

VERNE E. THORNBURG



1932 – 2021

He ran the Good Race

During his 88 years, Verne lived an amazing life. Born into a fourth-generation Turlock farming family, he was no stranger to hard work, helping his family operate a jersey dairy and grow alfalfa, almonds, corn, walnuts, and wine grapes. But his chores on the farm did not prevent him from excelling in school: he was elected Student Body Assistant Treasurer his Junior year at Turlock Union High School, and then Treasurer his Senior year, graduating in 1950 with California Scholarship Federation honors. Verne learned to play the piano well, and was a cornerstone of the Turlock High track team, earning first place ribbons at several meets!



Verne's love of distance running continued at U.C. Berkley, where he quickly became the "top two-miler" on the freshman team. He continued competing on Cal's track and field team through college, becoming a member of the SAE fraternity in 1952. After receiving his Associate of Arts degree in 1952, Verne continued at Cal in the ROTC program, receiving his commission as a 2d Lieutenant in 1954. Verne then attended the Army Intelligence School at Fort Holabird in Baltimore, graduating in the top 15% of his class in 1955. He was promoted to 1st Lieutenant the following year, and remained an active reserve officer until his honorable discharge in 1962.

While a reserve officer, Verne obtained his teaching credential at Sacramento State, and shortly thereafter, began his high school teaching career and his life-long love of coaching track, field and cross-country. He moved to the South Bay Area to teach and coach at Mountain View High School from 1960 – 1964, and then coached at Lynbrook HS for 22 years (1965 – 1987). During his tenure at Lynbrook, he started their cross-country program for both men and women, his team won three league championship titles and the 1986 Central Coast Section (CCS) Team Scholarship award. In 1988, he accepted a coaching position at Homestead High School, and that same year was named the California Interscholastic Federation CCS

September 23, 1988

SPORTS

Thornburg earns CCS honor

By Marc Lin

After 30 years of hard work and dedication to one school, most teachers would be set in their ways and rarely change anything different.

But having finished his 33rd year at Lynbrook last year, senior studies teacher and cross-country coach Verne Thornburg left in new time to move.

"I think a change in schools is good because the more people you get, the more you get a whole new perspective on coaching," Thornburg said.

Thornburg's experience paid off when the Central Coast Section Sports Commission selected him to be the 1988 cross-country Coach of the Year.

Thornburg coached his team to 1987 winning cross-country and track at the old Mountain View High School, where he taught World Civilization and U.S. History.

Leaving MVHS in 1987, Thornburg moved to Lynbrook. He stayed in that position until last June.

"I wanted to cross-country program was just getting too difficult to maintain. So one was coming out for cross-country season," Thornburg said as one reason for his change.

At Homestead, Thornburg teaches U.S. History and World Civilization. But he is versatile, he said.

"U.S. History, World Civilization, Government. I like them all. If it's history, I like it," he commented.

But as good a history teacher as Thornburg may be, he makes an even better cross-country coach, according to his athletes.

"He can be strict and funny at the same time. He motivates the runner by being firm, but his sense of humor keeps him from being too strict," observed senior Scott Fairbanks, a cross-country CCS Section champion.

Senior Lacey said, "The emphasis in coaching the runner is to keep him motivated who makes significant contributions to their school, spirit and community. They can't be too much to the athletes and coaches with whom they work."

Lately, head of the awards program, added that Thornburg was the most qualified coach nominated.

Thornburg will receive a plaque to arrive at the CCS Board of Managers luncheon in Redwood. He declined to comment on the award, preferring to wait until Lacey's presentation.

Despite his years of coaching, Thornburg has never won a CCS championship. "The closest he has come has been playing fourth in the sectional championship."

A CCS Championship? It would be nice, but that's not what Lacey's true success. If the kids learn, have fun and become better people in the end, then I'm happy," Thornburg said.

Fairbanks thinks that Thornburg's coaching philosophy suits the team.

"In the past, we have peaked too early. But Thornburg's methods are different and with them, we will peak just right, when at the FHS or CCS."

But the real reason to love cross-country, Thornburg said, is that to be successful, an athlete need not possess any special talent.

"You can pick any freshman, train him, and by the time he's a junior or senior, he will have the potential to be a champion," he explained.

Fairbanks agreed, adding that in the past, Thornburg has taken teams with little experience and turned them into contenders. "I think we're going to win CCS this year. We have the talent, and now we have the coaching."



VERNE THORNBURG

Cross Country Honor Coach. He continued to guide the cross country program at Homestead through 1997. Verne served many years on the CCS Cross Country Committee, and was the CCS Championship Tournament Director several times. He formally retired in 1997, moving back to Turlock, but continued to informally help coach the cross-country team at Pitman High School, just up the street from his home. In fact, the Pitman team still does "Verne Drills" during their regular practices.

Verne's passion for track and field went beyond coaching: He traveled the world to observe top international track events, visiting Russia, Europe, Asia and Australia. He made friends wherever he traveled, chatting with Jesse Owens in Germany and England, and visiting with Dame Margot Fonteyn in a Parisian hotel lobby. Having befriended members of the Track and Field Magazine crew at earlier events, they subsequently asked Verne to join them (and often, they joined him) at many international competitions.



He told of one trip to Germany in 1961, when he stayed at a West Berlin hotel overlooking the Brandenburg Gate. As he recounted, the day before his flight out of Berlin, he decided to explore East Berlin, stopping at a few shops, enjoying a dinner, and visiting with the East Berliners he encountered. He stayed later than intended, but managed to persuade a cab driver to take him through the checkpoint and back to his hotel after the curfew had "technically" started. His papers were in order, so the checkpoint authorities allowed the nervous cab driver to pass into West Berlin to deposit the American tourist back at his hotel. Verne tipped his driver five dollars - a lot of money back then! The next morning he awoke to the sounds of heavy machinery: looking out his hotel window across the plaza he saw that overnight, sections of the Brandenburg Gate had been blocked with barbed wire fences, and concrete barriers were under construction. Verne may well have been the last American to leave East Berlin before it was closed and the initial Wall erected on August 13, 1961.

Verne also religiously attended Cal Berkeley football games, both at home and away, as an avid member of the Bear Backers. One of his happiest days was at 1982 "Big Game" when Cal beat Stanford 25-20 as the result of a last-minute, wild kick-off return. For many years, Verne was very proud that he did not miss a single Cal game.



Verne was a loving son, caring for his mother, Helen Thornburg, for more than a decade after his father, Vernon, passed. He was a beloved brother to Don and LaMonte Thornburg, managing a large portion of their partnership in Thornburg Farms. And he was a cherished uncle and great uncle to his nieces, nephews, and their children. At traditional holiday and informal gatherings, all would delight in Uncle Verne's

pop history quizzes directed to those of elementary and high school age, and he made certain that everyone understood the distinction between being "good" and being "well". He will be missed greatly by his family, friends and neighbors.



"And let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith"

Hebrews 12:1-2

May 20, 2021

Dear Family and Friends:

As some of you may know, Verne passed on May 8th, and was buried this morning at Turlock Memorial Park.

He experienced declining health over the past year, but was able to stay in his own home per his wishes during that time. He was not in pain when he passed, and had the benefit of some wonderful, loving caregivers for several months beforehand. We were fortunate to be able to see and visit with him right up to the day of his passing.

We send this short memorial in honor of Verne to those he loved as family, friends and neighbors.

The Thornburg Family