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sports

Former track coach Quiller fights cancer

By John Meyer
The Denver Post

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Jerry Quiller ran track at CSU, then coached the Rams and later built up the University of Colorado program. (RJ Sangosti, The Denver Post)

LOUISVILLE — Two decades have passed since Kirsten Kindt ran track and cross country for the University of Colorado, but she fondly recalls coach Jerry Quiller screaming himself hoarse during races.

"Go, Kirsten! Be a bulldog!" It was Quiller's way of telling Kindt to be tenacious: Get after the woman in front of you and don't let go.

"I still hear that sometimes when I'm running," said Kindt, 44.

Now Kindt and several of Quiller's former

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athletes want him to be the bulldog in his fight against cancer. And they want to coach him through it.

Four decades after Quiller gave up trying to be a decathlete and began a career devoted to nurturing the athletic aspirations of others, his doctors want him to condition himself with an athlete's discipline — again. They need him to get stronger so he can withstand a stem-cell transplant to help him battle multiple myeloma, an incurable cancer he has been fighting for two years.

"We need to buff him up a little bit," said Quiller's oncologist, Dr. John Fleagle of the Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers in Boulder.

Eager to help the man — affectionately nicknamed "Q" — who laid the groundwork for CU's emergence as an NCAA power in distance running, former athletes are taking Quiller on walks and giving him pep talks.

"I've got a pretty good support group," said Quiller, 67. "They've started coming up once a week, some of them twice a week, to go for a walk. 'Q, now come on, you're supposed to be taking a walk for a mile, so let's go.' "

Quiller retired last year after a coaching career spent at Colorado State, Colorado, Wayne State, Idaho State and West Point. Last fall he helped on a volunteer basis at Colorado School of Mines, making an impression on freshman Briana Suppes. When he suffered a relapse in December, she wrote him a note urging him to fight the way

he had coached her to do.

"That word, fight, took on so much more meaning to me than I ever thought it would," Quiller said. "All of a sudden, that's in my vocabulary, big-time. And it came from her."

Quiller was diagnosed in January 2007 while coaching at West Point. Five weeks of radiation destroyed the tumor in his back, but vertebrae were damaged — turned to "sawdust," as Quiller put it.

Four rods were surgically inserted to stabilize his spine.

On Mother's Day that year, a group of West Point athletes showed up unannounced at his house to do yardwork because they knew Quiller's wife of 34 years, Sandy, had been too busy with her husband's medical needs to do it.

They wore "Q Lives" T-shirts, a takeoff on the "Pre Lives" shirts popular with fans of the late distance runner Steve Prefontaine.

"People are always calling," Sandy said. "He's always on the phone. I really think that's helped him along, because there have been some real discouraging times as well."

Quiller calls his relapse a "little fling I've had with a bump in the road." In partial remission, he knows the stem-cell transplant could buy him seven or eight years, but the onus is on him to get stronger first. He plans to swim at the Louisville Recreation Center and do some light

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weightlifting, along with those walks with former athletes.

"I didn't realize we had quite so many friends, and I haven't called anybody," Quiller said. "They're calling me."

Last month Quiller received a special tribute at an induction ceremony of the Colorado Running Hall of Fame.

Former CU miler John Lunn, who ran against Kansas star Jim Ryun in the 1960s, began his testimonial by inviting everyone in the audience who had been coached by Quiller to join him on the stage. Seventeen people lined up behind Lunn, some visibly struggling with their emotions.

"It was thrilling, or awe-inspiring," Quiller said. "I couldn't believe (Lunn) did that. Then he kind of got choked up. I'm saying, 'John, you and I went over this, it's not a big deal.' It got to him."

Lunn has been one of Quiller's most loyal former athletes, regularly checking on him.

"Jerry absolutely convinces athletes that everything he is doing is for their benefit," Lunn said. "He has no ego. He never takes credit for anything."

Lunn and John Gregorio ran for Quiller under the banner of the Colorado Track Club in the 1970s after their CU careers ended. As many as a dozen cash-starved, postcollegiate runners would crash in Quiller's double-wide mobile home in Boulder. The joke was that if one guy

rolled over in the middle of the night, everybody else had to roll in unison with him.

At the 1974 U.S. Cross Country Championships, they dethroned the powerful Florida Track Club, which had won the previous three years. The Colorado contingent won again in 1975 and 1977.

"He was like a dad to us," Gregorio said. "If you needed money, Quiller would give you money. If you needed to get somewhere, Quiller would get you there. There were guys he bailed out of jail at 2 in the morning."

As word spreads of Quiller's fight, get-well cards, letters and e-mails pour in.

"That really makes you feel good," Quiller said. "It's sure nice to know you've got somebody who's rooting for you. But we all only last so long. You just want to know when is your day and how does it happen? Do you just not wake up? I have that wondering in me. During the day, I don't have it. But in the middle of the night . . ."

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Jerry Quiller bio

Age: 67

Birthplace: Denver (grew up in Fort Collins)

College: Colorado State (1964)

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Assistant coaching: CSU grad assistant, CU assistant 1970-74

Head coach: Wayne (Mich.) State 1974-76, CSU 1976-80, Idaho State 1980-85, CU 1985-95, Army 1995-2008

Other distinctions: Assistant coach, 2000 Olympic team; 1994 national coach of the year; coached 48 All-Americans including eventual Olympians Adam Goucher, Alan Culpepper and Dan Browne; coach of U.S. men's team at the 1981 world cross country championships; coach of U.S. women's team at the 1994 world cross country championships; distance coach for U.S. team at the 1987 track and field world championships.

Reinfusing stem cells

Multiple myeloma is an incurable cancer of plasma cells in the bone marrow that causes weakened bones, often leading to fractures, and low blood counts. Patients are treated with medications that induce remissions, and the longest remissions come from procedures that involve stem- cell transplants. Circulating stem cells are harvested from the patient and stored, after which the patient receives high doses of chemotherapy. Then the patient's stem cells are reinfused.

"If you look at the median survival from transplant studies, it's about seven years," said Dr. John Fleagle of the Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers. *John Meyer, The Denver Post*

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