

## **PETER OLEY: REFLECTIONS SHARED FOR THE IRVINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY WEBINAR APRIL 2021**

### **Frank Gilligan, IHS Class of '56**

I remember Pete helping me with the 100 and 200 yard dash--he told me not to straighten up too fast in the 100 yard dash. My best time in the 100 was 10.4 at Children's Village. We didn't have a track. All the tracks we ran on were asphalt so we needed the spiked shoes. I fell once in a 400 yard relay and was picking asphalt from my arms and legs for a long time.

### **Gene Deutscher, MSHA, FACHE IHS Class of '60**

Coach Oley was my figurative Godfather.

He took me under his wing my Freshman year and had my back through my four years at IHS and beyond. He molded my running ability, my competitive spirit and my mental toughness. My gift to him was winning for him and his teams.

Doc Desormo and Walter Hawkes were guiding the IHS track teams when Coach Oley arrived. He was not much older than the members of the team, having just recently completed his studies at Brockport State. He understood middle and long distance running. He taught us how and how to win.

May I say at the outset, IHS had no track at the time. We would jog to and from Memorial Park on the aqueduct, showering and changing at the then relatively new IHS gymnasium at Main Street. Training on the grass surface was helpful.

My dad was a history teacher and track coach at Washington Irving High School in Tarrytown before departing teaching for economic reasons. Coach Oley knew my dad. His family was from North Tarrytown, as it was known then. Maybe that was the magic for me. All I knew at the time was as a young coach, he took an interest in my ability, pushed me, trained me, mentored me and made me the successful runner I was at IHS.

Coach Oley drove me home from practice each day in his red MG. He was a bachelor at the time, residing in North Tarrytown at the Van Tassel Apartments. My family lived on Washington Place in the shadow of the original Tappan Zee Bridge. My mother would have dinner waiting for us. The rest of the family had already eaten. Coach Oley and my dad would talk. I would eat and listen then be excused to do my homework.

Coach Oley took me to Penn State to meet the coach and Ed Moran, a senior runner on the Penn State team and a premier miler at the time. We drove in his red MG. Just the two of us. We spent a night in Harrisburg, PA at an older hotel. We shared a room. Before lights out, Coach Oley pushed a highboy bureau against the entry door. "You can never be too safe," he said. A lesson in personal safety!

My sophomore year, Coach Oley received permission to start a Cross Country team. What a rewarding experience for those of us who were privileged to be on his team.

The Cross Country team was Coach Oley's exclusively. The first meet was at home on an out and back course on the aqueduct starting and finishing at Memorial Park. It was during a home football game. The finish was timed to occur during half time of the football game. It was Coach Oley's magic to expose the team and the sport to the IHS community attending the football game!

The winter season was also Coach Oley's exclusively, a time for indoor competition. Coach Oley would bring me to a National Guard Armory on 268th Street in the Bronx, NY. There, on a flat indoor track fashioned on the armory floor, Coach Oley would have me compete against New York City male athletes from the five boroughs. He wanted the best for me so he made arrangements for me to run against the best there were at the time. To and from in his red MG, just the two of us!

Duke University expressed interest in me. Coach Oley made the trip to Durham, NC with my parents and me. I recall the lengthy conversation Coach Oley had with Doc Waters, the Duke track coach in 1960. The conversation took place at Wallace Wade Stadium where the Duke track was located. I was not part of the conversation. Coach Oley had his clipboard with him. The contents were part of the conversation. My workouts completed under his tutelage and my meet competition times and locations.

Subsequent to Duke, I was an officer in the United States Marine Corps with a duty assignment in Vietnam. I received several handwritten letters from Coach Oley while there. Each was a pep talk. You know, just like the ones he would give you 5 minutes before the gun fired to start the race. "You can do this." He was one of the first people I called when I returned to the US.

In 1979, I was privileged to be selected to represent the State of Texas on the 1980 Winter Olympics Torch Relay Team. Each state, as well as the Village of Lake Placid and Washington, DC, was represented. 26 women. 26 men. We traversed 1,000 miles in eight days running from Yorktown, Virginia to the Village of Lake Placid. The route passed through Irvington.

Because of my tie to Irvington, I was a guest of the Village that day. I was also a guest of the new high school. Can you guess who was there to greet me when I arrived? You have it correctly, Coach Oley. We were united once again through running, a passion he instilled in me as a young man. I was privileged further in speaking to the then enrolled students. Some of my teachers were still on faculty.

A gift to be there, however emotional.

I was a guest at Coach Oley's home to meet his wife and children. My roots in New York were transplanted in 1973 after grad school at Columbia, first to South Carolina followed by Florida and Texas, where I now make my home in my 78th year.

Thanks to Coach Oley, running has been part of my life since I met him. The self discipline it brings was his gift to me.

I loved him for being my mentor and coach. He taught me commitment to self and team. He loved me, too. I miss him. I will see him again.

Thank you Coach Oley and Irvington High School for the privilege of being a Bulldog!

### **Bill Murphy, IHS Class of '61**

On the matter of Pete Oley, around 1958 he bought a green (Plymouth (?)) station wagon, in order that he might carry the Cross Country team up to the Rockefeller estate in Pocantico Hills to practice on the cinder roads (maintained for their horses, which shoe tracks were visible) through the fields and woods, with no danger from cars, or car exhaust. (If we needed more wheels, Evan Smith had a car.) It was safer even than the aqueduct (where, with Memorial Park, we held home meets). Our rally cry was "Hy Va Ilta" (Finnish for "To the Track" — which he learned while training, himself, in Finland, where track, and running is the national sport —

Marathon champion Paavo Nurmi being the “Babe Ruth” of Finland). Pete’s wife is also Finnish.

### **Facebook conversation:**

#### **Tom Hannon, former athlete**

Just after your (Erik Oley’s) dad arrived (and Walter Hawkes was still coaching), I watched Milo and his steel pole vault in the sand pit in memorial park where the short hill and archery area were. Neal Fox after that. IHS didn’t have a vault spot till the track up at new HS

#### **Rod Deutscher, former athlete**

They didn't have a track either. Most of the time they practiced at Hackley. And it was amazing that they accomplished what they did both in track and cross country. Most of that was because of your father. I can't tell you how many times he tried to talk me into being a sprinter on the track team. But I loved baseball. The only reason I should have done it was for him. He was so enthusiastic and encouraging. We all wanted to be on whatever team he coached. The most inspirational and dedicated coach ever 🇺🇸❤️

#### **Rich Meszaros, former athlete**

You nailed it.

#### **Tom Hannon**

Rod and I can remember Pete watching the football team practice during x-c practice with his eye on finding sprinters and weight throwers for the track team... you and Gnatowski and Simon O

#### **Rich Meszaros**

True story. He recruited Butchie Burke and me to run in the last dual meet our senior year. We set a school record in the 880 yd relay with Joe David and Fran McKrickard which still stands. Ten minutes before the race he was showing us how to pass the baton! 😊. When the race was over he came running up to me to tell me I had just run a 23.00 flat in the first 220. We had never practiced and I didn't even know how to use starting blocks. I can still hear him, "I told you you should have come out for track." The meet was against Edgemont. The next day I pitched a one hitter at Edgemont in our last game. I give the credit to Pete Oley. He had me so pumped up I could have done just about anything. An incredible game saving catch by Rickie Kunstler in the bottom of the seventh with 2 outs also helped! Rickie and I still talk about it.

#### **Ed Burke, former athlete**

I remember when we set the 880 record and the next day we were back at baseball. AND If I remember correctly, suddenly my marks in Mr. Hawkes’ English class began to improve. lol

#### **Rick Marshall, former IHS middle school runner 1956-58**

What was it like growing up in Irvington during the 1950's ? I seldom reminisce about growing up in Irvington without remembering Peter Oley. I was there when he first arrived as an assistant Irvington High School track coach.

In the 1956 - 1957 school year I was an enthusiastic 5 foot 2 inch 90-something pound 7th grader, always the shortest boy in my class. I loved to run and jump, and dance, and play the drums. I enjoyed school, and I remember being with a pretty small group of older boys on a dreary winter's day after school in the first floor hallway of Irvington High School on Main Street. We all wanted to be on the Irvington Track Team. We were there doing calisthenics, either in our own T shirts and unmatched shorts or green Irvington sweats, with the Irvington High School English teacher and track coach, Walter Hawkes, when we met Mr. Oley, his new assistant.

His youthfulness was immediately striking because I expected him to look like a "grown up" - an older authority figure. So there was something surprising to me in his appearance. Maybe this was like the way popular culture suddenly shifted from listening to Eddie Fisher in 1955 to Chuck Berry - before you could catch up with generational changes - in 1957. The teen culture of James Dean and Natalie Wood's "Rebel Without A Cause" was more a light breeze in Irvington than a storm, but Post War society was changing as we grew up in it. In 1957, individual teen expression in the high school included only five or six students who drove their own cars to school. "Grown ups" acted like grown ups, and we were kids. Mr. Oley's appearance didn't seem to entirely fit this distinction. For one thing, he wore his own trim dark colored track suit, not a classroom teacher's suit ...and he *ran* with us !

As springtime brought sunshine and longer afternoons, we ran more often on the grass field of Memorial Park instead of working out inside the new gym adjacent to the high school. Not having much of anything in the way of equipment seemed to matter. Sometimes Mr. Oley would have us line up for 40 yard dashes, and every so often I was quick enough to win. As a junior high schooler not yet even officially a teenager, this gave Mr. Oley a chance to razz his varsity sprinters a little, and the older guys treated me as one of their own. We liked being together and running together at a time when track was considered a kind of fringy thing with seldom any audience to even notice us - or care about what we were doing. Still, the varsity team went on to win the Western Westchester League Championship, and had more than one individual member highlighted by being named to the "All County" team.

The next year in the 8th grade, while the varsity team took part in a number of meets, several classmates and I got to compete a few times in relays held on cinder tracks long before Irvington finally had one of its own. In some ways, these were exciting coming of age experiences. In the 9th grade I left Irvington to go to school at Hackley in Tarrytown. I was Captain of the cross country team there during my Junior and Senior years.

Despite the many miles of running for four years at Hackley, I never quite felt the same pure joy of running I had experienced with the older guys at Irvington as Mr. Oley began his storied coaching career there. But an especially proud moment came for me when I was back at Memorial Park with my Hackley team mates for a meet against several other cross country teams, including Irvington. I didn't win the meet, but it was Mr. Oley who presented me with a medal afterward.

Once on a Saturday afternoon when there was a duel meet scheduled with Hackley, I walked from my house on Riverview Road to the Irvington gym to spend a little time with old friends and ride in the bus with them to Hackley. Mr. Oley was astonished that I would presume it would be ok for me to use the occasion to maybe get into the heads of his team. At the time, I didn't realize that what I was doing was a little like the enemy using daylight to sneak into camp !

A serious moment occurred between us. I was completely oblivious, only looking forward to being with kids I had grown up with but saw increasingly less often. In light of our Irvington based relationship, Mr. Oley explained the responsibility he had to his team, but his kindness let me enjoy a rare reunion. This was something that had apparently not occurred anytime before, and I doubt that it ever did again !

Visiting with childhood friends a few years before he passed on, Mr. Oley invited us to see the stained glass Tiffany windows from the interior of the Presbyterian Church in the afternoon sunlight. That was my last visit with him.

He was serious, and he was humble, and though the magnitude of Peter Oley's success with generations and many hundreds of youth is in the record books, his contribution to Irvington is too big to be able to fairly or accurately add up.

How perfect that the Irvington Woods hiking trails named for him can be enjoyed by everyone - young and old ...*at any speed !*

### **Jim Brennen, IHS Class of '65**

Coach Oley was like a second father to me. I ran cross country while I was in 7th and 8th grade, and I was a middle of the pack runner, lucky to finish in the top half of any race.

But at one race at Blue Mountain, I finished 19th out of 150 runners. Coach Oley made a big deal out of it, saying afterwards "I want to thank Jimmy Brennen for finishing in the top 20 today--great effort!" which gave my ego a tremendous boost.

I've never forgotten it. Coach Oley was always encouraging, no matter where someone finished--he always encouraged you to do your best. He always waited at the finish line for the last person to finish and always congratulated them. He never downplayed anyone.

My son Kevin wanted to run cross country for Irvington so he could get a varsity jacket and impress the girls, even though he was more interested in drama. He was not much of a runner and always finished last.

Once, however, he managed to beat another kid at a meet at New Rochelle. Kevin was so happy--he kept saying, "I beat someone!" and of course Coach Oley made a big deal out of it, just as he did 35 years earlier for me.

He is one of the best people I have ever met.

### **Bob Prince, IHS Class of '70**

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share my story. Means a lot to me:

Mr Oley was my 5th grade teacher.

There was no screwing around or daydreaming in his class. He'd patrol the aisles between the rows of desks, massive college ring turned upside down in the equally massive palm of his hand, and pop you on the top of the head if you weren't

attending to the work at hand. It was old school...and very effective. Of course, he was also a very good teacher. The ring was only one of many tools he had in his toolbox. And, as a recently retired teacher, myself; I can confidently say that the man knew his stuff when it came to teaching and leading a class.

He was also my track coach (and cross country until 9th grade, when I opted to play football). Very smart guy in the area of track, was Mr Oley. Besides knowing how to get the most out of his athletes, individually (I always trained hard for him); he also knew how to get the points needed to win track meets.

For example: my real strength was long distance, but we already had a lot of excellent runners in those events when I was at IHS. Pete knew that I could do sprints as well...so that's what he had me train for. The 100 was my weakest event, but I'd always at least place, if not win...which contributed to the teams' final tally. Then I'd also be available for the 220 and relay, which were my strongest events. More points that would, most times, add up to another win for the Bulldogs!

Thinking back on it: it's pretty amazing how many times we'd win those track meets.

But most importantly, for yours truly: Mr Oley was one of the key figures in my secondary education and subsequent professional life.

I was the classic underachiever in middle and high school and, as a result, my college applications, academically, were pretty much laughable.

But Pete pushed hard on my behalf; writing letters to his track connections at different colleges. I ended up being accepted at multiple schools and received an excellent collegiate education (including a Masters degree in later years). I'm convinced that this wouldn't have been possible without Pete Oley's efforts. He, basically, gave me a second chance in the area of academics and the arts and I took full advantage of what was offered.

I owe so much to this man. He was a role model, disciplinarian, mentor, and a really nice guy. Opened a lot of doors for me and many others. Couldn't possibly be more thankful for everything he represented in my life.

With Love, Respect, and Admiration.

### **Bob Roane, former athlete**

Coach Oley was a very patient teacher with me, a very non-athletic runner. I also sang with him in Irvington Presbyterian choir with Barry McVinney.

### **Tom Bell, IHS Class of '80**

Having played football freshman and sophomore year, I joined cross country for my junior and senior years. Being new to running, I still vividly remember Coach Oley telling me how to properly hold the hands and position my fingers while running. 43 years later, I am still competing in road races and still hark back to his coaching and training methods and yes, how I should be holding my hands.

### **Nancy Pfister Jameson, IHS Class of '82**

To be a female runner on Coach Oley's team was to be a runner on Coach Oley's team.

I truly believe that Mr Oley—as I called him— valued each team—the boys and the girls— equally and, more importantly, he valued each runner for what they brought to the team. So his passion for coaching seemed to transcend any gender stereotypes as he appreciated each one of us for who we were as individuals and as runners; I felt that Mr Oley's expectations were high and reasonable for each of us regardless of our gender.

In my case, while I was not the lead runner, I often led the rest of the Harriers pack. And Mr Oley helped me realize the importance of that role—he focused on my ability to keep the rest of the runners going, maintaining strong positions in competition and to turn on the heat at key moments throughout the races. I was a valued team member who pushed the pack during both practice and meets.

But my connection to Mr Oley began a few years before that. He was my good friend Ann's father as well as my fifth and sixth grade teacher. Mr Oley was a warm, engaging and enthusiastic educator whose classroom had no walls—both literally and figuratively. His deep compassion and connectedness to the natural world guided and gilded his teachings. Whether he was telling us his personal experiences of swimming in and protecting our precious Hudson River, singing the influential songs of Pete Seeger or visiting the Hermit's Grave in the woods off Cyrus Field Road, Mr Oley embraced experiential hands-on learning and breathed life into everything he taught. I clearly remember learning about the habits and habitats of the caribou on the Tundra and how the Inuits carved tools and figures from soapstone. In fact, this is the very hippo I carved in his class about 46 years ago!

I truly believe that having Mr Oley as a teacher, a coach and a mentor during those formative years influenced not only my decision to go into education but how I have evolved as an educator in my thirty years of teaching.

This is probably best captured in the words of Maya Angelou who said:

“...people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

Well, I like to think that I have remembered much of what he said and did (with a little help from my friend here) but it was Mr Oley's kindness and compassion that has always stayed with me.

### **Michael “Tank” Bivens, IHS Class of ‘82**

Coach Pete Oley. What an honor and a blessing to be coached by one of the greatest, with the best assistant coaches what more could you ask for. You can't mention Irvington High School track without Pete Oley being mentioned. There was something awesome--actually a lot of things awesome--but I would just marvel how he did the track meet in his head, knowing how many points we needed to win...and this was even before the meet started.

If you would step on his track, he had a job for you and he knew exactly where each of us needed to go. Coach Pete Oley made everyone a winner not only because of his love for track but always being in that mind set of teaching/ coaching, wanting to push you beyond your limit knowing that you are going to put your best foot forward. He made sure that he was doing his job but also, he always made sure we stayed honest with ourselves and did our jobs by training, studying hard and being the best we could be.

Seeing Peter Carelli doing the pole vault, the mile walk...seeing William Williams and Jeff Bratjan doing the hurdles or whatever role that was given! Coach Pete Oley was a man on a mission, who surpassed all goals set before him.

Are you talking about raising the bar? I would love to see anyone get there and if they ever did, it would be on the ethics and moral values displayed by Coach Oley. You can tell how Coach Oley loved coaching. I remember him driving his station wagon on the cinder track just grooming it. When going to the Penn Relays, he drove the bus and what was so awesome he trained us to perform and at that huge meet, we won the mile relay. Same with the Empire State Games, a big meet at Syracuse University.

There are many other stories to tell but these were a few just to let you know how special Coach Oley was as a mentor, an educator, a man of integrity, knowledge and wisdom but I will probably remember him as a one of a kind go to person...it didn't matter what you had going on. This tribute to Coach Oley has made us all proud because it will always take a village....

**Ivan Sarda, IHS Class of '83: "Oley Moly! What a close race!"**

On a sunny weekend morning, the sound of a pistol launched 150 runners off to their last high school cross country race. This was not a high stakes section title, or a league championship. It was a contest for seniors who never previously medaled. Determined not to burnout at the start, I had no idea where I stood in the pack as we entered the woods. But Mr. Oley provided a confident and early update, "You gotta pick up 15 spots! You can do it!" With 10 medals up for grabs, that put me in 25<sup>th</sup> place. "Preserve energy at the start, but leave nothing in the tanks by the finish line", that was the plan. But 25<sup>th</sup> place...was not in the plan. So, it was time to empty the tanks. Minutes later, I remember sucking wind like a Hoover and proudly thinking, *I must have passed at least a dozen*. But there again stood Mr. Oley in the woods. With "stepped up" confidence, he reported that I had moved up a number of spots. That number, however, was only half of my apparently wishful estimate. Nonetheless, I struggled past a few more runners. Then I needed to catch my breath for several minutes... 'til once again, on a hill, was Mr. Oley. *Yes, yes, I remember Mr. Oley*, "Charge up the hill", as he would say, "as you get to the top, and everyone takes it easy down the backside, charge down that hill as well, they'll never expect that!!!" Age old advice that...for Pete's sake..."It worked!!!" A bit more energy and the force of gravity drove me past a few more on the downhill. After that, rigor mortis set in and it felt like I was running with ski boots on. But towards the end of the woods...one last time...the trusty motivator stood. *How does this man keep getting ahead of me?*, I wondered. Then, with a high rush of optimism, he exclaimed pointing forward, "Ivan! You gotta pass those two guys!!" I felt recharged.

Some observations in hindsight.

When a 3.1 mile race is decided within yards of the finish line, you realize just how fragile the chain of events were. Everything counted along the way, every update, every piece of advice, every encouraging word and each resulting boost of energy. No doubt, Mr. Oley stood in all the right places and said all the right things to help his runner nab that 10<sup>th</sup> and last medal. He arrived with only 3 runners, and left with 2 top 10 finishers. This was business as usual for Mr. Oley.

Many former Irvington runners know that "a great coach makes all the difference in the world" but Mr. Oley applied his signature enthusiasm on a personal level, he thrived on getting

you to discover something you didn't know you had inside and he showed genuine happiness in being a coach. What a great legacy.

### **Deb Talbot, Class of '84**

I loved Coach Oley! He played an influential role in my love for running that led me to run track in college. Some thoughts / stories to share:

- He was strategic and competitive, yet always took time to make sure we were having fun! He had that great smile and chuckle. Even when he was serious, or got mad at us, he always seemed to end with a smile and a laugh.
- He wasn't just our coach, but also our bus driver! I'm sure his cross-country runners remember the MANY meets he took us to with him driving the small mini bus!
- Who can forget when he drove us up to Cobleskill to compete? We stayed overnight and the morning of the meet he took us to get donuts. Yes, donuts! Of course, he learned really quickly that donuts before a 3.1-mile race was probably not a good idea. I barely finished the race because of those donuts.
- Sometimes on those warm September practice days, we girls would end up dipping in the reservoir for a swim, or stop by Nancy Pfister's for a snack, or stop by the Talbots for a dip in the pool which we kept open throughout September. We'd return to IHS (probably still a bit wet) and sometimes he'd already be gone, other times he'd say "You girls did quite a long run! You know this wasn't a distance day?"
- As we were getting ready for the season in August 1983 (which was my senior year and I was a captain), Coach Oley pulled me aside and said quite excitedly, "Debbie, Debbie, we've got a secret weapon this year!" Confused, I uttered something like, "What do you mean?" He replied, "We've got Samantha Kirby!" Then he went on to explain how Sam, who was returning to the team for her sophomore year, had spent her whole summer up in Maine (I think Maine) running every day. As Coach explained, she kept getting lost on all those runs and ended up running 2-3 times the distance she expected. She came back in phenomenal shape, ready to compete, and she was unstoppable! Coach was right; she was our secret weapon! We went on to have an awesome season!
- Also loved team dinners at the Oley's house.
- In my early years, I loved running with Annie Talbot (my sister), Nancy Pfister, Yvonne Ilton, and Amy Heffner. In my upper-class years, I loved running with Tara Fitzpatrick, Dawn Fitzpatrick, Sam Kirby, and of course my classmates Kate Whiting and Sue Broadhurst. Good times for sure. I'm sure there were others as well.

### **Tim Bell (aka T. Bell), IHS Class of '85**

Mr. Oley was my 5th grade teacher at Dows Lane but that initial relationship expanded to being my track coach for 4 years and cross country coach for 2 years. While I remember the phrases, 'the clock doesn't lie' and 'hip pockets', I think back and smile when I remember our local mini-bus treks, setting up 'the tent' and the overnights to upstate NY and the Penn Relays. I will always be grateful that he convinced me to give up my 140lb tight end football career and get into distance running. Little did I know at that time, it would help to open up opportunities that I couldn't have imagined.

I was fortunate to be a close friend and in the same class as his son Erik which gave me the special bonus of having more time to be with Coach Oley and hear about those who came before me and regale me of those Finnish greats.

**David McNiff, IHS Class of '89**

I remember we made up a song called Electric Caribou ... instead of the obvious Electric Avenue . Mr. Oley encouraged creativity ! I can still sing it ! 🎵

**David (Darvassy) Allison, IHS Class of '88**

I am originally from the New York suburbs in a town called Irvington right alongside the Hudson River. I was lucky enough to be coached by legendary Irvington High School track and cross country coach Peter Oley. He passed away in 2009, and although it's been 11 years since his death, the enormous effect he still has upon me is immense. Because of Coach Oley, I not only excelled in running throughout high school (and was able to compete in college) but still very much enjoy running to this day. I became a coach and a teacher mostly because of him; and like many great coaches, Coach Oley just didn't teach you about splits, pacing, and conditioning, but about life, more importantly.

I loved this man. He was at my wedding nearly 22 years ago and I still remember the gift he (and my other coach - Coach "Mo") gave me - a program copy from the [Glenn D. Loucks Games](#) (for those not familiar with this high school meet, it's the New York equivalent to the [Arcadia Invitational](#) in California). The reason this was such a thoughtful gift was that somehow in my senior year of high school I was lucky enough to win the boys' 3200 meters race (9:20). In this program were the names of all past champions by year for each event. There on the "3200M Boys Champions" page was my name and then the year "1988". Plus, included was the actual scratch sheet of paper where Coach Oley had written out my splits during the race, which was bookmarking that page (I closed in 62 my last 400m, I believe!). To think he had kept this scratch piece of paper after 10 years (1998 I was married) was both amazing and moved me profoundly - But that was Coach Oley. While many past winners had run faster times than mine and had more impressive running careers after high school (for example, Alberto Salazar had won the race when he was a teenager), that day in early May of 1988 was a magical moment for me. Not only because I ran a great race and won, but more so because my coaches believed that I could do it.

But like with all athletes, you don't always have your "Loucks Games" moments and fall way short of your goals. And that was when Coach Oley really shined. Coach Oley never got angry at you if you didn't perform well. In fact, I know I would feel bad if I ran poorly because I felt like I had let this great, kind, and generous man down. Coach Oley saw each of his athletes as people first and competitors second. He treated you like family and had a heart big enough to pump certainty, success, humility, humor, and integrity into the veins of anyone who was fortunate to be connected to him either as a student, athlete or in the community.

There will never be anyone like Coach Oley, in my opinion; but I'd also like to think that we were all changed for the better because of him. We may laugh a little louder, smile a smidge wider, hug a tad tighter, and believe in ourselves a bit more because of what Coach Oley showed us daily in simply how he lived his life.

**Noah Cornman, IHS Class of '92, half miler/ reluctant 1000-meter - occasional triple-jumper**

Coach Oley is a lot of things to a lot of people. For me, he started as my neighbor, the dad of some of my neighborhood friends... (there were always a lot of athletic and fun folks on Riverview Road).. he was my math teacher at Dows Lane, and eventually I found my way onto the track, after getting unceremoniously cut from the tennis team my junior year. **The beauty of Peter K. Oley the human being**, is he loved you for who you were, whether you were the State Champion or the last one across the finish line - he met you where you were to celebrate you for you. He created a culture of community and joy, and in the midst of all of it, a tradition of teamwork and spirit that led to incredible success, a tradition that continues and is a source of great pride for the village of Irvington.

### **Rob Yasinsac, IHS Class of '95**

Peter Oley was the first teacher to inspire in me an interest in history in general and of local history in particular. I was one of his students at Dows Lane elementary school, and I cherish the memories of walks along the Old Croton Aqueduct, past the millionaire's mansions, and in the woods behind the Irvington reservoir, up to the Hermit's Grave. These field trips off the beaten path made me become interested in the kinds of places that other people might overlook.

"Mr. Oley" was kind to remember me years after my time in elementary school, and to remain a mentor and friend, all the way through my time in high school and college, and afterwards. He always greeted me with enthusiasm — "Hey, it's the Yaz!" He made the time to answer my queries of local historical research, to go through the historical society archives to look up something with me, and even to drive me around the village to look for one building or another.

I am grateful to have been one of Mr. Oley's students. In acknowledgement of his influence, generosity, and friendship, I dedicated my book "Hudson Valley Ruins" (co-authored with my friend Tom Rinaldi) to Peter Oley, and also to Thom Johnson, another Irvington school teacher. Mr. Oley and Mr. Johnson helped me to find the subject interest that still remains my passion, the roots of which go all the way back to Peter Oley's history lessons.

### **Stan Liu, IHS Class of '97**

Looking back to my high school days are countless great memories of a school filled with amazing teachers and friends. It is a place that I will always hold dear to my heart.

One of the great men that I had the fortune of having guide me through my turbulent teenage years was Coach Oley. For us track runners, Coach Oley was a constant figure of motivation with a jolly smile and bellowing laugh to make us all feel welcome but also there with a swift kick in the rear when we needed the drive to keep pushing.

Through him we learned that running, much like life in general, is all about what you put into it. The more you give the more you get back. He inspired years of undefeated track seasons because he always believed in us, always believed that there was greatness in us all.

Running came for me at a time when I needed it most. I suffered the Earth shattering loss of a friend when Andrea, then a freshman at Irvington High, passed

away. She was like family to me and running gave me an outlet to channel that emotion into something other than grief. To this day some 20 plus years later running is still my greatest source of meditation and peace. I have Coach to thank for that.

As a kid I didn't understand the push to run when I wanted to least. I still clearly remember a cold rainy day when I wasn't feeling quite well, I told Coach I was going to skip practice and go home and rest. He insisted I run and just do my best. I was infuriated and ran with great intensity just to show how angry I was. Coach just chuckled, smiled at me and told me good job. It was like he knew those hard days would be the greatest lessons of all. I think about that day often when training for races now. When it's snowing or raining out and every fiber of my being is telling me to stay indoors, I look back and think, you get what you give, the weather didn't stop me then and it won't stop me now. So rain or shine I lace up my running sneakers and head out the door and all the angst of the day, all the tripeditions of life melt away and I am once again at peace. a

Much like me, many of the track team members of years yonder still run regularly and we still motivate each other just like Coach Oley did all those years ago. We carry on his legacy, mile after beautiful mile, every step of the way.

### **John Leone, IHS Class of '99**

Where do I begin? Being a part of the Coach Oley legacy was an incredible experience & honor.

As many years have passed since IHS athletics I look back now as I appreciate even more the commitment, time & lessons Coach Oley gifted to his team, students & the village of Irvington. Go Bulldogs!

### **Jeremy T. Adler, IHS Class of '99**

When I joined the team in 1995, the boys team didn't have very high expectations. In fact, none of them expected to keep up with Tina Ogbolu, who was one of the best girls in the section at the time. But we started having enough success that we were able to convince Jacob Grose and my brother to come out for the team the next year. So by 1996, we actually had a pretty good team. But we always liked to keep things exciting. So at the sectional meet at Bowdoin Park, I got excited and went out way too fast.

By the last mile, I was dying, and in the final straight my legs completely gave out. I finally dragged myself over the finish line in 50th place, worried that I had ruined our team's chances of going to states. In fact, our sixth man (possibly Adam Howard, pictured) ended up finishing just a few seconds behind me, so I wasn't even sure if I had helped the team at all. But the officials tally the scores, we found out that we had not only won, but that we had won by such a small margin that, if I hadn't finished, we would have lost.

Of course, our prize for winning in such dramatic fashion was that we were allowed to compete in one of the most miserable state meets ever. The course at St. Lawrence was flooded, so they ended up having us run a few laps around a huge

field through frigid puddles up to our knees. None of us did well at that meet, but I'm also pretty certain that none of us cared. We were so thrilled to be at the state meet--something that we couldn't have even imagined when this photo was taken.

### **Sam Gordon, IHS Class of '07**

For the first year that I ran under Peter Oley, my name was "the man." This wasn't a reflection of my significance to the team or my talent; I was but a slow frosh. Nor could it be attributed to a fading memory. Mr. Oley was still as sharp as ever. Instead, it was a humorous reminder that my new coach had 49 years of athletes crammed into his head, and he needed a few extra months to fit me in, too..

In Mr. Oley's final year of coaching, I was the definition of average, but to Coach Oley, that made me significant. What made Mr. Oley a great coach, especially for me, was that he gave the same level of encouragement to all of his athletes, regardless of talent.

Mr. Oley taught me to love running. He's the reason why I continued running during my first year in college, and, despite a bout of mid-season tendonitis, I was able to will myself through my first marathon last May. It's a great regret of mine that I never had the opportunity to tell him this....

Ironic, then, that Mr. Oley wanted running to be my fourth priority. Family, friends, and schoolwork all took precedence in his mind. He taught me, more than anything, that life was about balance, about love, about pursuing your passions. He's the reason why right now, at 11:30 on a Sunday night, I'm writing this instead of reading 100 pages about Medical Anthropology for class tomorrow. He's the reason why I learned to balance my priorities. He's the reason why the most humbling moment of my life was receiving the first annual Peter Oley Scholarship..

Finally, he's the reason why I was able to stop running. When I started to believe that the time I dedicated to running could be better spent elsewhere, I initially found it difficult to let go of the stability and structure that running gave me. His guidance allowed me to trust that my decision would ultimately be rewarding, and indeed it has been.

I can't help but call him a role model, or better yet, a hero. I'm privileged to have been on his teams during his final year of coaching, I'm thankful for the three years I spent under his guidance, and unfathomably grateful for the memories, wisdom, and values that I'll carry with me the rest of my life.

### **Barbara Ginsberg, Dows Lane Librarian, Colleague of Peter Oley**

Thanks so much for reaching out to Peter's former colleagues to share memories of one of the most unique individuals I have ever known.

Peter had all the hallmarks of a great teacher. He was unflaggingly patient, caring and kind and had the unique ability to develop relationships with each of his students while actively engaging them in learning.

We were fortunate enough to be teaching in Irvington in the "golden years"--that incredible time when there was no such thing as "teaching to the test" and the staff was not hampered in their teaching styles. And Peter's style WAS unique.... I can vividly remember walking into his classroom after his class had just gotten back from one of their local field trips to the Hermit's Cottage and getting a rousing rendition of "John Jacob Jingleheimer Smith".

My first encounter with Peter was in the fall of 1986 when I first arrived at Dows Lane as the "new" librarian. Steve Fisher, the superintendent at that time introduced me at the Superintendent's Day Meeting as his "recruit from Scarsdale.". As the meeting was breaking up someone taped me on my shoulder and when I turned around there was Peter asking me if I was related to David Ginsberg. When I said that I was his mother his eyes lit up and he started dragging people over to meet me exclaiming , "Do you know who this IS? This is David Ginsberg's mother! He is the greatest runner in all of Westchester.!!! "

His interest in my son never waned. Peter made it a practice to come to the library every Monday to check on David's times from the weekend meets or to discuss the layout of his newly developing cross country trails. You can imagine our surprise when David got a call from the track coach at the University of Pennsylvania and based on Peter's say so, invited Dave to Penn for an interview. But that was the essence of Peter Oley.

I know that I'm not alone when I say that you cannot think of Peter without having a giant smile on your face.

### **Bob Patterson, Irvington High School colleague**

I do not have anything original to contribute to Peter Oley's memorial, though I coached alongside him for many years. He was a coach and a person who did his job quietly and effectively throughout his career. The mark he left on his athletes is permanent, and I am glad you are giving him recognition for it.

### **Thom Johnson, Irvington High School colleague**

When I came to Irvington High School in 1978 to teach art and photography I was soon to meet Mr. Peter Oley. I think that we met in the hall outside the school's theater where I would work with Mr. Michael Penta on the shows. I then learned about his knowledge about the history of the village and Westchester. As I grew up in Dobbs Ferry I knew about the area, but Pete knew more and I found a fountain of information that I visited often.

We would often have informal sessions in the halls that covered all sorts of topics, but mostly his beloved Irvington. I know that Pete, by example, made me a more knowledgeable and better teacher. One fact about these talks is that they were never a minute or two long and I rarely wanted them to be shorter even when I was in a hurry.

As we worked together to further the interest in our students to know about their village and the surrounding area I realized that we were a team. This was best displayed in how we helped Rob Yasinsac research and photograph the ruins in the Hudson Valley. I know that one of his proudest accomplishments is that Rob dedicated the book he co-authored with Tom Rinadi to him. I am also proud that I share that same honor with him. Pete was a great team player and I am happy that I was part of that team- thanks Pete.

### **Elizabeth Ann Bolduc, former student**

Peter Oley was my elementary school teacher, and I loved his acceptance. I never felt wrong, even if the answer was incorrect. He also coached my brother, Todd, in track. Peter Oley had a big effect on me and in our family. In the forest of men, he stands tall.

### **Elaine Michaelides Lawless, former student**

Mr. Oley was an amazing 5th grade teacher ! He is one of the reasons I'm a teacher now . He knew how to teach in relatable terms and still have fun !

**George Slavin, former student**

He was my coach thru 10 grade, he never busted us when we took detours during practice to go sneak a smoke, yes it's true.

We did a lot of goofy stuff.He was a great guy to have as a mentor and coach. 😊

**Sue Schwer, former student**

My favorite elementary school teacher.

**Melissa Rich, former student**

Irvington School District sure has some legends!!!

**Peter Mastroianni, former student**

We named our dog after him...lol. A bulldog. When he found out he said "well I hope it was for the bulldog spirit and not his looks" lol.

**Jim ORourke, former student**

One of a kind ! Saw him in 2002 - hadn't changed a bit !

**Tim Fulton, coaching colleague**

Coach Oley was simply one of the nicest men I have ever met, a true gentleman and a great lover of track and field.

As a coach he was superb. His squads were always well rounded and competed as a team, something not all track and field teams achieve. His stats listed above are proof of his coaching ability, but spend any amount of time around him and you saw what all of his athletes did over the years - that he loved everyone he met.

I was there the night they inducted coach Oley into the Westchester County Hall of Fame, sitting with coach, my father, my grandfather, and Fred Singleton. He was truly honored, humble, and very gracious.

I got to know Pete a little better at running camp every summer, spending time listening to his jokes and hearing about his world travels.

Pete always asked me about my granddad, always congratulated me on my latest accomplishments as a coach, and always bragged about his kids, be it his actual children or the ones he coached. He was a man that still came to meets to cheer on Irvington after he retired and his presence will be felt in that school and town for years to come.

Peter Oley is one of the most successful outdoor track and cross country coaches the state has ever seen. He broke into the coaching ranks in 1956 at Irvington High School as a track coach after being hired as a teacher in the Irvington district. It wasn't long before Peter's teams broke records and put Irvington track on the map. His 1957 team won the Western Westchester League Championship and Section I title while breaking numerous school records along the way.

Over his 50 years of coaching high school track, Coach Oley's outdoor track teams won 13 consecutive Rasbeck Relays and Peter personally accumulated a 422-47 career record putting him fourth in the state today.

In 1958, he founded the school's first cross country and winter track teams. Coach Oley again proved success as a cross country coach at Irvington racking up a 278-75 career record in the sport, eighth in New York State, along with 13 consecutive league titles and an impressive 133 dual meet win streak that closed out his career.

Overall, his track and cross country teams captured a combined 27 Section I titles and helped Peter earn 12 Coach of the Year accolades.

Oley also contributed off the field to track and cross country by serving as the President of the Westchester Coaches and Officials Association and in 1960, being appointed as Section I cross country chairman, a position he held for 30 years.

In 1990, the Irvington School district honored Coach Oley by naming its new \$450,000 all weather track the "Peter K. Oley Track" after their famed coach. A year later, Sports Illustrated featured Peter in its "Faces in the Crowd" section for his dual meet victory streak, then in 2002, he was inducted into the Westchester Sports Hall of Fame.

### **Jim Reisler, NYT sportswriter**

Looking south on a fall day from Peter K. Oley's third-floor deck, high above Irvington, there is a view all the way to the Manhattan skyline. Look west and there is a view of Irvington's business district and the Hudson River. About the only landmark that cannot be seen is Irvington High School's all-weather track, officially named the Peter K. Oley Track.

"Good," said Oley's wife, Marianne, with a laugh. "We see it often enough." Nearing the end of his 41st year as Irvington High School's head cross-country coach, the 64-year-old Oley is finding himself in an odd position: while everyone, it seems, wants to put the focus on him and the legacy of the strong cross-country and track teams he has built at the school, Oley would rather talk about "my kids."

This year, the team could bring Irvington another cross-country championship in Westchester's Class C League, in which high schools with 300 students or less compete. Under Oley, Irvington has won 12 league (there are five league teams, including Keio, Edgemont, Hastings-on-Hudson and Croton-on-Hudson) and 9 Section I titles, in which 85 teams from Westchester, Putnam, Rockland and Dutchess Counties compete. His track teams have taken 21 league and 12 sectional titles.

"You don't have to be with Peter for more than 10 minutes to realize the passions he has in his life, two of which are coaching and running," said Dr. Scott Mosenthal, Principal of Irvington High School and Oley's former assistant coach for 21 years. "You learn about passion and the clarity of purpose. Our runners really respond to him, and it has been that way for more than 40 years."

"When Peter Oley's runners get to the starting line, they're always well prepared," said John Holland, a former Yorktown Heights High School track coach and Oley's longtime friend and professional rival. "He is able to instill a real knowledge in his runners that they accept. They always seem to peak at the end of the year."

In the basement study of Oley's house here are photographs and memorabilia, including dozens of team photos of past Irvington cross-country and track teams. Oley can recall almost every runner down to their best times, who their parents are, where they went to college and what they do today. "Our records are a testimonial to all these kids and this community, where there has always been a lot of support," Oley said. "This is a hard sport, and I've always managed

to have and bring along a bunch of incredibly motivated kids with a real work ethic. It's a real tradition we have here now."

Everyone, it seems, has a favorite Peter Oley story. Fred Herlitz, a 1982 Irvington High School graduate and mile record holder for the high school and today a marketing executive for Nike in Beaverton, Ore., recalled in a phone interview when Oley predicted how well the opponents would do -- "doping out the meet" in track talk -- and watching it all unfold just as Oley had predicted. "I think he can tell me more about myself than I know myself," Herlitz said, only half kidding. "He just knows people and knows where and when they need to be pushed. That's the mark of a great teacher."

Mosenthal recalled the time when Oley, driving his team back from a meet in Schenectady, was stopped for speeding by a state trooper. When the trooper asked for his license, Oley instantly recognized him as a former runner who had competed against Irvington years earlier. The result: one bemused trooper and one coach, off the hook.

Mosenthal talked about Oley's prodigious memory, mind for detail and knack for recalling names. "We'll run into people at the Penn Relays or on Long Island -- and people always know him, and he knows them," he said. "I'm continually amazed. He will point to a guy and just know him. He is quite simply a legend."

**Scott Mosenthal, IHS Colleague, Asst. Track Coach with Peter Oley (23 years)  
2021 Irvington Historical Society Webinar**

## **A STORY IN RHYME ABOUT THE MASTER STORYTELLER**

*OR*

### **A POEM ABOUT PETE**

If you ever met Coach Oley, you were quickly taken in  
By his incredible knowledge, and that quirky grin.  
His unparalleled memory, his unquenchable passion  
Made his program unique, as his teams sprang into action.

On a personal note, I was his assistant for years  
Twenty-three we were together, with blood, sweat and tears.  
Innumerable trips, to races and meets  
I heard all his stories, and all their repeats.

To spend a full day, with Pete was amazing  
Though others might have reacted, with eyes a-glazing.  
But I honestly loved, his passion for runners  
Track meets and kids, were his bread and his butter.

We gather today, in honor of Pete  
To remember the man, and his remarkable feats.

You'll hear from a bunch, who recall this man Oley  
Who impacted their lives, in a way almost holy..

So let's take a look, at Peter's career,  
If he were here talking, it would take most of a year.  
He grew up in North T-town, a number of years past  
Wash Irving, it's said, was enrolled in his class.

Pete soon found his forte, running on trails,  
On the Rockies estate, where he talked to the quails.  
To Doc Rasbeck, his coach, Pete was close to a son  
He was a track junkie; he was destined to run.

He made the state meet, finished a bit back in the pack  
But he was now off and running, and never looked back.  
It was then off to Brockport, where he maintained his zeal  
He majored in track, and minored in field.

He decided that teaching, would be his career  
He started at Dows Lane; made three grande his first year.  
Coaching soon followed, his earnings soon flowered  
He was coaching three seasons, at 10 cents an hour.

At Dows, he held meets, where his boys ran like rockets  
At the flagpole they'd move, with him yelling "Hip pockets!"  
The aqueduct became home, for the harrier team  
And it wasn't before long, that the Dawgs reigned supreme.

The years soon flew by, as did Peter's bosses  
(He outlasted 17--he had fewer career losses).  
He sowed a few oats, and squired a few belles  
Drove his cherry red MG, like a bat out of hell.

He eventually settled down, when he married a Finn  
His father-in-law, threw a mean javelin.  
Children soon followed, the Oleys had three  
All were track aces--an All-Star family.

He coached and sold candles, and dug all the pits  
He forgot not a time, not even a split.  
The lines he would mark, the track he would drag  
To Penn he would go, with his green leather bags.

He coached in the fall, the spring and the winter

Throwers and runners, jumpers and sprinters.  
More often than not, he'd win, place or show  
A Westchester fixture, his stature did grow.

Accolades he accrued, all the state knew his name  
State records, state champs, and two Halls of Fame.  
Closer to home, there's the Trot, the track and the woods  
All named in his honor; this coach was *good*.

Today we look back, thanks to his students, colleagues and runners  
His impact's been tremendous; it fills us with wonder.  
So we'll jog down memory lane, with this coach, teacher and friend  
A one of a kind, an Irvingtonian legend.

It's been fun presenting, an Irvington icon  
It's clear that Pete's light, continues to shine on.  
His stories, his impact, are like a relay baton  
Passed on to all us here, who shall carry it on.