

A Colourful life: Olympian Bob Adams remembered

Saskatoon Olympian Bob Adams died this weekend at age 94, after a colourful life steeped in athletics.

[Kevin Mitchell, Saskatoon StarPhoenix](#)

Updated: February 25, 2019

[Share](#)[Adjust](#)[Comment](#)[Print](#)

Saskatoon Olympian Bob Adams died on the weekend at age 94, after a colourful life steeped in athletics.

Adams competed in decathlon at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics. He was Canada's head track and field coach at the 1964 Olympics, built up strong local sprinters who went on to great things, and later officiated internationally — including at the 1976 Olympics, where he was chief judge of the pole-vault event.

Adams was also a founding member of the Saskatoon track club, and played a key role in growing Saskatchewan track and field.

“You don't always have Olympians who then go on to become coaches and administrators and officials,” says Dale Yellowlees, a longtime friend who worked closely with Adams. “And he did that at the Olympic level — competed, coached and officiated at the Olympics. That's a pretty unique combination of credentials.”

Longtime Saskatchewan athletics observer Bob Florence once wrote that if they built a Mount Rushmore for track and field in Saskatchewan, Adams would join Joe Griffiths and Lyle Sanderson up there — all three were prolific coaches and builders; Adams with that additional Olympic-athlete piece.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Adams — raised in Alsask and a longtime Saskatoon resident before moving to Victoria several years ago — enjoyed a long life, and a collection of stories that would make a fine book.

Yellowlees says Adams, who oversaw high school athletics in Saskatoon for many years, was precise with his words; a fair, diplomatic and principled man who could find common ground to settle disputes.

“The way he dealt with people was always exemplary,” Yellowlees said Monday. “I've seen conflict situations emerge in later times that were avoidable, and Bob would have found a way to head them off by consulting along the way. He would see something coming, he would talk to the involved coaches, and say ‘I think this isn't going to be happening — do you think we could

do this, and it would be the right way to do it.’ And at the end, everyone would be in agreement, and it would be seamless.”

During a recent interview with the Saskatoon StarPhoenix, Adams recalled his trek to the 1952 Olympics as a decathlete, where he placed 19th. He watched from up close as Finland spectators chanted “Za-to-pek, Za-to-pek” while Czech long-distance runner Emil Zatopek won his third gold medal of the games. And those opening ceremonies ...

“It was raining,” Adam said recently. “I didn’t have an umbrella, and I remember cozying up under an umbrella held by a couple of young Mexican boys — they didn’t seem to mind, so I stood there. And an event that got a lot of attention ... there was a woman in white, and somehow or other, she got up on stage and began to do a pitch for world peace, which was not part of the program. They gently got her out of there.

“The torch was carried by Paavo Nurmi, and he was idolized in his home country. Those are the highlights that stick in my mind — and the stadium, the likes of which I’d never seen before. You had to be impressed when for the first time, you saw a world-class stadium.”

Adams, who coached a long line of distinguished athletes, is the namesake of the Bob Adams Foundation, a charitable organization founded in 1983. It supports track-and-field athletes pursuing post-secondary education, officials working to improve their standing, and coaching development.

The Foundation is “dedicated to the development of the intellectual, moral, and physical skills of people through their involvement in athletics,” according to its founding principles, and Adams was present in Saskatoon at its recent annual banquet.

Adams coached Judy Peddle, who has served on the Foundation board for years. He also coached her sister Eleanor Haslam, who competed as a sprinter at the 1956 and 1960 Olympics.

Peddle remembers the ankle/leg injury that ended her own track and field career, and the words Adams spoke to her.

“There he was at the hospital, when I had my surgery, and a cast up to my hip, and he says, ‘Okay, kiddo. You’ve gotten a lot out of the sport’ — and I had, 10 years or so — ‘and it’s your turn to give back. You can be in administration, you can be a coach, you can be an official.’ And so I was an administrator. I was in every position with Sask. Athletics, president for eight years. Then he really got me going into officiating. He just ... he made you feel, in a nice way, that you owed it to the sport. You’d better get out and do that. He was my hero.”

During his recent chat with the StarPhoenix, Adams said cancer treatments had sapped his energy.

“This is the first year that I haven’t officiated,” the 94-year-old said, but wife Marge then pointed out that he’d worked an indoor pole vault event not too long ago.

Adams laughed.

“Well, once,” he said.

Yellowlees, who served as the Foundation president several years ago, said Adams was “a giant” when it came to moving track and field forward in the city and the province. And even after moving out of Saskatchewan, he continued to keep close tabs on what was happening.

“Bob never relented,” he said. “He was tremendously responsible. When other people got tired, Bob kept on going.”

kemitchell@postmedia.com

twitter.com/kmitchsp