

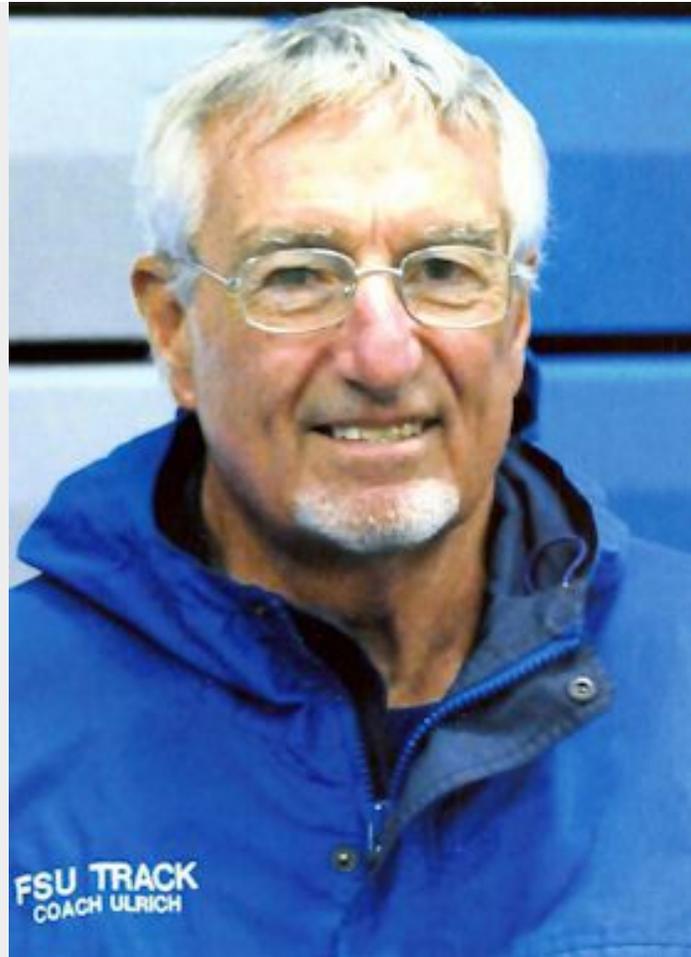
## Jon-Ryan Maloney

Strength and Conditioning Coach at Fredonia



## How Jim Ulrich Built The Most Successful Sports Team In Fredonia's History

Posted on [March 13, 2017](#)



Jim Ulrich, Fredonia men's track and field coach, 1974-1997 (photo by Jerry Reilly)

*Fredonia didn't have an indoor track when Jim Ulrich inherited its men's track and field program in 1974. There was hardly a weight room. And up until then, sport coaches, whose main responsibility was teaching, had very little time to recruit athletes. Indeed, Ulrich was perhaps the first head coach who could spend significant time doing so.*

*Teaming with his wife Linda, the Ulriches sent hundreds of letters to high school track and field prospects across New York showing even a modest ability to compete at the college level. He calls it a "shotgun approach," because of those hundreds of inquiries he'd often receive only a few responses.*

*But over time, with the help of coaching connections in Western New York, the approach worked. By 1976 the program produced its first two SUNYAC individual champions — Fred Ruterbusch and Bob Carroll — and by 1977 the team would win its first SUNYAC outdoor title. Such are the origins of the most successful team in the history of the SUNYAC, which wouldn't lose another outdoor title until 1997.*

*I interviewed Ulrich from his home in Florida in early February. The interview has been edited and condensed for clarity, though it's worth noting that Ulrich spent significant time crediting Dr. Everett Phillips for his help in training Fredonia's distance runners:*

**Jon-Ryan Maloney:** Can you give me a sense of the comparison between what Fredonia was like then, and what it's like now?

**Jim Ulrich:** Well, we didn't have as many sports, and there was quite a bit more emphasis on the teaching aspect in physical education.

**JRM:** When you say teaching, you mean teaching phys. ed. at Fredonia?

**Ulrich:** Oh, yes. All the coaches had to. We did a lot of teaching back then. Your main job at Fredonia State was to teach phys. ed., it wasn't to coach necessarily. There wasn't much recruiting going on and the athletic programs were pretty low. There was very little winning at the SUNYAC level when I came in. I'm not trying to downgrade anyone, but the year before I came in we had scored one point in the state meet in track and field

**JRM:** You described in your book ([Effective Coaching](#)) the challenges of recruiting to Fredonia back in the 1970's. In a lot of ways, in terms of facilities and in terms of location, it sounds similar to how it is now. What story did you tell recruits and their parents to get them to come here?

**Ulrich:** Recruiting is certainly a big factor. I wasn't going to get the top guys in the state, but back then they (admissions) were willing to lean a little bit, to give us a little bit of a break in terms of academic ability. There were only so many good athletes who were also good students, and everybody wants those people. I was able to get some students that weren't quite as good as the other ones in the college, maybe slightly lower, but could show success. I still brought in twenty to twenty-five athletes a year — I spent a lot of time at that. It got to be a little harder to recruit, and that might be something coaches now might be having a little trouble with. Everybody fights over the good athlete and the good student, and there's not that many of those around.

First of all, my wife did a lot of letter-writing for me. So I would get a hold of as many good athletes as I could. I would get newspaper articles from around the state. I would go to high school meets. I would contact the coaches themselves, especially the ones in Western New York who I knew, and tell them what kind of athletes we're looking for. I just tried to get as many names of people who were, not great athletes, but a little above average. Guys that were competing pretty well in high school, but not state-level guys. We would get a lot of names, and then I would contact those people with my wife's letters and if they sent anything back to me I would ask them for a visit. That was the main thing in recruiting, was getting them to visit. Once you get them on campus there are a lot of things you can do showing them around campus — it's a nice campus. Even back then we had some good things going for us.

When it came down to the big decision at the end, one of the main things that I always said about Fredonia was we have small classes. I recruited a lot of kids who were going to UB (University at Buffalo), to come down to Fredonia instead. Do you want to be in an auditorium with two or three hundred people, or would you rather have classes of fifteen, twenty, or twenty-five? That was a big plus. I'd tell them that the way to do this is to come to Fredonia with small classes, get an education, *then* go to the big grad school. We did a good job of getting kids a base education at Fredonia State. That worked really well, that really helped in recruiting.

**JRM:** Now, I feel like a lot of coaches do that. They set up the recruiting visits and they do it a lot the same way that you did. I'm wondering what helped you have so much more success than other schools, or coaches you were working with.

**Ulrich:** Well, I contacted a lot of people. I contacted a lot of kids. I think a mistake a lot of us make is that we see some kid, and I always have to laugh at this, because some of the coaches would say, "I'm after this so-and-so." And you just can't do it that way, because the chance of that person coming to Fredonia is small. I used more of a shotgun approach — I contacted a lot of people. Then out of that group, maybe out of hundreds, I would get a few that said, "Yeah, I might be interested in Fredonia," and they'd come and visit. It's very time-consuming, but it was certainly a big factor in our success. It took a lot of work and a lot of time. I was always thankful to a number of faculty and staff at Fredonia that would spend an hour or so with a kid and his parents, talking about their program. It was a big help. Even though we didn't have great facilities at the time, the education was really something that I emphasized.

**JRM:** So, when you're talking to a kid and maybe you show them a facility that's not great, would you intentionally talk about something else?

**Ulrich:** Yes, I would only bring up positive things. I would be very positive about everything. Initially we had to run outside for practice — we would run the stairs at Maytum, and we ran in the hallways. The hallways were our indoor track. You don't want to open a door while we're running by!

**JRM:** I had no idea that there wasn't an indoor track here when you started

**Ulrich:** Oh, yes for quite a while. That was the other thing. In recruiting, I would say to the guys that we're getting a new indoor facility, and some of them came and left before it was ever made (*laughs*). But when it came in it certainly was a big plus, and we did pretty well with getting some home meets. Even though it was a 160-meter track and not a 200-meter track, at the time we had one of the nicer facilities. We held state meets, and we held SUNYAC meets in our facility, which isn't happening any more I guess, with some of the other facilities around which are probably a little better.

**JRM:** The facility was one of the better ones in the area at the time, and it's not now. Now it's kind of the opposite.

**Ulrich:** That's true.

**JRM:** So if you were to come back here again, if you were magically thirty years younger and came back to coach here, what would you do as far as building a program?

**Ulrich:** I don't think I'd change anything to tell you the truth. But I wouldn't have spent as much time recruiting downstate kids. I never did out-of-state because the tuition was so high, but I would try to get kids down on Long Island and New York City. I wouldn't spend as much time on those students. Many of them didn't want to come. Many would go to Cortland instead.

**JRM:** Interesting.

**Ulrich:** You have to decide how you're going to be successful, and if you want to spin your wheels at things you're not being successful at.

**JRM:** If a coach came to you and asked for advice about being a better coach, how could you succinctly answer that?

**Ulrich:** I would be pretty critical of my athletes until it came to the big meet. By then I'd think, "Well, they know what they're supposed to do now." But I think the attitude from coaches is always, "Oh, that was great, good try," but I really wasn't that type of coach.

I took pride, more than anything else, in having an average to above average athlete come in and become an All-American. Having an athlete improve with your coaching meant an awful lot to me. That was the one thing I would get really excited about, even if they didn't make it to nationals. Maybe they were a 35-foot shot putter and they got to be a 40-foot shot putter. That's meaningful. That person will never go to nationals, but that's alright. But if we can improve their performances and have them be excited about that, I think that was most fun about coaching, by far. Some schools get athletes to come in and they don't improve at all.

**JRM:** Is there anything else that you think is important to mention?

**Ulrich:** One of the main reasons for our success in conference meets was that our teams were well-rounded. We would score in all the events. Other teams would only have good runners or only good field men.

There are so many athletes in track and field that need to be individualized. It would take an awfully long time. Writing workouts for everybody on the team was probably the hardest thing I had to do every day. There were ten or twelve workout sheets up on the board each day. That's a lot of workout sheets I had to make up. It was very individualized, and that makes a big difference. You've got to do what's going to help them be better.