

FREDONIA'S ULRICH NEVER HIT SOUR NOTE DURING COACHING CAREER

- **By [Jerry Sullivan](#)**

- ***Buffalo News***

- *Published Wed, Aug 26, 1998*

It was moments after his team's first conference title, in the spring of 1977. As Jim Ulrich walked off the track in triumph, he overheard the Cortland State coach giving his athletes a severe tongue-lashing: "I can't believe we lost to a music school!" Well, it seemed outlandish at the time, losing to Fredonia State. Who could imagine that the little "music school" in Western New York, which had never won a SUNYAC title, had begun one of the greatest runs in Division III track and field history? Starting in '77, Ulrich led Fredonia to 20 straight SUNYAC outdoor titles. The Blue Devils won 15 conference indoor titles and 27 other state titles. In 24 seasons, Ulrich has been SUNYAC coach of the year 13 times.

It's the record of a dedicated, indefatigable man. But a while back, Ulrich realized he had lost the all-consuming zeal of his younger days. So Friday, he officially retires as head coach at age 51. Ed O'Gorman, a former Fredonia runner, will replace him on an interim basis while the school conducts a national search for a successor.

If they expect to find his equal, they are in for a long search. They seem to know that, because they have persuaded Ulrich to help out in a part-time capacity, easing the transition.

"I hadn't expected to do it," Ulrich said Tuesday at his office. "People say this might be the best thing for me. I can wean myself from it. But I've looked at it both ways. It might be best to cut the cord completely. I have mixed emotions."

His office is a shrine to Fredonia track. On one wall are 67 All-American plaques. On the opposite wall are dozens of photographs of former athletes. Trophies are everywhere -- on top of the filing cabinet, in the bookcases, on top of the coat rack.

He removed the individual awards. It'll be hard enough for the next coach, living up to the standard. It'll be difficult for Ulrich, too, remembering he's no longer in charge, the man with the responsibility, the surrogate father to 45 college kids.

"The championships weren't the most memorable thing for me," said Ulrich, a member of the Kenmore West athletic Hall of Fame. "To me, the most important thing was the relationships. That's kind of why I agreed to help Ed."

Half a dozen times, he got up and walked over to the wall. He'd point to one of his former players, like a proud father showing photos of his children. This one is supervisor at a Ford plant. That one just got his CPA. This guy's an actuary in Rochester.

Timon and Tonawanda. Dunkirk and Depew. Hilton and Hammondsport. He got them from Western New York, hardly a track hotbed. But they won, and they studied hard, and they still keep in touch.

"The exciting part of it is the kids," he said. "I've had great kids and most of them are from Western New York. You're not buying an outstanding athlete here. They come and improve, and that's exciting."

Maybe that's why he never left. Ulrich had two Division I offers -- Colgate and his alma mater, Indiana State. But the timing wasn't right; and why go someplace where track gets second-class treatment?

Now he feels he's done all he can do at Fredonia. Last year's freshman class was his best in 15 years. The team should be able to defend its SUNYAC title. He and Linda, his wife of 31 years, are ready to sell their house and move to Florida to be closer to their two grown children. Both of Ulrich's parents died in their 50s. He thinks it's time to slow down.

Ulrich admits to a Type A personality. He's competed in all 21 Empire Games and has the Masters record in the javelin. He has bowled a 300 game. Everything he has ever done, he has done all-out.

"I have some concerns about him staying on as a part-time coach," his wife said, "because I know how he is. So I plan to keep after him, so he doesn't put too many hours. It's going to be very difficult."

Ulrich is honest enough to know he couldn't live up to his own towering standards any longer.

"I'm sure I'll do something else," he said. "I won't sit around in true retirement. I'm such an achiever in everything I do. It would have bothered me more and more trying to keep the program up. It's affected my health. I'm the type where everything has to be done perfectly, and this is not a perfect sport."

Although at Fredonia, it came pretty close.