

By Jerry Reilly

SUNY Fredonia *Statement*

Fall 2016 issue

“Do the difficult things while they are easy and do the great things while they are small. A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.” -- Lao Tzu, Chinese philosopher.

Forty years ago this fall, the tilt of power in SUNYAC Men’s Track & Field underwent a dramatic westward shift.

The conference held nine championship meets prior to 1977, all of them of the outdoor variety (the first indoor championship wasn’t held until 1981). Brockport won three times, Cortland three times, and University of Buffalo and Plattsburgh – fresh off its title the previous spring – once each.

For the next 20 years, none of those teams would win again. In fact, no other school with men’s track and field – save one – would earn the right to pose with the championship banner.

That lone exception – the Fredonia Blue Devils.

Fredonia won 20 straight SUNYAC outdoor championships from 1977 to 1996. That incredible run of success still stands as the longest winning streak by a SUNYAC school in any sport. It is also among the longest championship winning streaks in NCAA Division III.

And the Blue Devils were no horse for a course. During their outdoor winning streak, they also won 14 SUNYAC indoor titles -- once it finally was held – and numerous indoor and outdoor New York State Collegiate Track & Field indoor and outdoor championship meets, a feat not lost on the architect of it all.

“Everybody likes to talk about the SUNYAC championships,” Fredonia Hall of Fame Coach Jim Ulrich once said. “But we always pointed toward the state meet. That meant a lot more to us.”

Ulrich arrived in Fredonia in the fall of 1974 already flush with success both personal and communal. A schoolboy standout at Kenmore West High School, and later at Indiana State, his first coaching job came at Lockport High School – where he coached for three years, the last coming in 1972.

He returned to Indiana State in 1973 to complete work on his master’s degree and help coach field events. One of his grad school professors was Dr. William Ruffer, a former teacher and administrator in the Fredonia Department of Health, Physical Education, Athletics, and Dance. “That’s when I first heard of Fredonia,” Ulrich said.

It was also at that time Ulrich learned that Fredonia was looking for a men’s track & field coach and head athletic trainer. With Ruffer’s guidance, Ulrich landed the job. It was a bonus that his new job would take him back to Western New York.

“Ulrich has the proper credentials for his work,” Bob Lowe of the Tonawanda News wrote at the time. “After his Kenmore West days he was an All-American at Indiana State in the javelin, was a three-time

state champion there and also won his school's outstanding athlete award in 1969. He also competed in the decathlon and the pentathlon.

"Following graduation he served as Lockport High's head coach, compiling a record of 21 wins against three defeats. He won two Section VI AAA crowns in that time before returning to Indiana State ... (then) Fredonia beckoned and the rest is now history."

Ulrich relied on his Western New York connections to recruit his early Fredonia teams. "I knew the coaches," he said. "They wanted their kids to go to a school that had a good program and where they were going to get good coaching."

The success was immediate. Ulrich's first two Blue Devil teams were undefeated in dual meets (a win streak that continued for several more years). In addition, the program produced two SUNYAC individual champs – and its first All-American in Fred Ruterbusch, a thrower from Pittsford, N.Y. who finished fifth in the javelin at the 1976 NCAA Division III outdoor championship meet.

Ruterbusch was also one of the program's most endearing athletes. Ulrich recalls how the strongman -- who passed away in 2003 and is remembered by track & field alumni with an on-campus 5K run -- was a team-builder at a time when Ulrich was getting his fledgling program started and leadership was needed.

"He boosted everybody, rooted for everybody" Ulrich said. "He wasn't just a thrower. Even after he graduated, he kept coming back to meets and team functions. He was always the life of the party."

In the spring of 1976, Ulrich's second as head coach, Ruterbusch and then-freshman Bob Carroll from nearby Forestville, N.Y., became SUNYAC individual champions – a harbinger of team success one year in the offing. Carroll won the 880 in a then-school record of 1:55.71 while Ruterbusch shattered the meet and school javelin record with a throw of 207 feet, 11 inches. The Blue Devils finished fourth.

The fall of 1976 bought a new class of freshmen – and one key transfer student. A sprinter and jumper from Niagara Falls, Eldred Stephens had grown disenchanted at the University of Buffalo. He contacted Ulrich and signed on at Fredonia with only one year of eligibility remaining. "He was sort of introverted, not an outgoing leader like Fred was," Ulrich said. "Yet his ability and work ethic made him a leader in that respect."

It turns out Stephens was very talented. Competing at the 12th New York State Indoor Track & Field championship meet at St. Lawrence, he set a meet record in the long jump (winning the event by more than a foot) and ran the opening leg on the mile relay team – it also included Tom Heinrich, Steve Scott, and Keith McFayden – which won the event and set a state meet record.

Carroll also set a state half-mile record, high-jumper Jeff Roberson cleared 6-7 and qualified for the NCAA meet, Ruterbusch set a school record in the weight throw, and the distance medley relay team of Scott, Greg Miller, Pierre Vavoules, and Tim Zintel set yet another school mark. The end result was Fredonia's first team title of any kind, an improvement from 10th place the year before.

The first of 20 straight SUNYAC outdoor titles came next. The Blue Devils won seven individual events: three by Stephens (100-yard dash, long jump, triple jump), and one each by Carroll (mile), McFayden

(440), Heinrich (120 high hurdles), and Roberson (high jump). Stephens again joined Scott, Heinrich, and McFayden to win the 440 relay. There were school records set up and down the lineup.

Fredonia completed its Triple Crown by winning the 1977 New York State Track & Field championship meet, then in its 30th season. Roberson won the high jump (with a then school-record 6 feet, 7 ¼ inches) and Carroll won the mile. Stephens finished second in the triple jump, the 100-yard dash, and the long jump, and third in the 220. Despite no wins, he was named Outstanding Performer of the meet. In addition, Ruterbusch was second in the javelin and Dave Rechlin second in the pole vault. The Blue Devils were first among 18 teams.

“We finally had gotten some people,” recalled Ulrich, “who could compete, kids who started to believe in themselves and weren’t intimidated by the bigger schools.”

The journey of a thousand miles had begun.

Ulrich said the key to the three championships in 1977 – and all of the others that followed – was roster balance. “Everybody had good runners,” he said. “The reason we won a lot of meets was because our field athletes were better than their field athletes. We had good people in all events.”

He also had good helpers. His wife, Linda, played a clerical part. “She did all my recruiting letters,” he said. “She was basically my secretary without the pay.” Bud Carpenter, then the intramural director (now head athletic trainer with the Buffalo Bills), took on some of the athletic training work. That freed up Ulrich to spend more time coaching. Dr. Everett Phillips – Ulrich’s predecessor as head coach – stayed on to coach the distance runners.

“Ev’s expertise in distance was a big help,” he said. “He worked with (the distance runners) while I ran around practiced and tried to get to everyone else. We really didn’t have another coach until we brought on (sprints coach) Paul Csont.”

Bob Lowe, again in the Tonawanda News, must have had a crystal ball when he wrote about the 1977 championship team: “Ulrich has developed that winning habit to perfection at Fredonia and, with the nucleus of this year’s team being undergraduates – aside from the irreplaceable Stephens and the steady Ruterbusch – the dynasty seems destined to continue on and on.”