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Becoming a track official a rewarding experience

By Nick Brockman For the Gazette-Mail Dec 6, 2015

The rewards present as abundantly as the responsibilities for members of the Kanawha Valley Track Officials Association.

From checking in athletes prior to events, timing, scoring and announcing, the Kanawha Valley track officials hold many duties, but also reap the benefits of working closely with the Mountain State's top athletes and coaches.

The officials keep annual prestigious events, including the state track and field meet, running efficiently. At 86 years old, Johnny Barker, "The Voice of Laidley Field," is perhaps the longest-tenured Association member and most qualified to speak on its perks.

"If anybody ever wanted to be a track official, they ought to do it," Barker said, "because the reward's not only when you're working a track meet and the thanks that you get from the coaches – and you meet a lot of nice coaches – it really makes a difference in your own life and your outlook also. You really remember these things in the future."

ADVERTISING

Currently, the Association boasts 30 active members, with approximately 20 officials needed to conduct a meet. Officials may work as many as five meets per week, with most at Laidley Field. Additionally, officials help with meets at Winfield and Hurricane, and some officiate at Marshall's indoor facility or elsewhere across the region.

Like the rewards, the reasons for becoming an official vary.

"I originally got into it because we coach youth track and field here in Charleston with the Capital City Striders, and it just became an obvious fit," said Paul Gilmer, president of the Capital City Striders and West Virginia USATF. "I saw an opportunity to give back to my community, as well as the sport that for some ungodly reason I developed a passion for."

It doesn't take a track or athletic background to get involved either, said Marshall Cavender, president of the Association.

"We take people as they come in and try to bring them along," Cavender said. "They may start as a helper, as a clerk in the bullpen or even with the field events. There's no formal training or schooling. It's like on-the-job training."

Through the years, working track meets afforded officials the opportunity to see many outstanding athletes and state records.

"I never kept a record of that, but it would have been nice to know what an awful lot of new records," said Barker, who worked every state meet from its inception until illness forced the streak to end last season. "Each year, there's five or six or seven new records generated on average."

Randy Barnes, a St. Albans native, Olympic champion and world-record holder in the shot put, lists among the best athletes to grace Laidley.

"There have been a tremendous amount of people as far as athletes that have come to Laidley Field that went on to have outstanding college careers, even Olympic athletes we've had," Cavender said.

It's the people, on the track and off, and relationships that keep the officials interested and coming back to work.

“It’s a treat to be around folks that share that passion and it all seems quite genuine,” Gilmer said. “I still just like to see the kids getting the opportunity to learn and grow, compete, develop friendships and relationships that last a lifetime as a result of coming to Laidley Field and practicing track.

“It’s enjoyable to do. If you like something that well and you like the people and the officials that you meet from all over the state, that’s a big thing. Most jobs, I would say, don’t have that reward that we get as a track official, working with young people.”