

# One Of The Best

## Priester Continues To Officiate Big Meets Across The United States

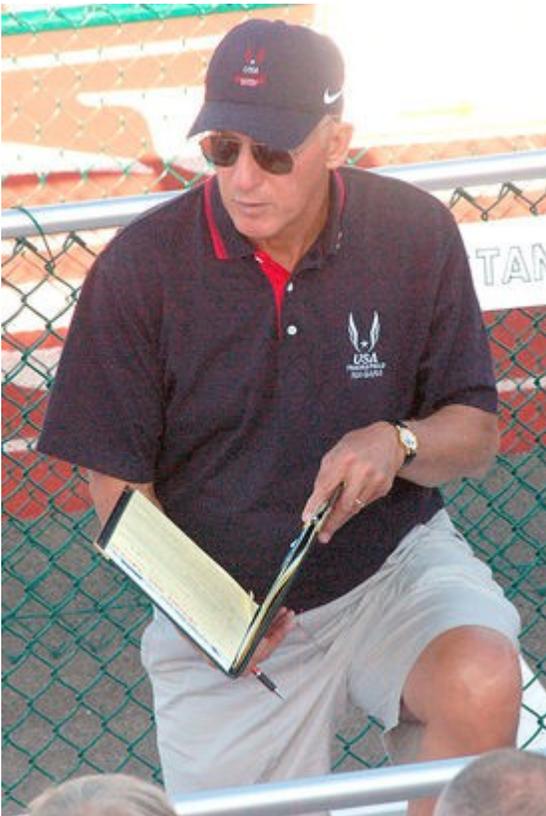
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By Scott Kindberg, Post-Journal

Tom Priester has been officiating track and field meets for more than 30 years, but the 76-year-old West Ellicott resident has no plans to slow down.

Not even a little bit.

"It's just fun," he said earlier this week. "I don't do things unless they're fun. I still play basketball. I get asked, 'At your age?' Well, it's because it's fun."



*West Ellicott resident Tom Priester has been officiating track and field meets for more than 30 years.*

*P-J file photo by Scott Kindberg*

Priester had plenty of "fun" last month.

In the span of a week, Priester officiated the USA Indoor Track & Field Indoor Championships followed by the IAAF World Indoor Championships, both held in Portland, Oregon.

"I had applied (to work) the Worlds, the USA Indoors and the Olympic Trials," Priester said earlier this week. "I was accepted to do the USA Indoors and the Olympic Trials, and I was an alternate for the Worlds. Right before I left (for Portland), I got a call from the head of the USA track officials."

Essentially, the call was a plea for Priester's help.

"Two of my friends on the (officials') selection committee are chief umpires and they said they didn't have enough umpires (for the Worlds)."

After they informed the local committee that Portland-area officials weren't among its preferred choices, Priester was brought into the fold, and he was more than happy to extend his stay in the Pacific Northwest for another week.

"That's what I'm most proud of," he said. " ... That was very, very gratifying."

It's been quite a run for the retired teacher and cross country coach at Southwestern Central School. In addition to working this summer's Olympic Trials in Eugene, Oregon, Priester plans to apply for the 2021 World Outdoor Championships.

Priester will be 81 years old by then.

"Then I'm going to have to hang up my shoes or they'll kick me out," he said with a laugh.

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Priester grew up in North East, Pennsylvania and was a two-sport athlete at North East High School, although he was too small to play on the football team. Instead, he served as the varsity manager for four years. One of his many jobs during a game was to take a water bucket out to the middle of the field during a timeout, so the players could get some refreshment.

"I remember my mother stood up in the stands (one game) and hollered, 'That's my boy. Go get 'em, Tommy.'"

Priester has been pushing pedal to the metal ever since.

After graduating from Slippery Rick University - he played soccer all four years there - he got a teaching job at Southwestern. During his tenure there, he served as varsity track coach for eight years and cross country coach for 45. His accomplishments in those roles earned him induction into the Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame in 2014.

"I just can't believe that," Priester said. "Here's a little old country water boy and he's in the Hall of Fame. That's just mind-boggling."

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Priester's trips across the United States have afforded him opportunity to see some of the best athletes on the planet.

His two favorites?

Fredonia native Jenn Suhr, the Olympic gold medalist in the pole vault and a Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame inductee; and Bryan Clay, the decathlete who has family living in the area.

Priester's role as an official has also earned him some TV time, including during the 2008 Olympic Trials in Eugene.

"I was behind the starting line and (sprinter) Justin Gatlin was on one side and Tyson Gay was on the other," he recalled. "I'm thinking, 'These two guys are medaling in the Olympics and I'm standing in the middle.'"

There's no other place Priester would rather be.

"When I'm there, I can watch the athletes and see how good these people are, and at the same time stay focused on my job," he said. "We go by the motto, 'If you think you saw it, you didn't. If you know you saw it, you write it. I feel it's important that you keep the playing field fair. I have no qualms. If I see a violation, I write it up.

"It's either do the best you can or don't bother to show up."