

85 years young And he's still coaching

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Peterson oldest cross country coach in Colorado.

Glenn Peterson coached the first cross country team at Air Academy High School in 1966.

At 85 years old (his birthday is today) and nearly half century later, Peterson still coaches the sport in Colorado Springs, CO, that began including girls in 1983.

The Gothenburg native is the oldest cross country coach in Colorado.

“I think in all sports in Colorado,” he said.

What’s in it for Peterson?

“I think it helps keep me young because I’m around kids and can help them,” Peterson said. “I feel I can do some good for the kids.”

What’s in it for the kids?

With much negativity in today’s society, he said it takes 10 positives to eliminate a negative. Unfortunately negatives often are what’s heard.

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"If they only hear negatives, they need 10 positives to offset them," Peterson explained.

Peterson got into coaching in a roundabout way.

His story begins on a farm and ranch in the rugged hills of south Custer County near Etna where he grew up with two brothers and four sisters.

Peterson attended New Hope country school and enrolled at Gothenburg Public School as a freshman, playing football and running track all four years.

He was part of the legendary and mythical (since there were no playoffs) championship football team that beat Creighton Prep, 27- 21, and tied with Boys Town in ratings for the top team in the state.

Fellow team member Jack Ostergard said Peterson, a tackle, made several all-conference football teams.

As a hurdler, Peterson qualified for state his junior and senior years and brought home a second-place medal in the event his senior year.



In 1946, Peterson graduated and worked on the family farm for two years before enrolling at Kearney State College where he earned a teaching degree in industrial arts.

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He also won high hurdles in the National Collegiate Athletic Association conference meet four years in a row.

With a starting salary of \$3,000 in teaching, Peterson decided he couldn't live on that amount so he returned to the family farm to work for four more years until a Gothenburg friend called about a teaching opening in Kearney.

Peterson took it and ended up teaching industrial arts to Kearney junior and senior high students and coaching high school football.

"I'd never coached in my life," Peterson said.

Nonetheless, he became assistant football coach, and also coached track, while he taught for six years.

In 1962, he found out about a position at Air Academy High School on the Air Force Academy campus in Colorado Springs.

At the time, Peterson said the school was attended mostly by children of Air Force Academy officers and that 75% of the students were from military parents.

He accepted the job in 1962 and found himself coaching seventh-grade basketball.

"I'd never played basketball," Peterson said with a laugh. "They were very good kids and we lost four games."

The next year, he coached ninth-grade football and in the spring of 1965 he started coaching track.

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A year later, Peterson started the cross country team with 15 boys. At the time, the team ran two, instead of the 3.1 miles they run today.

“And I didn’t know how to coach them running that distance,” he said.

He soon figured it out.

Although he retired from teaching in 1989, he continued coaching cross country except for a nine-year hiatus until he returned.

“I have an age advantage,” Peterson said with a chuckle. “How many kids hate their great-grandfather which I’m old enough to be.”

Today, the program has around 60 kids that includes girls.

Peterson coaches with a teacher who is on the Air Academy staff.

Last year the girls placed third in the state in their division and the boys 11th. He said the Kadets have placed second as a team five times and that two runners have won the state title individually.

This year, girls in Nebraska started running the same distance as boys after competing for years at 2.5 miles.

Peterson has perspective on the change, noting that Colorado girls have run 3.1 miles since he started coaching them.

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"It's shock treatment for them now," Peterson said about the Swede girls. "They have to get used to running that distance and get some toughness in them."

Peterson pointed out that it took a long time for girls to break the 20-minute mark in the 2.5-mile distance in Nebraska.

At Air Academy, Peterson coaches an elite sophomore runner, Katie Rainsberger, who can run 17:31 at a distance of 3.1 miles.

Earlier in the season, the time ranked her 10th in the nation.

"She has good genes," Peterson said, noting that Katie's mother, Lisa Weidenback Rainsberger, was the last American woman to win the Boston Marathon in 1985.

Nearly three years ago, Peterson lost his wife of 62 years.

In November, he'll marry an 85-year-old woman he met in rehabilitation after he broke his leg on the family farm near Custer County when a piece of equipment ran over it.

"We were both in wheelchairs and she had a broken back," Peterson said. "The odds of us meeting was unreal."

Peterson told his fiance they couldn't get married during the cross country season so they decided to wait.

In the meantime, he waits for his runners after school to train and to watch them cross the

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finish at meets around the state.

“A lot of people my age don't want to be around kids,” Peterson said. “I love being around them.”

Just how long he'll continue coaching is a question mark.

“When I'm not able to help kids, I don't belong.”

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