

Phila. man's mission keeps him running

By DIANE McMANUS
SPECIAL TO THE CS&T

Dave Thomas is a foot soldier for the causes he believes in — literally. He has worn out countless pairs of running shoes since his early days competing for LaSalle College High School in Converse All-Stars in the 1970s.

An accomplished runner, coached by Villanova standouts Tom Donnelly and Pat Devine, Thomas values his LaSalle experience. He recalls that his coaches' Villanova background linked them — and him — to a great athletic tradition and as such inspired him to want to carry on that tradition.

In addition, his competitive spirit drove him to excel. LaSalle teammate Bob Reynolds remembers Thomas as a "tough competitor. You could set your watch by him. Every season he improved his position," he said.

He improved enough to run for Temple University under Jack St. Clair, a coach he has admired since he first entered Temple in 1975.

After graduation in 1980 with a bachelor's degree in exercise science, he studied sports management and also coached for a short period at LaSalle University.

He then worked for Pat Croce as a sports therapist, training such professional athletes as Ron Hextall and Eric Lindros of the Flyers, as well as Olympic boxing gold medalist Mel-dred Taylor.

And he continued to run — longer and longer distances. While some might see the 26.2-mile marathon as the

pinnacle of their distance running achievements, Thomas did not stop there. Although he ran many marathons — achieving a personal best of 2:28:54 in the 1985 Chicago Marathon, he set his sights higher, running in races of 50 miles and more, including 24-hour events. For example, he was the first American in the London to Brighton race (1992) and the Comrades Marathon (2000), each 56 miles.

But in addition to these competitive successes, he said his mission was "to use my God-given talent to do some good for others." Inspired by the ethic of the Christian Brothers, who taught him at LaSalle, he sought to make a difference.



DAVE THOMAS, a member of St. John the Baptist Parish in the Manayunk section of Philadelphia, runs the Delaware Distance Classic in 2007. To date, he has run over 1,000 races, including 75 marathons.

And so in 1989, he set out on foot, running for approximately 27 hours and 125 miles from Catholic high school to Catholic high school all around the Philadelphia Archdiocese. Enlisting support of the schools' track teams, he raised \$5,000 for St. Francis Inn, a Philadelphia homeless shelter. And he didn't stop with that effort.

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— Dave Thomas

On two occasions, in 1991 and 1992, he spent 24 hours running around the Spectrum — a total of more than 115 miles for each run — to raise money for the Flyers' Wives Fight for Lives charity. Then, in 1993, he traveled from the Hershey Bears' minor league hockey arena

to the Spectrum, a distance of 100 miles — on foot and on the run.

And it wasn't enough for him simply to run — or even to raise money through running — so he turned to coaching.

Croce tapped Thomas to coach the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society's Team in Training, an organization in which runners train for various sports events, most notably marathons, while raising money for cancer research. Thomas worked with that organization for 14 years.

It was, at first, an awakening for him. Used to coaching highly motivated professional athletes, he realized that many of the runners entering the Team in Training

program were new to the sport and that he needed to "redefine success." Often, their goals were not so much to win or place, or even achieve a specific time — merely to finish a marathon and to raise a specific amount of money.

Thus, he needed to "start from square one," teaching about nutrition, running clothes, shoes, and other basic topics. Yet he said he derived satisfaction in watching their progress "from only being able to run a couple of miles to completing a 26.2 mile marathon." Altogether, he helped about fifteen hundred runners complete their first marathon.

Meanwhile, Thomas also sought to organize his fundraising efforts and in 2002 formed his non-profit organization, Philadelphia Athletic Charities, which creates events such as races to promote fitness while raising money for a variety of charitable organizations in the Philadelphia area.

Among the races Thomas directs are the Ocean City Police Chase, the Schuylkill River Loop, the Northeast Philly 5-Miler — and an event that has special meaning for him, due to its connection with the Catholic League — the Philadelphia Catholic League Open Cross Country Championship. Proceeds from this race pay for awards for Catholic League races throughout the year.

It started as an informal alumni cross-country race that preceded the Catholic League Cross Country Championships on Belmont Plateau and drew only 30 to 40 runners. Now, the event has grown and about 160 runners participate.

It now functions as the Mid-Atlantic USA Track and Field Cross Country Championship, and top

runners compete from all around the region. Of course, many Catholic League alumni teams return to compete as well and retain their rivalries from the past. At the same time, it also draws those who have never experienced cross-country during their school years, as well as runners of all ages, some well into their 60s and 70s.

For Thomas, the lure of the race is its tradition. Awards are named after coaches from the past. For example, alumni teams compete for the Jack St. Clair Award, since St. Clair coached Cardinal Dougherty's team to eight Catholic and city cross-country championships.

With his own history of competing, Thomas is steeped in tradition and enjoys sharing stories of past races and runners — as well as his own running past.

The runners at Philadelphia University, where Thomas now serves as head cross-country coach, confirm his ability to lighten a workout with stories of his college days.

"There was rarely a practice that would go by without one of Dave's infamous old school stories that began with 'back in the day.' However, these stories always kept the team entertained," said Philadelphia University runner Shawn D'Andrea.

And they kept the team motivated, as well. D'Andrea was impressed from the start with Thomas's "knowledge of the sport and competitive desire" and the results that followed. "I adapted very well to Dave's training," said D'Andrea, as did the team.

In the Central Atlantic Collegiate Conference Championship, D'Andrea finished second with a personal best time, and said, "four of our top five ran personal bests at Belmont to lead our team to a second place finish."

As team captain Andrew Piotrowski sums up, "Dave Thomas is a great inspiration to every runner on each and every one of the teams he has coached."

While his intimate knowledge of running has a great deal to do with Thomas's success as a coach and race director, at the heart of his achievement is his heart.

Friend and fellow ultra-running competitor, Neil Weygandt, of Drexel Hill, perhaps best sums up Thomas's contribution. "Dave has done more than anyone in the Philadelphia area to promote and support running at all levels," he said.

Ultimately, the courage, wisdom, and joy that Thomas derives from running, promoting the sport, helping his causes, and teaching others comes from a source far deeper than human desire for success or adulation.

"The energy always came from within," Thomas said in describing what kept him going during his ultra-distance runs. "And I always knew I was never alone on the run, but the power of the Holy Spirit was always with me."

And perhaps that is what touches those around him as well.

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Up for a Challenge?

Whether or not you ran cross-country in high school, whether or not you attended a Philadelphia Catholic League high school, Dave Thomas is looking for you! The Philadelphia Catholic League Open Cross Country Championship race offers unique opportunities for: parents who want to understand what their high school children face on Belmont Plateau; alumni who want to relive their glory days; any runner who seeks a change from monotonously paved road races; and for runners of all speeds and ages who don't mind a little oxygen debt.

The Open race takes place on the same course on which high school races are contested. Thus, you will have the same chance as your high school counterparts to sprint from the starting line, charging up Flaggpole Hill (still so-called despite there now being no flaggpole at the top); romping past baseball fields; until you reach the wooded section and your next nemesis, Parachute Hill. (The name should be self-explanatory.)

For more information about the race, go to the Web site: <http://fscatsports.com/PCLRacepage.html> or e-mail thomasd611@yahoo.com