

Rob Rose Column - 11/1/07

In the world of professional sports, induction into their respective Halls of Fame is the pinnacle of career achievement for those fortunate few. The inductees are selected based on their stellar performances on the field of play over many years. However, one criteria to being selected is that the candidate needs to have been retired from their sport for a defined number of years.

On November 10, King Philip Regional High School will be inducting several individuals from numerous sports into their sports Hall of Fame at a ceremony at Luciano's in Wrentham. One of those will be Larry Olsen. At this juncture I need to point out that if the King Philip Selection Committee had waited until Olsen retires, it could be quite a number of years before he would be inducted. At sixty years of age, Larry the Legend keeps running, competing and accumulating hardware.

Whenever I think of Larry Olsen, King Philip isn't what comes to mind. In recent years, Olsen's base of operations has been Millis and Milford where his running club, the Tri-Valley Frontrunners, is oriented. But Olsen is a Norfolk native and a 1964 graduate of King Philip. There's no doubt, he is deserving of the honor because in my mind, he is one of the most amazing athletes I have ever known.

Olsen excelled at King Philip in cross country, track and hockey. In hockey, which he played all four years, he made All Star in his senior season. He was a Hockomock League all-star in his senior year of cross country in addition to being captain of the team. His 4:43 mile, in 1964 was a school record. At Dean College and later at Providence, he continued to play hockey and run cross country. However, it was in his post scholastic career where Olsen rose to greatness.

In the more than forty years since Olsen left King Philip, his road racing accomplishments have been truly prodigious. He won 22 New England road racing titles at distances ranging from 5K to 30K. At age 40, he was the New England Runner of the Year. He holds the men's masters national record for 20K and was ranked as the top ranked fifty year old male over 50 in 1997. His marathon personal best is 2:19:23 at Boston in 1978 and he has competed in both the 1976 and 1980 men's Olympic Marathon Trials. At his 'advanced' age, he consistently beats competitors half his age and there is no end in sight.

Perhaps the most telling is the testimonial from one of his peers, who is perhaps America's greatest distance runner. "I'm glad to hear that Larry Olsen is being inducted into the King Philip Hall of Fame," said four time Boston Marathon winner Bill Rodgers. "Certainly Larry earned that honor many times as

his career has lasted so long!

Rodgers brings the perspective of history to the discussion "What is most striking about Larry's career is its terrific consistency," he said. "This is even more meaningful when you realize almost no other distance runner has been so steady for so long. Johnny Kelley and Clarence Demar are two well known American champions who come to mind who ran well into their 50's and 60's. Both of them received far more acclaim than Larry. Larry however ran faster than either Kelley and Demar and they have seven Boston Marathon victories between them."

Another stud marathoner from that era, Rick Bayko (2:20 PR), was a member with Olsen of the North Medford club and he also cited the parallel with past running greats. "The best thing about Larry took years to reveal." he said. "When we started road racing as teenagers 'Old' John Kelley was in his late 50's but still finishing high in the races. Larry and I as well as many of our peers eventually ran faster than 'Old' Kelley did in his prime. Larry and I ran our best marathons about ten minutes faster than 'Old' Kelley ran his best. Strange thing happened over time though. By the time most of us reached our 40's we realized that we weren't as fast as Kelley had been in his 40's. By the time we were in our 50's we weren't in sight of what 'Old' Kelley did in his 50's. All except Larry. Some two decades later Father Time has finally slowed Larry down some but less so than most of his peers. The rest of us can only stand back and watch in awe. Larry is the new 'Old' Kelley."

'Old' Kelley didn't hang up the racing flats until he was in his eighties. If Olsen is his reincarnation then it's fortunate that the KP Selection Committee didn't wait until he retired. Otherwise we'd be waiting another twenty years.

Footnotes - the Tri-Valley Frontrunners, Larry Olsen's running club, will be holding their annual banquet on Thursday, Nov. 8, at the Milford Italian Vet's Club on Meade St. in Milford; 1976 Boston Marathon winner Jack Fultz will be the speaker; dinner begins at 6:30 p.m. and the cost is ten dollars per person; contact Sherry Brown (runtvfr@charter.net) if you intend to attend ... Congratulations to the following area runners who qualified for Boston at recent fall marathons; Attleboro's Kim Forget, Seekonk's Pat LaChance and Norton's Lorraine Mohan at Bay State; Mansfield's Jean Miller and Plainville's Lauren Farkash at the Breakers Marathon ...