

# Priester Completes ‘Triple Crown’

## Jamestown Track Official Receives Ken Smith Memorial Award

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*Tom Priester, left, is pictured with Sam Prinzi. Priester received the Ken Smith Memorial Award for outstanding service earlier this month at the New York State Public High School Athletic Association Track & Field Championships. Submitted photo*

Tom Priester was inducted into the Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame in 2014, but that didn't mean then, and it certainly doesn't mean now, that the Jamestown resident is nearing the finish line in his

remarkable track and field officiating career.

Far from it.

In fact, Priester, 78, completed the triple crown of sorts earlier this month at the New York State Public High School Athletic Association Outdoor Championships at Cicero-North Syracuse High School when he was presented the Ken Smith Memorial Award for outstanding service.

That honor, from the New York State Certified Officials of Track, Field and Cross Country, came on the heels of Priester receiving the Dick Ferziger Award in 2007 and the Dick Teetsel Official of the Year in 2017.

“These are men who have passed on who have served in various positions of hierarchy and are well respected,” Priester said. “To my knowledge — according to a person who would know — there have been only four people (to receive all three awards).”



*Tom Priester is pictured with the other officials at this year's New York State Public High School Athletic Association Track & Field Championships at Cicero-North Syracuse High School. Submitted photo*

And, although the retired physical education teacher and coach at Southwestern Central School is now on the figurative “Mount Rushmore” of state track officials, he said such recognition would have never happened if it weren’t for his good friend and fellow official, Sam Prinzi of Jamestown, who was the state association treasurer from 1986-2017.

“It was nice when they asked me if I would present (the Ken Smith Memorial Award) to Tom,” said Prinzi, who was a past award winner. “It made me feel good.”

Ironically, Priester’s decorated officiating career might never have happened had he not found himself at a professional crossroads more than 40 years ago.

“In the 1974-75 school year, I was on sabbatical at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro and I thought I would finish my doctorate, which I didn’t do,” Priester said, “but I had given up (the Southwestern track head coaching job) to Fran Sirianni (a 2018 CSHOF inductee). Someone had to coach it and he was my assistant. When I came back (from the sabbatical), I didn’t know how long I was going to be here ... and I didn’t feel it was right to move Fran out.”

Ultimately, Priester, who never left the area after all, decided in 1975 to become a track official instead.

The rest is history.

In the last 43 years, Priester has worked three Olympic Trials — “and I’m shooting for No. 4 in 2020,” he said — countless NYSPHSAA meets; all levels of NCAA championships; many national high school championships; a bunch of Junior Olympic national championships; and area high school and junior high meets.

Last weekend, Priester was at the New Balance National Scholastic Championships in Greensboro, North Carolina.

“It’s the best kids in the country who are in high school or have just graduated from high school,” Priester said.

One of the athletes he saw was North Rockland’s Katelyn Tuohy.

The sophomore, who doubled at the state meet three weeks ago, including a NYSPHSAA record in the 3,000 meters, broke a 36-year-old record in the outdoor mile (4:33.8) last weekend in Greensboro. In May at the Loucks Games in White Plains, she ran 9:47.88 in the 3,200 meters for another U.S. record.

“I saw her at the finish line,” Priester said. “I introduced myself, told her I was from New York state and I wanted to congratulate her. She said, ‘Thank you,’ and was very kind.”

It was just one of many historic accomplishments that Priester has witnessed through the decades as an official.

“I don’t go out to show off,” Priester said. “I go out to make the playing field fair. ... And, in the meantime, I see some of the best athletes in the country.”

Mentors like Boyd Matteson and the late Joe Paterniti have played a huge role in Priester’s career.

“They, to me, were the top of our group (locally),” Priester said. “I just thought I should be like them. If you were going to do it, you want to be the best. If you’re not going to be the best, you’ll be like the rest. I think that’s what you should try and shoot for — being the best. Try to emulate them and make them happy.”

Added Prinzi: “(Tom) is a good official. He still has his wits about him.”

And Priester shows no sign of slowing down. This weekend he’ll be heading to the USATF Youth Nationals at SUNY Brockport where he’ll know just one person on the officiating crew.

“I don’t know how many (of the other officials) have the experience, because we don’t know them, so we have to show them how it’s done in a nice way,” he said.

Given his success for more than four decades, it’s only appropriate that Priester be leading the field.