

# Fifty years after first making mark at Curley, Hoffman eyes finish line

Baseball's loss was the running community's gain.

Gene Hoffman will make his 46th full school year at Archbishop Curley High School in Baltimore his last. Before retiring from his alma mater, he'll coach the Friars one more time in cross country, indoor track and field, and then outdoors, bringing to 132 the seasons in which he's inspired them to run faster, jump higher and throw longer.

Hoffman knew nothing of those skills in 1965, when he entered the all-boys school that had just sent off its first graduating class. As a freshman, he tried out for baseball - along with 240 other Brooks Robinson wannabes.

"Oh my Lord, there were so many of us, the tryout meeting was in the auditorium. Bernie Walter cut 200," Hoffman said, of the coach who would go on to set a record for state public schools championships. "I have a high regard for Bernie. Cutting me was probably the biggest favor of my life."

Hoffman went down the hill to the Curley bowl, joined track and field, and was, he said, "literally the worst kid on the team." His diligence and persistence were evident as a senior, however, when he set school records in both hurdles events and the high jump, and played on a landmark Friar football team.

At what is now Towson University, Hoffman won the 440-yard hurdles in the old Mason-Dixon Conference and dabbled in the decathlon. In 1981, when he became eligible for masters competitions, he was the national champion in the 110-meter hurdles.

"I can pretty much coach any event but the pole vault," he said, ironic since his son, Ian, Curley class of 2020, cleared 13 feet, 9 inches to win the MIAAs in May.

Hoffman grew up next to Curley, in Armistead Gardens. He attended the parish school at St. Wenceslaus in Baltimore, and his first teaching job was at Holy Rosary

School in Fells Point. In 1975, he went from coaching CYO girls basketball in the winter to assisting Jack Targarona with Curley track in the spring. His mentors included another absent friend and legendary Friar coach, Richard Patry.

"I wanted to become a coach because the ones I met here were the nicest people," Hoffman said. "They related to you. They cared. They would compliment you, but kick you in the butt when you needed it."

That formula helped Curley to five A Conference championships in cross country, and seven in outdoor track and field, where the cup that goes to the winner of the Maryland Interscholastic Athletic Association championship meet bears Hoffman's name.

The Friars ruled from 2006 to 2008, and their trophy case would be even fuller if not for a lesson that was harder on his boys than him. One year, Hoffman went to the scorers' table to disqualify one of his athletes for outside transgressions mid-meet, removing big points from the Friars' total.

"Gene is the most competitive person in the world," said David Lumsden, Curley '79, who has been his right-hand man since 1982, "but his goal is for the boys to win in *life*."

"I remember one boy who struggled to become a contributor, but did. Years later, he came back as a CEO and spoke to the boys about being part of Gene's team. Afterward, Gene looked at me and said, 'another day, another championship.'"

His early '80s distance standouts included Jack Peach and Rob Torres, who followed his career path and continue to coach at Mount St. Joseph High School and The John Carroll School, respectively.

"I learned all of his lessons early, but took closer notes the second time around," said Peach, who was on the Curley staff for two years. "To have someone take an interest in what you're doing, in a way that's not overbearing, that's a special gift."

"Gene gave you the opportunity to be great. 'If you run twice a day in the summer, and lift (weights) and eat right, you might become a champion. If you don't, you won't.' He took us all over the country, and he's still willing to take his kids

anywhere for a meet. His energy and enthusiasm put the rest of us to shame.”

“He made it fun,” Torres said. “I still use some of the workouts Gene had us do.”

Hoffman has taught freshman health, all four years of physical education, weight training, athletic training, Physical Science, Pre-calculus, Geometry, Algebra I, Personal Business Management, “and some (courses) I’ve forgotten,” he said.

With apologies to Roger Angell, at 68, Hoffman remains a Boy of Spring, as related in a decades-old epiphany.

“Very few things compare to pitching softball to the kids in the spring,” Hoffman said of his favorite curriculum item. “I can remember Brooks Robinson signing a \$50,000 contract (it was 1965, when Hoffman was in eighth grade), and saying to myself, ‘Man, what in the world would that be like, to play ball for \$50,000?’

“I’ll be outside pitching softball, and say to myself, ‘I got it, right?’”