

By Ed Brannon

You've probably seen those old BASF commercials, you know, the ones with the catchphrase of, "We don't make the products you buy, we make the products you buy better."

Randy Wilber's job is a lot like that. In fact, you could say, "He doesn't make the athletes you watch, he makes the athletes you watch better."

Don't just take my word for it, though. Apparently, the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOC), along with the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) feel that way about the Franklin native as well.

Wilber, 67, received prestigious honors from both of those well-known organizations over the past few months, centering around his work with countless numbers of United States Olympic athletes as a senior sports physiologist.

The 1972 Franklin High School graduate, a member of the school's inaugural Sports Hall of Fame class in 2011, wasn't even aware of the award he was to receive this past February.

"The USOC notified me when I was in China for the Winter Olympics, but we weren't allowed to access our emails for security reasons," Wilber said last week from his office in Colorado Springs. "The USOC awards were officially announced in February, but I wasn't aware of it until March."

It was worth the wait for Wilber, though, as he was the 2021 recipient of the Doc Counsilman Science Award by the USOC, which recognizes a coach who utilizes scientific techniques and equipment as an integral part of their coaching methods or has created innovative ways to use sports science.

"Like myself, Doc was also a Ph.D in physiology, but he was also an outstanding swimming coach, both at the University of Indiana and for the U.S. Olympic team on more the one occasion. He coached Mark Spitz at Indiana and Spitz went on to win a then-record seven gold medals in the 1972 Summer Olympics at Munich. Michael Phelps eventually broke that record with eight gold medals at Beijing in 2008.

"Although I never met Doc, I felt like I knew him because I read a lot of his literature on interval training to enhance performance. I am honored to receive that award because of what he stood for and everything he accomplished."

Just three months later, Wilber learned he had been nominated and approved for a citation award by the ACSM, which he received on June 5 in San Diego at the organization's annual meeting.

"The ACSM is easily the largest medical organization in the world and the citation award is the second-highest honor a member can receive," an emotional Wilber said. "It's basically a lifetime achievement award, since it's based on your whole body of work.

"This honor was very special for two reasons. The first is that I was nominated by my former mentor and boss, Dr. Jay T. Kearney, who was as demanding of a person as I've ever met. But, he taught me so much and just having been nominated by him meant as much as actually receiving the award," Wilber said. "The second reason is that it is voted on by your peers from all over the world. Looking back, I guess that both the Doc Counsilman Award and the citation award kind of provided me with validation that I did something right in my chosen profession"

An accomplished runner during his own athletic career, Wilber is not at the finish line yet.

He's headed to Switzerland Aug. 12 for about 10 days of altitude training and, at the end of the month, he's off to Paris. No, not for a well-deserved vacation, but for work.

"I'll be going over there to help set up the United States training center for the 2024 Summer Olympics," he said. "Plus, we're going to upgrade the track, along with many other things, like building relationships with my French colleagues, who I'll be working with a lot in the coming months."

In his current role, Wilber works closely with Team USA athletes and coaches in areas of altitude training, heat/humidity acclimatization, blood chemistry analysis, overtraining, international air travel (jet lag) and exercise-induced asthma. Since joining the USOC in 1993, Wilber has supported Team USA at seven Olympic Games and worked with 88 Olympians from 17 sports, who have earned more than 200 individual medals and six team medals.

He's also authored more than 30 papers in peer-reviewed scientific journals and has written several book chapters in the areas of sports medicine and sports science.

Wilber earned a bachelor's degree in history from Grove City College and holds an M.S. in history from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. He received his M.S. and Ph.D in exercise physiology from Florida State.

Ironically, Wilber has an eye of returning to the classroom, not as a student this time, but as an advisor/instructor.

"I'm shifting into pre-retirement and I'd like to do some mentoring and some legacy projects," he began. "As great as my job has been, you lose some of the passion and creativity after 30-plus years. I think these new projects will bring back those things."

One of those legacy projects is set to be up and running by the fall of 2023.

"I've been partnering and collaborating with the University of Colorado on creating a Master of Science program in sports physiology," Wilber said. "We've been working on it for the past year. It will be a three-year program and the final 1 1/2 years will be a capstone program, which I will have a more active role in showing the students all the details of my job. It's a way to give back and assist a new generation. There's a real interest and a great need for sports physiologists. They will get a master of science degree and be available immediately for our Olympic athletes to help make them better.

"I still want to be involved and stimulated, both intellectually and physically," Wilber said. "When I retire, I want to say, 'Wow! What a great program we got started.'"

And hopefully, Wilber's proteges will carry on his tradition of making our Olympic athletes better!