

Views from the Rock



Newspaper coverage of the first beach run in 1966.

FILE PHOTO

The man who brought the starting line to the Coast

Ralph Davis was almost superhuman in the eyes of those at the beaches of Seaside and Gearhart. A strapping man who competed at every age, the Portland State University coach and Seaside lifeguard died Sunday. Davis left his mark not only with the 250 lives he saved over his time on the beach, but as the founder of the Seaside Beach Run and Trail's End Marathon. Davis died Sunday, Aug. 14.

"He certainly was a notable figure on the North Coast," Cannon Beach's Peter Lindsey said. "He was a huge, lantern-jawed, strapping, fine, gentle, but rugged character, believe me." "He and his wife Betty and their sons Bryan and Scott were lifeguards, first in Seaside, then Gearhart for many, many years when I was a child," Gearhart's Jeff Ter Har said, "He was just super-nice, could talk to you forever, would do anything for you — just fabulous."

A lifelong Oregonian born in Portland in 1920, family members described Davis's athletic childhood along the Columbia River Gorge, where at a young age he constructed his own boat and tacked it against the wind.

That athleticism was to be a characteristic of his entire career, as a football player at the University of Oregon and Oregon State and later as a track and field coach at Portland State University.

On the North Coast, it was in Seaside as founder of the Beach Run and in Gearhart as a lifeguard that he made his mark.

Labor Day 1965 had seen the third consecutive year of unrest in Seaside, as papers described "hundreds of unruly youth who attempted unsuccessfully to take over the town." The city was an "armed camp," as Oregon State Police and National Guard put Seaside in virtual lockdown.

The July 1966 Seaside Beach Run was a response to the unrest, Jack Davis said. "Dad wanted to promote a more positive image of the community by organizing an 8-mile run."

"Ralph and Betty were an extraordinary, powerful couple that were really a true force of nature," recalled Seaside's Mary Blake, former longtime general manager of the Sunset Empire Parks and Recreation District. Blake said. "They believed if you engaged people, they have a great time, instead of causing problems because they didn't have anything to do."

The American Athletic Union-sanctioned run started at the Turnaround, heading south to the Cove before returning north to Gearhart Beach and crossing the Necanicum River at low tide. The race ended with the final leg from Gearhart Beach to the Turnaround, again crossing the Necanicum.

That first year, a rainstorm shortened because the mouth of the river was "a little too wide and deep for the safety of the runners," according to the Signal at the time.

University of Oregon track star Jim Grelle — who ran in the 1960 Olympics for the United States — won the 7.5-mile loop with a time of 38 minutes, 32 seconds. "The tension in regular

CANNON SHOTS

R.J. MARX



competition is extreme," Grelle told the Signal afterward. "This was fun."

The first run featured 44 runners participated; by the 1970s; that number grew to more than 1,200 participants.

"Every year, we had to re-do the course because of the change in the estuary," Blake recalled one race when, because of high tides, runners were diverted over hot sand dunes. Another year, fog was so thick Blake and Davis patrolled the shorelines in a rig to protect runners who might stumble into the water.

"It was all done with volunteers," Bryan Davis said. "A lot of these volunteers were people that my dad taught or had experience in athletics. He could call upon them, and they really liked him and respected him and would pretty much do anything for him. They took positions timing things, recording things."

Today, the race is organized by Seaside Beach Run, Inc., a nonprofit dedicated to providing fitness center memberships to Clatsop County's middle- and high-school students.

Davis's second major North Coast running event, the Trail's End Marathon, was organized in the 1970s and took a complete 26-mile loop from Seaside to Cullaby Lake and back, starting and ending at the Turnaround.

Ter Har said he likes to say he was the first

to finish the marathon — "My claim to fame is I won it five times because I drove the lead car," he laughed.

An avid surfer, kids "looked up to dad like Duke Kamehameha," the lifeguard god, Scott Davis said. "He was very athletic. He had a good stature. His body was built like Tarzan."

Davis was one of the first people to ride a surfboard in Seaside and his strength in the water was renowned — strong enough to single-handedly clear logs or tow them away.

"The high school kids in the area would come down to the beach and my dad would during his breaks would organize touch football," Jack Davis said. "It was a lot of fun. He never thought of himself being the age that he was. He always thought of himself as much younger. Even in his 80s or 90s he didn't want to go to someplace where 'the old people were.'"

There was no lifeguard tower at the Gearhart beach, Ter Har remembered, so patrols were on foot or in the jeep.

Cannon Beach's Lindsey recalled Davis as his water safety instructor at Portland State. "I was a pimply-faced 19, 20-year-old, slightly built person," Lindsey said. "He was about 240 pounds, all gristle and muscle. One of the things he would do would require you to rescue him."

One of Davis's major accomplishments was to organize lifeguard crews to request state funding. "The state actually disbursed an amount of money to communities to buy trucks and life-saving equipment," Lindsey said.

Once Davis and the Gearhart lifeguards challenged the Cannon Beach lifeguards to a volleyball game on Pacific Way.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Ralph S. Davis Jr.

— Batman on television. His mother owned an old hotel in Gearhart. He was having a martini, visiting. We beat them, by Jove, but we laughed about it afterward."

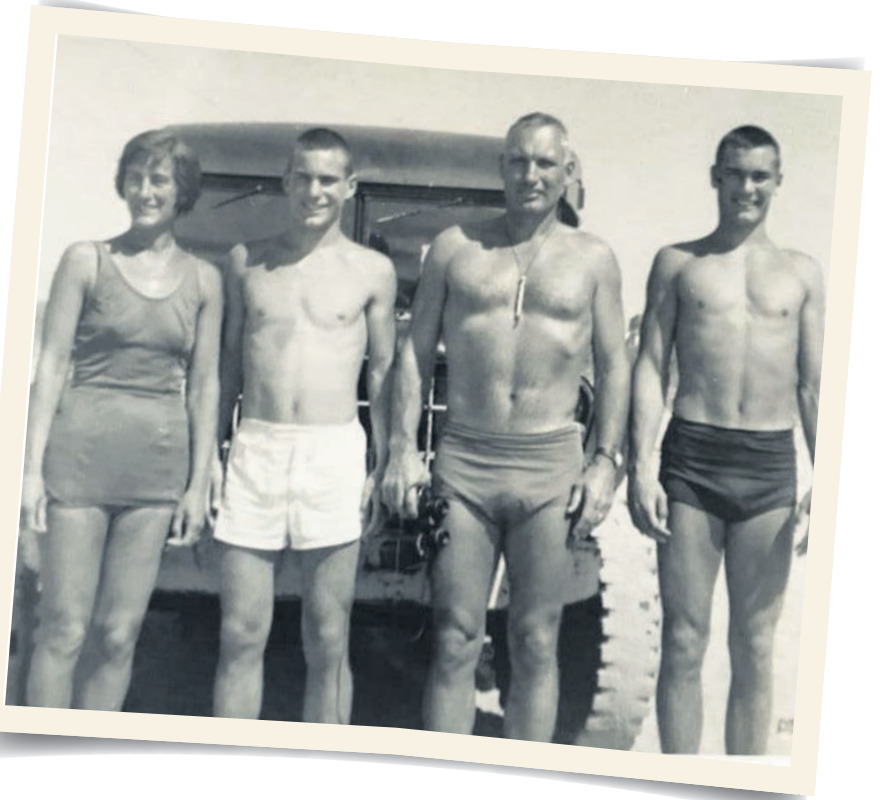
In the 1970s, Ralph Davis became "one of the pioneers of korfball" in the United States — a "sort of Dutch version of basketball," according to Lindsey. Around here, some people call it pickleball, former parks district manager Blake said.

"You can live your life with this aliveness and joy, and really being in the moment, and he and Betty were the absolute representation of that," she said. "They beamed. Ralph had that smile, physique, this attitude, this knowingsness — it was an absolute pleasure to be around them."

"The thing about growing old is, you don't have to get old," she added. "That's the magic. He was able to do that. He just didn't age."



LEFT: Ralph Davis played football for the University of Oregon before World War II, and finished his college career after the war with Oregon State University. RIGHT: Betty Davis, Bryan Davis, Ralph Davis, Scott Davis Lifeguard family. Gearhart Beach 1962.



SUBMITTED PHOTOS/CANNON BEACH GAZETTE

Headed to Vermont for a wedding and some birding

I am headed east, Vermont exactly, for a good friend's wedding and I hope to get a little birding in! To prepare I have pulled up the Vermont bird list on the wonderful Sibley app and am going through each family of birds and categorize them into the environments where I am likely to find them. I have found that if I list the birds I will see in trees or fields or marshes, I have a better chance of narrowing down what they might be.

This reminds me of the number one bird id exercise that David Sibley, internationally renowned bird expert, mentions first when asked "how can I start identifying birds?" His answer is to pick up a guide book and studying the families

BIRD NOTES

SUSAN BOAC



of birds. Pick out a few birds you see regularly and start identifying! Starting in your own yard is recommended.

The first bird I did this with was a song sparrow and they continue to be one of my favorite birds and a frequent visitor to my back porch. Knowing the shape of a sparrow bill, similar in all sparrows, I was able to get to the right family. Then it was a process of elimination using size, color of feathers, legs and

bill and other small details. After that process, I had a few choices and was able to stand strong with my decision that it was a song sparrow. The song sparrow is mostly brown and has these amazing gray stripes on its head and one large brown spot on its chest.

With birds I saw in the field, if I was able to take a picture, I would look at it on the computer at home and go through the same process. This helped build the number of birds I am now able to identify on sight. Watching their movements is also a good way to narrow down the choices.

Looking at the list of birds I hope to see in Vermont, I am going to be very busy! Wish me luck!

Please join the First Sunday bird. The next one will be on Sept. 4, so if you're in town, join us at 9 a.m. at the Lagoon Trail on Second Street. Bring binoculars and wear appropriate clothing. Everyone is welcome!

Susan has spent her life enjoying the great outdoors from the lakes and woods of northern Minnesota, Mount Adams in Washington and now the Oregon beach environs. After spending many pleasurable hours driving her avid birder parents around, she has taken up birding as a passion, to the mixed emotions of her husband Scott. The Boacs reside on Neawanna Creek in Seaside where their backyard is a birder's paradise (confirmed).

LETTERS

Article captured essence of Victorian 'cabin'

I just wanted to tell you how grateful we are for your reporter Lyra Fontaine who did a front page article for us on our open house to let everyone look inside my late brother's Victorian "cabin." It was a huge success — 100 to 200 people came by and had a great time.

Lyra was such a careful reporter and wrote a great article. She is surely very talented and economical with her words, very readable. People told us they loved the article.

Thank you for helping us to get the word out.

Bonnie Schein
Cannon Beach

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