

Budd Bailey's Running: Grand Island race a salute to Bessel's influence



Dick Bessel made such an impact on the running scene in Grand Island that the town long ago opted to name its annual Independence Day event in his honor. Harry Scull Jr/Buffalo News

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Dick Bessel wants to make sure of one key point on the weekend of the 40th running of the Dick Bessel Independence Day Run in Grand Island. "It's not a Memorial Run," he said with a laugh. Bessel was very much alive for the milestone number on Saturday, a traditional part of Fourth of July celebrations in Grand Island. Number 40 was saluted by the Town Board there in mid-June. It's always nice that an important person in a town's athletic history can be around to see such an honor. In this case, Bessel is getting a reward for a long association with athletics.

That love of sports started, naturally, when he was a boy. "I was a runner at Hutch Tech and Buffalo State," he said. "I made the Hall of Fame at Buffalo State." The 1961 graduate of the school was inducted for his work in track and field and cross country at Buffalo State in 1988. Bessel once won six events in a meet against Niagara, setting an individual record for the Bengals. He was named as the winner of the Hubert Coyer Award as the outstanding senior athlete at the school in 1961.

From there Bessel went into teaching, as he taught math at Grand Island High School for more than three decades. But Bessel couldn't walk away from athletics that easily. "I went into coaching high school," he said. "My whole family ran. They were all good runners." Bessel also coached basketball and bowling at times at Grand Island, but running was his first love. You could say Bessel was around for the start of the revolution when it comes to women's running in the 1970s. He started the girls track and cross country programs at Grand Island. "I remember when my daughter" Margie "started running and my wife started," he said. "It was just the beginning. There wasn't much for the girls at that time."

Bessel's boys teams made it to the state championships four times during a coaching career that stretched from the 1960s to the 1990s, and a couple of his runners made it to the states. Bessel won many awards over the years for his coaching – and for his teaching. As for the race, the event hasn't always been named after him. He was involved in the beginning of it, though.

"It started in 1976, as part of the bicentennial celebration," Bessel said. "I would help out a little bit in the recreation department, and they wanted to do something special. I said, do a race. Every year, they do a parade, so we put it in front of the parade. It's grown quite a bit over the years." These days most runners who take part in the race for the first time can set a personal record. That's because of the somewhat odd distance: 2.3 miles. It worked out that way because of the street patterns involved in the parade area. "They used to have a couple of races in the area that were 2.3 miles," Bessel said. "They were in South Buffalo and Kenmore. It was a tune-up for some people."

Bessel isn't sure exactly when the race took on his name. He has had a connection to the event for all but a couple of years of its existence, although he said he doesn't do much work on it now. "It's a nice way to celebrate the Fourth on Grand Island," Bessel said. In later years, the former citizen of the year in Grand Island has cut back on his sports activities a bit. "I was with the Empire State Games when it existed," Bessel said. "I help out with the marathons, and volunteer with some races. I'm not on the finish line crew any more, and I miss" the late "Emery Fisher and John Beishline."

And he's happy that it looks like the July 4 race will be part of the running schedule for the foreseeable future. "It seems to be there," Bessel said. "We get 500, 600 now. I'm happy about that."