



Charlie Winger has a word with the Oil City girls cross country team in this 1980s photo. He's pictured with his high school coach, John Kaufman, at Mitchell Avenue Field in the photo below.

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Charlie Winger, who died Saturday at age 84, is not just the only three-time state track champion in Venango County history.

He is remembered fondly for that twinkle in his eye and as the firm but friendly taskmaster to those he coached at Oil City High School.

Winger won PIAA Class A (now AAA) state championships in the mile (twice) and 880 for the Oilers in 1954-55, breaking a 16-year-old meet record in the mile as a senior. Years later, he would coach two state champions of his own as an assistant to Bob Craig on the Oiler track team.

Ed Munoz, a skinny 100-pound convert from football after his freshman year, was one of them. After enduring Winger's many grueling drills for three years in both cross country and track, he culminated his high school running career with the 800 meters championship in the 1985 Class AAA state track meet.

Trailing the leaders by five yards after rounding the final turn on the outside, Munoz, to this day, remembers Winger through the roar of the crowd: “Go Get Him EDDIE!”

“My head exploded,” Munoz wrote on Facebook early Monday. “I popped gears after gears and ever so slowly I reeled in the leader, step-by-step, until at the tape I took the last step – first. The photo would show I won by 1/100th of a second...but I really won every day before that as Coach prepared, taught and expected us to win. It was the second state champion day (Mike Renninger had claimed the 1600 meters earlier) and he cried.”

“...His spirit, inspiration and love changed my life forever. Thank you, Coach. Rest in peace, and I’ll keep getting them,” Munoz wrote.



Said Renninger, “Coach was more than a coach to us; he was our heart.”

Renninger was another “football transfer,” who described himself as a “relative nobody.” But Winger showed him the possibilities he had in life, and now at 53, Renninger is a training NCO (non-commissioned officers) for the Army National Guard. Munoz is a financial advisor.

Many an Oiler responded to Munoz’ piece, including the “just average” guys like Jeff Bryan who recalls sneaking off to Franklin with teammates because marathon star Bill Rodgers was going to start a Pepsi 10K race. They didn’t think Winger would find out.

But, The Derrick ran a photo of the Oil City kids and Rodgers at the starting line. “I don’t recall who won but us Oiler harriers topped the leaderboard,” Bryan said. And at

the next practice Winger admonished them, “If you smart alecks want to run ‘lots,’ then you’re going to run ‘lots.’”

“Lots” is a sort of Oiler thing. When his runners would ask what they were going to do in practice, Winger would respond, “Lots.” And they would do “Lots” Every. Time.

Winger himself started as a quarter-miler as a freshman in 1952, and began to blossom his junior year. Actually, he would go unbeaten in both the 880 and mile his last two years at Oil City.

But, he didn’t run the 880 at states his junior year after he won the mile in 4:32.2. “I was so happy when I won the mile, I felt why not let someone else win the half-mile?” he told Craig Phillips of The Derrick in 2005.

Coach John Kaufman was not amused. “(He) wasn’t real happy with me,” Winger said. “Next year (he said) you’re winning the mile and half-mile.”

And so he did. With ease. He won the mile in 4:25 – four yards ahead of the runnerup. Kaufman hinted he could have gone 4:20 or faster had he been pushed.

“Winger runs to win,” Kaufman said. “It’s difficult to say how fast he could have run if he were pressed.” Still, the first four runners broke the state meet record of 4:26.7 set in 1939 by Oliver Hunter of Strong Vincent.

What’s even more impressive is Winger came back less than an hour and a half later to capture the 880 in 1:58.1, which was 1.1 seconds off the meet record set in 1938.

Winger told Phillips 50 years later that his strategy was pretty much the same every time. "I'd like someone else to set the pace and then I would outkick them at the finish."

He also offered a couple of other gems to Phillips on the 50-year anniversary of his wins. Since cinder tracks were the way of the world back then, "I was covered with black because I followed everybody until the end." What's more, his shoes bogged him down. "Each of my shoes weighed about two pounds apiece because they had a big metal plate that they screwed the spikes into," he said.

Kaufman believed Winger could have beaten a number of college guys as a schoolboy. Winger later attended Modesto Junior College in California, and in 1956, was part of a two-mile relay that set a national junior college record.

Franklin's Phil Emerson would match Winger with three individual state titles in swimming (50 and 100 free) in 2012-13. Emerson actually has four golds with another first in a relay. Another Franklin swimmer, Jill Wilkinson (1995-96), has two individual golds and a third in a relay.

Winger, a pride of Siverly – the neighborhood has many -- lived most of his life in Oil City. He coached a little football at Venango Christian, and was a pretty good back for the Oilers in high school, too. But mainly he made his mark on the oval or through the woods, coaching the Oilers to District 10 cross country titles his first two years, starting in 1982 – once setting a meet record for fewest points scored, 19, which is the idea is cross country.

His wife, Pat, is also remembered fondly by the athletes. "Used to love when the Mrs. would come on the trips, too," Linda Radack Toy commented. "Coach and Mrs. Coach. I so loved them both!"