

# Running commentary

By Charlie Kanzig  
Correspondent

I got an email from my good friend Neil Branson, a longtime cross-country and track coach in Oregon, mainly at Seaside High School, announcing his retirement from cross-country. He and I had talked recently, so the email was not a surprise — yet seeing it in writing made it even more real and gave me pause to consider the deep impact this man has had in my life as a coach and as a person.

When I was a high school runner, I largely trained myself because my coach, though a great guy, did not adhere to any particular regimen designed to enhance performance. I had a passion to do well, so I read *Runner's World*, talked to runners from other schools, and simply ran a ton of miles. My efforts never quite got me to my dream of being a district champion and running at the state meet, and that left me hungry to learn more about quality training as I headed for college.

When I arrived at the University of Oregon in the fall of 1978, the Ducks were in the middle of an era of having a number of Olympic-level runners on the

cross-country and track teams including Alberto Salazar, Bill McChesney, and Rudy Chapa, so there was no real use in me even going to the open practices that Coach Bill Dellinger allowed unattached runners like me to attend. I spoke to him one day about it and he said that runners like me would come to these workouts for a while and overextend themselves trying to keep up with the elite runners and end up discouraged and injured. His advice was to train on my own and find road races and other open meets in the area.

So that's what I did, but I still itched to learn more about training and had developed a desire to one day be a cross-country and track coach.

I had met Neil Branson about two years earlier through another friend of mine named Mike Bauer who was a teacher and running coach at Regis High School in Stayton, where I grew up. Neil would occasionally visit Mike and join us for training runs and local races.

These two characters, both 13 years older than me, had met during high school in Eugene and were following similar paths, as Neil was also teaching high school and coaching runners. The first

American "running boom" was in full swing and many people became enchanted with running marathons. I had run my first one as a senior in high school and basically stayed in marathon shape year-round in college, completing eight marathons during that time.

During my first year in college, Neil was teaching and coaching at Illinois Valley High School in Cave Junction and arranged to run with me on a visit to Eugene. He also wanted me to meet a couple of runners he had coached at Illinois Valley who were attending Lane Community College. During that visit, Neil took down my address and the first letter from him arrived a few weeks later. I don't recall exactly the contents, but I clearly remember it included words of encouragement, mention of some adventure he was undertaking, and an invitation to keep in touch. This is a practice he has continued to this day. In fact, I just received a letter from him last week even though I had just seen him the week before and would see him again the week after at cross-country meets.

During my college years and beyond, Neil and I shared many running adventures,



PHOTO PROVIDED

Sisters High School 1994-95 cross-country team.

including some crazy relay runs across Oregon and to other far-flung destinations. I started coaching at age 19 and finally found, in Neil Branson and Mike Bauer, mentors worth emulating. I see it as no accident that my career has matched these two. All of us are school counselors and long-time distance coaches.

One miraculous highlight of my friendship with Neil came when I applied for the counseling job here in Sisters in 1994. True to his helpful self, Neil had long ago told me that I could always use him as a reference for jobs. I had done this for the Sisters job, but didn't tell Neil. The short version of this story is that Neil had also applied for the job and in the end, we were both hired. We spent a year here together in Sisters, counseling and coaching, before Neil was drawn back to Seaside. To this day I treasure that school year with my "Jedi

Master." His care and concern for individual students combined with his gift of bringing people together and fostering a genuinely caring, integrity-laced team culture is a model of how educators and coaches should conduct their lives.

So, it's bittersweet to see Neil Branson retire. He's been living a parallel existence with me for well over 30 years. He has certainly left a legacy of genuine good will and sportsmanship, as well as a contagious love for the sport of cross-country.

Personally, Neil Branson has taught me the transformative power of simple acts of kindness and the tremendous value of speaking life into others. This is how he lives his life. How lucky are all the high school kids he has coached and counseled. How fortunate are those who have coached alongside him. How blessed are those of us who call him our friend.

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