lessons they learned on the track to everyday life. One of the defining characteristics of our Soldiers is we are warrior-athletes. Many of us were most influenced by our coaches in our formative years. Bill Bowerman, having been a Soldier and a war hero himself, used that as a guiding principle for how he developed young adults in his career.”

In the 1998 film, “Without Limits,” a group of University of Oregon track athletes are waiting to meet the head coach, when one runner gives a new recruit a warning before meeting Bill Bowerman.

“He was in Italy, World War II, 10th Mountain Division. He negotiated the surrender of the German Army … all of them. When he commands, you obey.”

In January 1943, Bowerman took a train to Colorado, where he joined the 86th Mountain Infantry Regiment at Camp Hale, Colorado. He was an accomplished track athlete, not a skier, but Bowerman arrived with a little experience on the slopes. As a platoon leader in C Company, 1st Battalion, he learned military skiing and snowshoeing. When Bowerman was named the regimental supply officer, he became the proud owner of 200 mules.

Bowerman distinguished himself as a leader during the 10th Mountain Division’s deployment to Italy, and he eventually took command of the 1st Battalion of the 86th Mountain Infantry Regiment. He was said to have orchestrated the surrender of 4,000 German troops near the Brenner Pass just hours before the German Army officially surrendered in Italy.

In the book, “Bowerman and the Men of Oregon,” the author wrote that Bowerman was fond of telling people that when the war ended, Army records indicated he had 200 mules in his charge, but that 201 were accounted for in the corral. So, he shot one of them to balance the books. Bowerman's wife, Barbara, said that in reality, he released many of them and that Italian peasants happily wrangled them up.

After he was honorably discharged from service, Bowerman returned to teaching and coaching at a local high school in Medford, Oregon. In 1948, he moved his family to Eugene, where he began his extraordinary career at the University of Oregon.

Bowerman authored a book, “Jogging,” that helped create a nationwide fitness trend. Published in 1967, the book offered a medically approved physical fitness program for all ages – drawn from his studies at the University of Oregon, as well as other experts.

Bowerman also established Eugene’s first joggers club. A couple hundred community members showed up at the track on the first day. By the third day, there were roughly 1,500 joggers and Bowerman had to turn people away until he could establish some sort of program for everyone. That is when he began a draft of his jogger’s manual.

Runners needed shoes for this new American pastime, and Bowerman partnered with a former miler on his team, Phil Knight, to make them. The company they formed was originally called Blue Ribbon Sports, but later became known worldwide as Nike.

In the 10th Mountain Division documentary, “Fire on the Mountain,” Bowerman said the inspiration for their first Nike running shoe occurred at the kitchen table during breakfast. The pattern he was looking for, something that would separate mud from the bottom of the shoes, was found in the waffle iron. He poured urethane into the iron, and a releasing agent, to create the waffle sole.

“He (Phil Knight) sold them out of his father’s garage, and they went like hotcakes,” Bowerman said in the documentary.

The memorialization ceremony concluded with the unveiling of a bronze plaque honoring Bowerman’s many achievements and recognizing his service in the 10th Mountain Division.

“All of this is why it is so appropriate and fitting that we are naming this facility after a 10th Mountain war hero who taught and trained so many athletes, designed the footwear that we still wear today, and inspired the fitness that is so critical to our ability to conduct grueling combat operations,” Curl said. “Thank you, Bill Bowerman, for everything you have done for us.”

Photos to support this story can be found at:

https://www.dvidshub.net/news/428247/fort-drum-track-memorialized-legendary-coach-10th-mountain-veteran <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/428247/fort-drum-track-memorialized-legendary-coach-10th-mountain-veteran>

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