

Jim Price Returns As Honorary Starter Of 25th Mud Mountain 5K Race, Shares Memories As Cross Country Coach, Salutes Patrylak

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE - From very modest beginnings when he took over the team in 1986 and building the program until his final year in 2003, former Edwardsville head cross country coach Jim Price played a very vital role in helping the Tigers become one of the area's and the state's premier programs.

Price was also the creator of the annual Mud Mountain 5K Classic, the annual fundraising race for the Tigers, and the programs at Lincoln and Liberty Middle Schools, an event that has become one of the area's biggest races of its kind.

Price returned to be recognized for his contributions to both the race and Tigers program on the occasion of the 25th running, and was also the honorary starter for the race, sending the 200-plus runners on the journey around the famed course at SIU-Edwardsville.

Price expressed his gratitude and shared some of his memories of the race and the Edwardsville program in an interview that followed the race.

"It's wonderful to be back," Price said. "That's a fabulous program out here at Edwardsville, and all the other schools, too. This is a fabulous course to run this race on."

Price taught at Edwardsville High for 33 years and coached the Tigers' cross country team for 18 seasons, and in the early days, things weren't quite as how they are today.

"The early years were challenging," Price said, "because I wasn't a cross country runner, I wasn't a long-distance runner. I took over from John Dean and learned as I went. John and some of the guys helped me through those early years. All my memories of the kids are fond memories."

When asked about his favorite teams and runners, Price had one runner in mind: Stephen Pifer, who won a very unique triple crown in Illinois running his senior year.

"Well, number one, everyone knows it's Stephen Pifer," Price said. "In 2002, he won the cross country championship (in Class AA) in Peoria. He came back, won the mile in 4:09, a school record, he won the two-mile, all in the same year. So of all the kids, we had who made a memorable, lasting memory on me, it was Stephen Pifer. What I was telling coach (George) Patrylak, I remember the kids weren't really cross country runners, but they came out and stayed with the program. Some went on to be runners into their adulthood. Most of the kids then really made a big impression on me. You do it because you love it."

In Price's early days, the cross-country race day operations were a bare minimum, with a group of dedicated parents helping out along the way.

"When I took over the program from John Dean, we only had a very small number of participants, and not very many parents," Price said. "We had a couple of years we've

gotten bigger, not real big, but bigger, not like anything George has. it was the parents and my wife. My wife ran the concession stand, my wife helped me with all the things, in terms of taking the ticket stubs. We used to have to do it by hand, where you tore off your bib number, put them on a stringer. Without my wife and all of those very dedicated parents, we didn't have very many. And the course was just as big as it is now. The parents helped me be as good as I could be because they did lots and lots of work. I want to thank them so much for being there all those years ago. And being out here today, all of this setup."

The Edwardsville running community is a very close and tight-knit group, almost like a family, and Price is very appreciative of the community.

"It's very much like family," Price said, "and George does a fabulous job of making it feel more like family, with his team and coaches and assistant coaches. Cross country is a unique sport, in that truth, your competition is in fact the course you're on, the clock is ticking, because everyone on the course has to beat those two things."

How a runner finished in a race has an effect on the team score, where the team with the lowest number of points is the winner.

"If you're going to do well as a team," Price said, "it's critical that all top seven do the best they can. We had a race down in Granite City where it came down to our sixth runner. We were tied, and they went to the sixth runner, and our sixth runner beat their sixth runner. And even though you're not one of the top five, which are the counters, everyone on the team counts. And what we did, and it was always my ambition to do, every meet we went to, every kid raced, every race."

Today, Price, a native of Mt. Carmel, Ill., lives in Evansville, Ind., close to his daughter and grandchild, and at his current job at the Evansville Museum and Planetarium, he'll often ask where people are from. Sometimes, he'll get some pleasantly surprising answers.

"I often ask people where they're from," Price said, "and it's stunning how many people are familiar with Edwardsville. We had a program that we helped put on at a local bar, Science With A Twist, and there were some little old ladies I was talking to this last Wednesday when we had it. And what I'm asking, what I did, where I came from, and I said Edwardsville; you've probably never heard of it. One of those little old ladies said 'Well, I'm from East Alton.' Out in the middle of nowhere, in Evansville, Ind., there she was, from East Alton."

Another great memory, and one which caused some controversy, was in the Granite City Invitational meet at Wilson Park, when Price decided to run Pifer in the sophomore race instead of the varsity race.

"Granite City was one of our favorite races," Price said. "There was a little controversy one year when Stephen was a sophomore. I ran him in the sophomore race, not varsity. The question came up, he's number one in the area, why did you do this? The answer was because in the sophomore race, he would attack, being the pacesetter. He would have to do it all by himself. In a regular race, you have someone you can key off of. Being in that sophomore race, he was on his own. He did a fabulous job at it. And I think he figured out what it takes to be number one. He became number one in the area."

Of course, Price was very happy to be back home and be a part of the Mud Mountain race, one which he created, and expressed concern about the future of the race and what local cross country and sports fans could do to help keep the tradition alive and growing.

"I am. I'm very happy to be back," Price said. "My daughter's here; she ran cross country for me, my son in Virginia; he couldn't make it today. I'm very happy to be back today. I'm concerned - you can pass it along to the readers. We have a concern, we've always had a concern, about the possibility of losing this course, not being able to afford using this course. And I think the people who run this course could call the coaches, this is the number one high school cross country course in the state of Illinois; there's none better than this. Because when you go to the state championship in Peoria (at Detweiler Park), flat as a pancake. They have a little incline called The Hill. That's not the way cross country ought to be."

Price also expressed how proud he was of the Tiger program today, and the efforts of the Edwardsville coaching staff and runners, and how they've helped build the program into what it is today.

"I'm so proud of coach Patrylak and his crew," Price said. "and the fabulous job they've done. I started with two girls and seven boys back in the mid to early 80s. He has 100 kids, he says, he thinks are coming out in junior high school. He thinks he might get 80 boys coming out, and possibly 50 girls. That's what (Elmhurst) York High School does. And when you go out to the state championships, I guarantee York will be there. And they would often have 100 kids out for the team, on the boys' side. George is getting close."