



Former KU runner involved in benefit 5K

By Samantha Anderson

Published on Thu., September 10th, 2009

Dick Wilson is and has always been a man of many dreams.

"It was my dream in junior high school to go to high school and find a sport in which I could participate and earn a varsity letter," Wilson said. But it wasn't until his freshman year of high school in gym class that he figured out what that sport was.

Sixty years later, he still remembers when it happened

"The teacher had us all run a half mile on the track," Wilson said. "So we ran that half mile and I beat everybody in the class."

That was when Wilson figured out he was a runner. What Wilson didn't know was that he would earn more than a Varsity letter; he would acquire a whole basement's worth of medals, plaques and trophies.

After battling brain cancer and a hip injury that ended Wilson's competitive career, he'll return to Lawrence to run.

This Sunday, Wilson will be participating in Lawrence's first 'Head For the Cure 5K.' He hopes that by entering the contest it will raise awareness of brain tumors.

High School and college

Wilson had a lot of success running at the high school level, attracting the attention of college scouts throughout the country. Originally, Wilson believed he would be going to Syracuse, a college in his home state of New York. But one day a family in his hometown, who knew about Kansas' track program, asked Wilson if he would be interested in running there. Wilson had never even heard of the University of Kansas, but he kept an open mind. Then the new track coach at KU, Bill Easton, came to visit Wilson in New York.

"He told me during our conversation that the Kansas cross-country team was going to win a NCAA cross-country title and that the four-mile relay team was going to set an American record," Wilson said. "And he wanted me to be part of that."



Dick Wilson, cancer survivor and former KU cross country athlete, will be participating a 5K run-and-walk event this Sunday to benefit the Chris Anthony Brain Tumor Research Fund. After college, Wilson ranked in the top 10 for his age for 20 years in a row. Photo by Jerry Wang

Easton kept his word. Wilson decided to come to Kansas and participate in its cross-country and track program. In 1953 Wilson was part of Kansas' only cross-country team to ever win a national championship. In that same year the four-mile relay team broke the American record.

"Dick was a very good runner," Larry Stroup, former Kansas runner from 1954-1957 said. "He was a member of the 'Four Horsemen.'"

The 'Four Horsemen' was a nickname the cross-country and track teams gave for its record-breaking runners, Wes Santee, Art Dalzell, Lloyd Koby and Dick Wilson. All four men came to Kansas together, ran together and graduated together.

"The entire team was very close and they enjoyed each other," Wilson's wife, JoAn Wilson said.

Beyond school

After college Wilson and his wife, JoAn, moved around the country. Eventually, they landed in Indianapolis. Wilson was so busy with his career with the Traveler's Insurance Co. and his family that running kind of fell to the wayside.

“There wasn’t any real need to,” said Wilson. “It wasn’t like today where you have road races and track races.”

It was a request of a friend that began Wilson’s interest in running again.

“A neighbor of mine wanted to start running to lose weight,” Wilson said. “We started running half a mile a day and built it up to five miles a day.”

It wasn’t until they entered a three-mile race on Labor Day in 1978 that he started to believe that he could ever run for success again.

“I think I finished fifth and so I got the bug,” Wilson said.

The bug carried him to gain local, statewide and eventually international recognition.

He was ranked in the top 10 of his age group, on a national scale, every year from 1985 to 2005, but in 2003 he earned the honor of being the No. 2 runner in the country and the No. 4 four runner in the world in his age group. A 2005 hip injury ended his competitive career.

Wilson was diagnosed with a brain tumor in September 2008. The doctor was able to remove 95 percent of the tumor, but Wilson still had to endure two six-month sessions of chemotherapy. Still, he exercises at least five times a week.

“He’s enthusiastic for the race and the good it does” Stroup said.

This is the first year that the ‘Head For the Cure 5K’ will be held in Lawrence. The original 5K ran in Kansas City in honor of Chris Anthony who died, at age 37 from a brain tumor.

All of the proceeds will go to the Chris Anthony Tumor Research Fund at the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center.

“Maybe some day there will be a cure,” said Wilson. “And if there is it can hopefully help my children and help my grandchildren.”

— *Edited by Alicia Banister*