

Hall of Fame

He has a 'Nak' for coaching track

Wayne Nakoneczny went the distance with track and cross country

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

In the late 1970s, reporters huddled around Coach Wayne Nakoneczny at the end of a cross country race. The opponents were already on their bus. The Southington runners had cooled down and were lounging in the late day sun, but Nakoneczny waved off the interview. There was still one Southington runner on the course, so Nakoneczny wasn't ready to talk about his team's finish. After all, they weren't done.

"Wayne was waiting for the kid to come out of the woods. I don't think he could walk the course, let alone run it, but Wayne would take anybody on his team," said Jim Senich, former sports writer for *The Observer*. "The kid makes it to the finish line, and he produced his best time ever. Wayne went nuts. The team went crazy. They picked this kid up and carried him around the football field. You would have thought he just set a New England record."

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For 30 years, 'Coach Nak' lavished attention on the Southington athlete like nobody else. Good, bad, it didn't matter. Nakoneczny only cared about the competition.

"His love of young people is his biggest asset," former Southington Athletic Director Dom D'Angelo told *The Observer* in 1992. "He is dedicated to them. He'll do anything to help them out. He is a great human being."

According to Nakoneczny, that wasn't always the case. He describes himself as a bold boy in Stratford, a three-sport athlete that went on to compete in track and football in college, but he had yet to learn anything about humility.

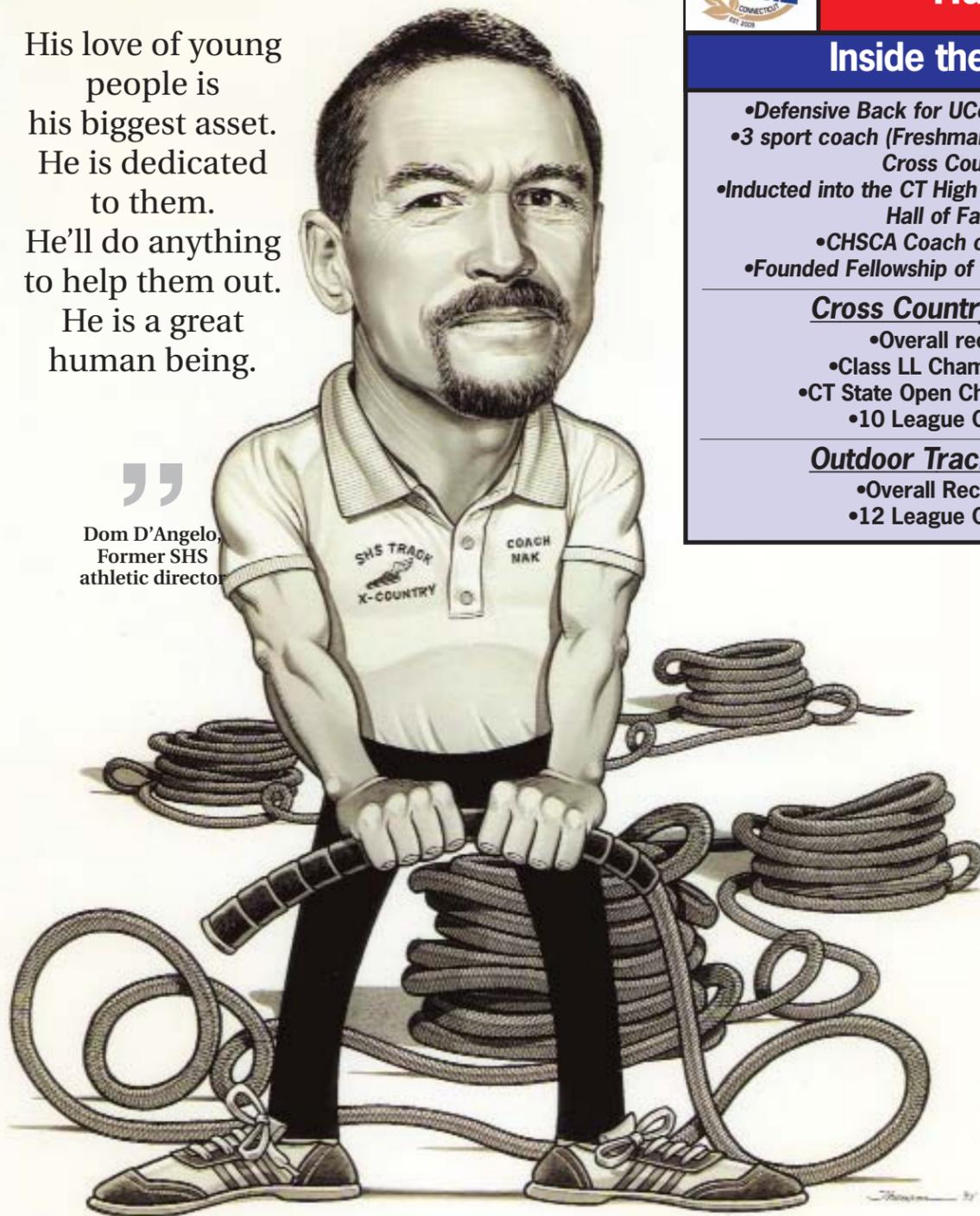
He settled in Southington after college and was immediately thrust into coaching. He served as a freshman coach with D'Angelo his first year in town. It wasn't long before he was promoted to the varsity field as an assistant. He took the reins in track the following spring and the cross country in 1976. It wasn't long before Nakoneczny was coaching a different sport in every season. He excelled at everything he touched, but a high school teacher's cautionary words still lingered in his head.

"I didn't have him as a teacher," said Nakoneczny, "but he came up to me and said this nose-to-nose. 'Boy,' he said. 'You're going to be good someday, but your attitude is going to hurt you.' Then, he turned around and walked away. That had an impact on me. It really did."

The full impact didn't hit him until 1974 when Nakoneczny found himself overcome by an overwhelming God-

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Dom D'Angelo, Former SHS athletic director



BILL THOMSON

When Coach Nakoneczny spoke about discipline, he told his runners to 'Speak softly but carry a big whip.' His former captain Bill Thomson left his coach with this caricature in the early 1980s.

"He was just an exceptionally good coach, and I think he was one of the best [physical education] teachers around," said former Blue Knight coach Joe Orsene. "He had such a good way of getting things across and doing it in a great fashion. Everything about him was great. He's a loyal friend, a great coach, a great teacher, and a great person. Anybody who was associated with him would tell you the same thing."

On the field, Coach Nak's teams began to flourish. His track teams rallied for 12 conference titles. His cross country teams rallied for 10. His track teams averaged around 100 athletes, and three cross country teams finished as runner ups at the state meet.

"He really engaged every athlete on the team from your best kid to your worst kid," said

Bill Thomson, a former athlete and Southington coach. "He wasn't focused so much on a kid's stature on the team. He was focused on their individual improvement. Each kid was focused on beating his best time or his best jump or best throw. When you have a whole team where everybody's just constantly improving, the team can't help but be good."

Discipline was the key, and Nakoneczny demanded the same commitment from his team that he demanded from himself. He began to test athletes with time trials and competitions to fit them into a role would best help the team. His practices developed a military precision as he moved between groups for individualized instruction.

"He told us that, when we stepped onto the track, we had

to give everything we had. That way, when we stepped off, there'd be no regrets," said Thomson. "A lot of people will say that they gave everything they had, but it's easy to kid yourself. He made us all accountable. If you really did your best on that particular day, then everyone on the team could be a winner."

In 1984, Nakoneczny's cross country team reached new heights. Practices would begin on Queen Street, and his players would race up and down the hill on Loper Street up to 10 times in succession. By the time they reached the state competition, Southington was ready for any course.

"They were the toughest group of cross country athletes that I had the opportunity to coach. They had a very high expectation of what they wanted to accomplish," said the coach. "We used to have a little motto that hills were our friends, and we would work hills. They'd run up and down, non-stop. They'd sprint up, go around, and come back down."

At the state meets, they sped past the entire field. They became the first and only cross country team to win a Class LL and state open title.

"It's exciting to win championships, no question, but that's not the exciting thing. It's the thrill of watching the athletes develop," he said. "The greatest thrill was to see an athlete—boy or girl—reach whatever potential they could. Some guys would just fly. All of a sudden, they would improve."

His commitment to coaching and the kids is unparalleled in local sports, and that's why the Southington Sports Hall of Fame selection committee picked him for the Class of 2011.

On Wednesday, Nov. 9, Nakoneczny will be inducted into the Southington Sports Hall of Fame at the Aqua Turf Club in Plantsville.



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

- Defensive Back for UConn football (1961, 1962)
- 3 sport coach (Freshman/Assistant Football coach, Cross Country, Track)
- Inducted into the CT High School Coaches Association Hall of Fame (1999).
- CHSCA Coach of the Year (1984).
- Founded Fellowship of Christian Athletes at SHS.

Cross Country (1976-1992)

- Overall record 216-41.
- Class LL Championship (1984).
- CT State Open Championship (1984).
- 10 League Championships.

Outdoor Track (1964-1985)

- Overall Record 190-38-2.
- 12 League Championships.