

Published July 5th, 2023

Teacher, coach, Renaissance man Chris Walsh retires from Campolindo

By Jon Kingdon



2001 Campolindo Girls cross country state championship team (Walsh pictured second from the left) Photo provided

With the end of this school year, along with all the seniors in Lamorinda that will be moving on, Chris Walsh, a physical education teacher, track and cross-country coach and yoga instructor at Campolindo is also taking a new path.

For Walsh, there were many accomplishments as a coach and creativity as a PE instructor but the acknowledgment which he values the most was when he was selected as Campolindo's Teacher of the Year competing against all of the other district schools. "That was five years ago, and it was a real honor because we have such an exceptional staff at Campolindo," Walsh said.

With a love of running, Walsh was fortunate to be coached by four Hall of Fame coaches – his Southington High School coach Wane Nakoneczny, Wil Wright and Jim Barber, his coaches at Southern Connecticut State, where he set records in the two and three miles and competed in two national championships in cross country and Bill Bowerman at the University of Oregon, the 1972

Olympic coach who partnered with Phil Knight in a company called Blue Ribbon Sports that eventually became known as Nike.

"They were the best of the best," Walsh said. "I was simply the torch bearer as best as I could be." Walsh would carry that torch into the Southington High School Hall of Fame at his induction in 2015.

While competing against the University of Oregon runners, it led Walsh to pursue a career in coaching. "I really met my match, running with the greatest distance runners in the United States that went on to win numerous Olympic medals," Walsh said. "I was far behind them in the workouts but that really piqued my interest and Bill Bowerman encouraged me to go into coaching, which I did."

In 1989, while teaching middle school in Oakley with a daily commute from Pleasant Hill, Walsh's wife, Kathy, who was working as a nurse at John Muir Hospital, let him know that there was a school called Campolindo that needed a track coach and soon after he became the Cougars' track coach.

The commute from Pleasant Hill to Oakley to Campolindo began to wear thin on Walsh and when an opening for a PE teacher opened up at Campolindo, Walsh jumped at it. "I met with Tom Ehrhorn, the principal at the time, and spoke of the good rapport that I had with the kids and parents at Campolindo," Walsh said. "I believe what really won him over was when I showed him a pad where I had calculated that I had driven about 170,000 miles over the previous five years and that was why he should hire me, and after coaching off campus for five years, I was officially hired to teach PE in 1994."

When Walsh first arrived as a coach, the cross-country team had 35 players turn out for the team. Coaching alongside Alison Adams and Dino Petrocco, by 2,000, the number of runners had jumped to 210. Walsh had a simple way of getting more students to come out for the team. "The first week of school, we had the students run the mile and if anyone ran it in close to six minutes or less, we would tell them they should go out for cross country," Walsh said. "Bob Wilson (the AD at the time) and I always tried to get kids, especially freshman, into sports. If there was some reluctance on their part, I would encourage them to just come out for a month and see what happens."

Walsh soon discovered one of the secrets to success: "I learned that if you have good athletes, you'll look good. In my first year of coaching cross country, we had a girl named Sarah Riley who won the state championship, so I looked like a good coach. She went on to Notre Dame, becoming the first female to be an All-American there and we were able to build our program off of Sarah's success."

Ryan Gallagher was another athlete that made others around him better. "In 1994, Ryan's senior year, he was the NCS champion and finished fifth in the state," Walsh said. "He was a great co-captain and with a large pool of freshmen and sophomores, he nurtured those kids and the team's success came from the dedication of the athletes."

It was also a matter of finding the athletes that were willing to pay the price to be successful. "When I came to Campo, I encouraged a couple of our seniors to run a thousand miles over the summer (14 miles a day) which was an idea I got from my high school coach to determine who really wanted it," Walsh said. "The more excited the athletes got, the more excited we would get, and the boys would be running 500 to 700 miles and the girls about 350 to 400 miles over the dog days of summer and that's how our championships were built."

After 16 years, Walsh stopped coaching at Campolindo while remaining a teacher there because of his commitment to his family. "Kathy and I have been married for 38 years now and we never wanted to miss anything with our kids," Walsh said. "I really loved coaching but when my son went to De La Salle and my daughter to Carondelet, they played fall and spring sports and we never wanted to miss anything they did so that's why I stopped coaching."

How did Walsh judge his success? "That's simple," he said. "If the kids are still running. In my lineage with the great coaches I had, the runner should do their best running in their 20s, 30s or older. The idea was that the high school experience should be fun. They should be student-athletes, not athlete-students."

During Walsh's time coaching at Campolindo, the boys' and girls' cross country teams won 11 NCS titles and had one state champion in Sarah Riley. The team's overall winning percentage was 84%. The girls' cross country team won Campolindo's first cross country state meet in 2001 and was a runner up three times and finished in third place three times. The girls' team finished in the top five every year but one from 1995-2005 and from 1997 to 2001, the girls' team had a 55 race win streak. In 2003, Walsh was named the California Coaches Association High School Girls Cross Country Coach of the Year and was a finalist for the National High School Coach of the Year.

In Lamorinda, yoga was first taught at Acalanes High School by Manny Myers. Superintendent John Nickerson was the principal at Acalanes at the time, and he strongly endorsed the program. "Dr. Nickerson said that this is great for the kids and all of the Lamorinda schools have it now," Walsh said.

Led by Jenna Wrobel, a counselor at Campolindo and principal, John Walker, their first yoga class began in 2014. "We started out with one class period for 45 kids and in 2018, we switched to five periods which I taught, still having 45 kids per class with more and more athletes taking the class," Walsh said. "The Campolindo parents club and the Moraga Education Foundation were very supportive and paid for the mats, the equipment, and the teacher training and I ended up teaching five classes a day and loved it. One of the goals with our yoga classes, was for the students, some who had ADHD and others overwhelmed with AP classes, was to build our classes where the kids would have a place to come and feel safe. Many of the teachers, when they had a free period, would come and take a yoga class."

Walsh also used the class to make a social statement, memorializing the victims of the Parkland High School shooting. "That touched our hearts terribly so I was thinking what we could do," Walsh said. "We went up to the football field with about 50 kids and we made a big heart with all of them on the mats, and we took a picture from the press box and sent it to the principal of Parkland to just let them know that we were with them."

What prompted Walsh, who will continue to be teaching yoga at the Moraga Country Club, to retire at this point in his life? "When I first came to Campolindo, we had a lovely teacher named Dee Cobo who was getting ready to retire and I asked her when she knew it was time to retire and she said it was when you start teaching the kids of the kids you once taught," Walsh laughed. "There are now six teachers at Campo that used to take my class. What I really love about Campo and the other Lamorinda schools is that we see a lot of the graduates come back to teach and coach at our schools. Campo was and remains a great place to work." Bill O'Brien coached with Chris Walsh for a couple of years, and read this poem to Walsh at a recent staff meeting. "It just blew me away," Walsh said.

What is a Coach?

By Bill O'Brien

What is a coach?

Coach Walsh is a Coach.

A teacher, preacher, parent,

Pointer of the Way,

Of being so much more

Than you were yesterday.

An inspirer, pulling, pushing

Floating motivation in the air

For those who heed,

To pushing themselves

To winning moments,

Coach has planted the seed.

An organizer, gathering various energies

Into coalescing teams, bringing together

The best in individuals,

Delivering themselves to dreams.

Mothers' comfort, fathers' rules,

Showing the Path,

From stumbles, running,

Standing tall, digging down

Within oneself finding what's there,

Intangible grit, work ethic, mental steel,

Physical preference and pain.

What one does for another,

Aides, assists, shapes, marks,

Never leaves the mind

Living over years,

As affection transcends tears,

Others helping one grow,

Like a Marine, always a Marine,

Once a Coach, always a Coach.

No other name means the same,

Shows what one has done for others

Bringing forth from bodies of mind
Such growth, strength, discipline,
Beautiful flowing physical movements
Competing for and against others,
From unseen deep recesses of mind over matter
Personal and long standing records shatter,
Are reborn anew, for today a new you.

Coach remains ever there,
In one's experience growing, showing
How physical agility and strength,
Fluidity and bodily beauty
All flow together, remain
With gains from Coach's care.

Coach Walsh, ever upbeat, caring, gentle,
His encouraging voice, his laughing, smiling,
Knowing what you need before you do,
Finding roads into another's spirit
To become better than ever,
Coach Walsh is forever Coach,
From the best of him to the best of you.

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