

THE PASSING OF A COACHING ICON:

John Minichiello

Born: March 11, 1939

Deceased: May 4, 2017

John Minichiello passed away last Thursday and with that event the life of an individual that truly made a difference in the development of our sport had left us. Diminutive in stature, Minichiello looked anything but the part of a great athlete and he wasn't one. But what he did possess was an intellectualism, an ability to command respect and a dedication that allowed him to master the coaching techniques required to turn good athletes into champions. That is what enabled this individual to stand above so many others in his coaching endeavors.

Raised in East Vancouver, John attended Vancouver Technical High School. While a student at that school, for whatever reason, he took it upon himself to help fellow students hone their athletic talents to the point where they became exceptionally competitive at the Vancouver and District Track and Field Championships. It was a strange sight indeed to witness this somewhat undersized young man, who walked with a limp, be able to influence and develop the athletic ability of fellow students.

Even at a young age, there was something about the charisma and intellect embodied in his person that marked John as an individual that was going to be a great mentor and who indeed would go on to coach a world record holder and Olympic Games medalist, as well as an extensive list of other athletes of note.

"His innate perceptive intelligence allowed him to grasp what was important in competitive athletics," stated his former athlete Steve Spencer.

Valerie Jerome remembers first meeting John with fondness - "It was 1958, that brother Harry and I first met John. We had been told that a new track club, Optimist Striders, had been formed and that a young coach who had a knack for developing athletes was in charge so Harry and I plus a couple of other sprinters from North Vancouver High decided to give it a try. We had to climb a fence at Tech to access the track and I found that to be a bit of an ordeal, but we were impressed with our new coaches' expertise and decided that this was the club for us."

It was a relationship that endured through many years and a number of twists and turns but in the end John saw his prize pupil, Harry Winston Jerome, establish a world record and make a remarkable comeback from what should have been a career ending injury, to win an Olympic bronze medal.

Although Harry Jerome was John's most notable athlete there was a host of other individuals. A number of these portages went on to become both accomplished athletes and persons of prominence in the workday world. Among those names is Milton Wong - a former chancellor of SFU, decathlete Ron Parker - a renowned

Canadian artist, middle distance runner and Olympian Bill Smart - a justice of the British Columbia Supreme Court, Paul Winn - an activist for black rights, Steve and Peter Spencer - excellent athletes who went on to become an educator and a barrister, Stuart Hunning - who represented Canada in numerous international competitions including the Maccabi Games as a thrower and, of course, Valerie Jerome - an international long jump medalist. These are a few of the individuals that Minichiello tutored and influenced.

Over a coaching career that lasted some eighteen years, John developed the Striders into a club that was amongst the best in Canada and served as a Canadian coach at two Pan American Games, an international tour of Europe and the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games. In the words of Ron Parker, "John was an innovative coach and had his athletes weight training for sprints, jumps and 800m at a time when only the throwers were using weights to build strength. He could describe the kinesthetics of a skill to an athlete - an ability that he mastered as an acute observer of successful athletes."

John Minichiello was a leader of our sport during an era in which support at the governmental or corporate levels was hard to come by. When John's time as a coach of track and field came to an end, he devoted a good deal of effort to community projects in East Vancouver that included the Britannia Foundation. He even found time to take a turn as a liberal candidate for the federal parliament and I remember him remarking, "my NDP opponent Paddy Neale was one tough customer and he taught me lessons that ended my career as a politician." John went on to a career in educational administration that concluded with being appointed principal of Britannia High School, a position that he had long cherished.

John Minichiello was a leader, an individual who gave of himself tirelessly and a person who made a positive difference to the progress of track and field in our province. Those are attributes that all who knew John are proud of.

Prepared by Gerry Swan with thanks to Ron Parker, Steve Spencer, Valerie Jerome, Paul Winn, Diane Minichiello and Jason Swan for memories, contributions and editing.