

Medford's Nike Connection: Bill Bowerman **By Dennis Powers**

Former Medford High football player and coach, Bill Bowerman, later went on to become a legend in coaching track--and a co-founder of Nike. He played for another stand-out, Prink Callison, whose Medford teams had a 44-game win streak at one time and won three state championships from 1926 to 1928. The 1928 Medford "Tigers" (as the team was called then)--one of the best teams ever in Southern Oregon--averaged 36 points a game, limited opponents to 40 points for the entire season, and Bill Bowerman was their left end.

Born in 1911, Bowerman moved to Medford when he was 10 years old. Raised by his mother and aunts (his father left the family when he was 2), he was "a mean little kid," by his own admission. When he went out for football as a sophomore, Callison wouldn't put up with his antics and kicked him off the varsity team to junior varsity. Bowerman credits both him and Superintendent Hedrick (for whom the middle school on East Jackson Street is named) as disciplinarians who straightened him out. He also played basketball and edited the school newspaper.

After high school, he went to the University of Oregon ("OU") and became a quarter-mile runner under legendary Ducks' track coach, Colonel Bill Hayward; this coach became the mentor under which Bowerman modeled himself and learned the "concepts of greatness," as he reminisced. With his bachelor's degree in 1934, Bowerman decided to attend medical school, but he first had to earn tuition.

Coaching for one year in Portland, he came to Medford in 1935 to coach football and track. His "Tornado" football teams (the nickname came from sports newspaper editors) went 69-13-8 overall, while his 1935 and 1939 teams were 7-0-1 and 8-0-1. World War II intervened just months before he was to start medical school and become a doctor. Having learned to ski in the Siskiyou Mountains without chairlifts, he headed to Colorado, trained for the 10th Mountain Division, and then skied the Italian Southern Alps on patrol.

He returned to Medford after the war and coached for two more seasons, leaving to coach track and freshman football at OU in 1949. For 24 years as the head track coach, he developed many of the world's best distance and middle-distance runners, among them being Steve Prefontaine and Alberto Salazar. He won four NCAA track and field championships, finished second twice, and coached 44 all-Americans and 19 Olympians. He is credited with turning the college town of Eugene, Oregon, into the running capital of the world.

With a commanding presence, Bowerman overlooked no detail, even hand-crafting his athletes' shoes. He created the first lightweight, outsole shoe from some latex, leather, glue, and his wife's waffle iron. In 1964, he joined with Phil Knight--a middle-distance runner who ran for him in the late 1950's--each investing \$500 into a company named Blue Ribbon Sports and sold 330 pairs of the shoes.

They sought to develop athletic shoes that were lighter with more traction than the present, longstanding designs. More innovations came, including the wedged heel, the cushioned mid-sole, and lightweight nylon uppers--not to mention developing rubberized asphalt runways. Propelled by the waffle-soled shoes, astute marketing, and the 1970's upsurge of interest in running and physical fitness, they built Nike, based in Beaverton, Oregon, into the world's largest athletic shoe and sports apparel maker. It became a multi-billion-dollar company and recognized world-wide for its swoosh logo.

The Medford Linebackers Club honored him in the early 1970s when they built Bowerman Field on what's now the North Medford campus. Giving back to the community, his foundation helped build or improve tracks at Medford's North and South High Schools, St. Mary's, and Hedrick and McLoughlin Middle Schools. Receiving numerous honors during this time, he died in 1999 at the age of 88.

Sources: Greg Stiles, "Bowerman among Medford's greats," *Mail Tribune*, September 28, 1999, at [Bill Bowerman](#); *The New York Times*, "Obituaries: Bill Bowerman, 88, Nike Co-Founder, Dies," December 27, 1999, at [Additional Background](#); "National Distance Running Hall of Fame: Bill Bowerman," at [Track and Distance Running](#).