ELEVATING athletes

Late great teacher/coach Brian Flanagan remembered for taking care of students

Brian Flanagan, seen here in his favorite red Coach Flanagan jacket, had a knack for finding the fire within his students and bringing out that talent in his athletes.

No matter who you were, you were somebody to Brian Flanagan.

"It didn't matter if you were the fastest or the slowest, if you were the strongest or the weakest, he made a spot for you on the track or in the field," recalled Tony Matoin, a former student and athlete of Flanagan's. "It didn't matter if you were the star, he took care of everybody."

Flanagan, who died in 2019, spent 21 years at Sanford High School, as a social studies teacher and coach of track, cross-country and girls basketball, and eventually assistant principal for seven years. His friends and family remember Flanagan always found the good in both his students and athletes.

"He just had a really great way with his students," said Marlene Flanagan, his wife of 41 years from their Springvale home. "He always, no matter who you were, treated everyone with the same level of dignity and respect. And especially when he stepped into the Assistant Principal role. The assistant principal is really known as the heavy, and he just had a great way about him, even when he was doling out discipline."

Martin McKeon was one of those students he took under his wing.

"Mr. Flanagan listened to students, and pulled any one of them aside whenever he sensed that encouragement was needed; I was one of those students, and he coaxed me to get more involved with extracurricular activities, and my love of my school intensified as a result," said McKeon, who was in Flanagan's social studies class in 1972, his first year as a teacher.

Besides his students, Flanagan was most proud of the new asphalt track at the old Cobb Stadium. He was instrumental in fundraising, planning and building the "new" track and runways for the field events.

"Whatever he had to do, he did," said Matoin. "And that really elevated the sport. It had always been football, basketball and baseball (that got all the attention.) Track always took a back seat."

"I would say Brian was the one who started the program. Not that he was the first one, but I'll tell you, he was the one who brought it to life," said Matoin. "Pretty soon we were beating the perennial power schools like Portland and Westbrook, who were always dominant. We went in there and beat 'em!"

"He recruited athletes from all the other sports, 'come out and try it to see what you like!' There are so many different events, basically if you wanted to go try something, he made sure you found something. There was room for everyone in track and field."

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ELEVATING athletes

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Marlene said her husband, who ran cross-country himself in high school and St. Francis College in Biddeford, was particularly drawn to track and cross-country for that reason.

"Cross country involved a lot of kids who wouldn't otherwise participate in spectator sports. He was always so proud of their accomplishments, or their improvements in time, or maybe just seeing a kid participate in a school sport for the first time," she said.

Flanagan took a personal interest in kids and their success.

McKeon remembers the home cross-country meet where Coach Flanagan arranged to start the meet during half-time of the Sanford football game against arch-rival Biddeford.

"Imagine the thrill of those athletes, who usually competed before just a handful of parents and friends, on that day running to the finish line, in front of the home grandstand, being cheered on by thousands of fans!" he said.

Two specific memories made a mark on Matoin (who won the prestigious 1978 Fitzpatrick Trophy winner in football, plus a state championship in the 100-yard dash and the 440 relay) and he said Flanagan would have done it for any of his athletes.

When the team transitioned from the dirt to asphalt track, Flanagan brought Matoin to the shoe store and paid for new shoes more appropriate for the asphalt. And later in his junior year, when administrative complications prevented his runners from attending New Englands, Coach Flanagan and Assistant Coach John Faulkner personally drove the four qualifiers in Flanagan's old black Monte Carlo to the competition in Vermont on their own dime and time.

"We still talk about it to this day. We had such a great time," Matoin says with a laugh. "He didn't have to do that, but he always took care of us."

In the same spirit. Mr. Flanagan recruited a select group of three to serve as a panel of the old Channel 8 "High School Quiz" show. "Probably paying for the gas himself, he and one of the parents drove the panelists and their large and boisterous 'rooting section' week after week to the old WMTW Channel 8 television studio in Poland Spring," said McKeon. "The television personnel loved seeing Sanford walk in as this enthusiasm went way beyond the typical polite clapping as was the tradition on that show. Sanford's group went crazy after each correct answer, and the team went all the way to the finals that year, and gave the entire school something to cheer about!"

Brady Flanagan ran the New York City marathon in 2015 for the Alzheimer's Association in honor of his father, and presented Brian with his medal at the finish line.

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>
> **Tony Matoin**
> former student-athlete

School spirit was important to Flanagan, said McKeon: "When things weren't going right, he resurrected the Pep Club; his pep rallies at different points of the year would whip the students into a frenzy!"

Matoin remembered Flanagan as one of the few coaches who made practice fun. "I played football and a few other sports, and I always hated practice. Practice with Coach was serious, and we got our work done, but I remember laughing all the time. I loved his practices and even bus rides."

Out of school, Brian and Marlene raised three of their own sons, Michael, Brady and Andrew; and Brian and Marlene owned Flanagan's Driving School for 16 years. He was chairman of the Maine Bureau of Motor Vehicles' Driver/Rider Education Program for a few years, and he was instrumental in developing the written test they still use today.

Flanagan eventually moved on to Bonny Eagle High School and finished his career as principal at Somersworth High School in New Hampshire, before developing early onset Alzheimer's Disease at 58. He died at age 69.

His memory will live on in the hearts and minds of family and friends.

"He was quite an inspiration," said Matoin, who visited his friend regularly up until his last few days.

McKeon called him a "Teacher of the Decades." "Mr. Flanagan, your heart, soul, and fire live on within all those whom you have touched."