

RINGO: Coach Jerry Quiller 'was a coach before anyone knew he was a coach'

Hundreds pay tribute to Quiller at memorial service

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Olympic team in a career that spanned more than 40 years. And his way of living with "Jerry enthusiasm" served as an example to everyone else with whom he came into contact.

Hundreds of colleagues, competitors, athletes he coached and those whose lives he touched joined his family Saturday on the suite level at Folsom Field to pay tribute to Quiller and celebrate his remarkable life. Quiller died Feb. 2. He was 69.

Some of those in attendance traveled thousands of miles to share stories about a man who was born in Denver, grew up in Fort Collins and was eulogized in Boulder. They told of how Quiller changed them, molded them, challenged them, improved them, saved them, loved them.

They called him Q, Coach Q, or, simply, Jer.

The history books will note that his coaching career began in the late 1960s at Aviation High School in California, where he impressed some by coaxing 30 students to join the track and field team in his first season.

Just a few years later, the team had swelled to more than 120.

More than four decades later, seven members of those teams came to pay their respects Saturday along with representatives from every other stop he made in his career.

Quiller's younger brothers, Steve, Dana and Al, and his little sister Shauna see it differently. He became a coach when he was still a boy and a big brother to each of them.

"He coached us from the time we were born," Steve Quiller said. "He was a coach before anyone knew he was a coach."

He influenced thousands of lives and left indelible marks on many, often greeting his athletes each day when they reported for practice with "Hey, bubba."

In Jerry Quiller's final few weeks of life, he fought through fatigue -- just as he coached so many high school, college and professional athletes to do over the years -- in order to reach out one more time to those he loved.

Quiller dictated letters to his beloved wife, Sandy, in a final attempt to connect with friends because he was too weak to write them himself. That was the essence of one the great track and field and distance running coaches of all-time.

He found a way to get things done. If a way didn't exist, he made one up, particularly when the opportunity to help someone or make an impact on a life hung in the balance.

"He always had time for everybody, he really did," Sandy Quiller said. "... He enjoyed what he did. He loved what he did."

Quiller coached at Wayne State, Colorado State, Idaho State, Colorado, the United States Military Academy and the U.S.

His three sons, Ryan, Rory and Robb believe he did his finest work with them with constant encouragement in nearly anything they wanted to explore or try.

Quiller taught his sons to be nice to people, be proud of the lives they led, make everyone feel special and give people a chance.

"He was a great coach, a great person and an even better father," Ryan Quiller said.

David Derdyn flew to Colorado from Los Angeles on Saturday to say goodbye to his friend and former coach.

Quiller coached Derdyn in cross country at CU in the 1980s. Derdyn had joined the program in his mid-20s after serving in the military and after finishing well in the Bolder Boulder one year. He completed his college career when he was 30 and became well-known after he sued the school over drug testing issues.

Derdyn said Quiller stood by him and allowed him to remain on the team when many other coaches would have run him off.

Derdyn said Quiller did so despite the fact that he disagreed with Derdyn's lawsuit. Derdyn said he is forever grateful to have been coached by Quiller.

"He was the kind of guy who was very accepting, very open-minded," Derdyn said. "He treated me like the grown man that ostensibly I was supposed to be. I just really got along well with him. Our personalities just kind of meshed you know?"

Quiller owned a double-wide trailer at 34th and Valmont in Boulder that he rented to different runners at times in the early 1970s when he was an assistant coach at CU.

Pablo Vigil was one of 14 runners using the trailer at one time. Vigil recalls that Quiller opened the door to anybody passing through town.

Vigil recalls that at one time he shared the trailer with future Olympians Mike Slack and Garry Bjorklund. He said the trailer came with all the spaghetti, oatmeal and peanut butter the runners could eat courtesy of the Quiller family.

In April, Quiller, Vigil and Bjorklund will be inducted into the Colorado Running Hall of Fame.

Quiller coached and recruited some of the great runners in Colorado history, including Alan Culpepper, who won an NCAA title in the outdoor 5,000 meters in 1996.

He went on to become a two-time Olympian in 2000 and 2004. Culpepper was reunited with Quiller on the 2000 U.S. Olympic team and remembers walking into the opening ceremony in the stadium in Sydney, Australia, with Quiller at his side.

He also remembers Quiller as a man armed with a small yellow megaphone who served as a constant voice of encouragement and who lost his voice after every race day.

"You would go into his office and before you knew it, you would be having conversations about this, that and the other," Culpepper said. "He would inevitably rip out like the top of a pizza box and start writing the workouts down for the week on the pizza box. I think that is what people liked about him. He was so down to earth and so simple and so approachable."

Quiller left his mark on the Colorado program not only through the athletes he coached and their achievements, but by hiring his eventual successor, Mark Wetmore.

Twenty years have passed since Quiller first hired Wetmore as an assistant coach and, since taking over as cross country and track and field coach in Boulder in 1995, Wetmore has built Colorado into one of the premier distance running programs in the nation.

"He gave me a free hand with the group he assigned me, which head coaches rarely do, and honestly, anything that has happened here in my career has grown out of that," Wetmore said.

In preparing for Saturday's memorial service for their father, his sons came across a copy of an old will Quiller had

prepared years earlier.

One segment of the document asked the coach for any remarks he would like shared at a service in his honor.

His son, Ryan, read those words -- one final bit of coaching from Quiller -- Saturday evening.

"I have a great family," Quiller wrote. "Remember the good times."

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