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### In Memoriam: Al Yarr — A legacy built on a labour of love

Posted by **Athletics and Recreation** on June 1, 2023 in [In Memoriam](#)

Legendary Dalhousie Tigers coach, [Al Yarr passed away at the age of 89 on Friday, May 26, 2023.](#)

Al coached 91 conference championship-winning teams between three different sports in his 44 years as a head coach at Dalhousie. Five of those teams went on to medal at national championships, while 28 of his individual athletes advanced to compete on the national stage.

The breadth of sports which Al coached is as expansive as his list of successes. During his early years at Dalhousie, he coached men's basketball, track and field, cross country, golf, tennis and was an assistant coach with the football team.

Al coached the men's basketball team from 1963-1979, making it a point of pride to recruit exclusively in Canada, while the other top teams were predominantly American. The roster of Canadian athletes certainly didn't slow Dalhousie's success. From 1967-72, Dalhousie had one of the best teams in the league with conference records of 10-2 twice and 9-3 twice. Two ties for league honours were among the highlights. During the same period, Al also coached the Nova Scotia basketball team at the first Canada Winter Games in Quebec City in 1967 where the team captured a bronze medal. In 1968-69 Al was assistant coach of the Canadian men's national basketball team. Al also had what he has always referred to as 'the privilege' of coaching John Cassidy, who went on to spend ten years on Canada's national team and played in the 1976 Montreal Olympics.

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Although Al started at Dalhousie with a significant focus on basketball, his great passion in his later coaching years was in the sports of cross country and track and field. In 1967, Dalhousie won its first AUAA track and field conference championship since the sport's inception in the conference in 1911. Al quickly followed his success on the track with success on the cross country trails with Dalhousie winning its first ever AUAA cross country conference championship in 1972. From these modest beginnings, Al developed very successful track and field and cross country programs at Dalhousie. The majority of the 91 conference championships his teams won were in those two sports.

The credit for his success, according to Al, was often left to his athletes. His mantra, "You don't become a great coach without having great athletes," speaks both to his faith in the athletes with whom he worked and to what he enjoyed most about coaching. Despite the unprecedented number of conference wins he recorded, Al's undiminished enthusiasm for coaching was powered by his enjoyment of working with the people attracted to the sports he coaches.

While he formally retired as head coach in 1999, Al stayed on as an associate coach with the cross country teams until recent years. Retirement didn't keep him from showing up at Point Pleasant Park on occasion as recently as last fall to keep an eye on training. He still got excited about new runners coming to Dalhousie, new training techniques and was elated when athletes achieve personal bests. And he and wife Pam were courtside at most basketball games last season.

"Al was the most important and influential person in the Nova Scotia running community," says current cross country and track and field head coach Rich Lehman. "He quite literally created the Dalhousie track and field and cross country programs and was the driving force behind so much of our team's successes. His ability to develop student-athletes into better runners, and more importantly, better people is unmatched; the number of lives he changed for the better is countless; and the hole his passing leaves in our community is irreparable. We are all better for having had the opportunity to work with him, run for him, and learn from him."

He was forever a student of the game, whatever that game may be. Whether it is basketball, golf, running, or life, he was always searching for and integrating new ideas into training programs. He still continued learning, perhaps more voraciously than ever. He read constantly, learning from sports greats in the process.

Ninety-one conference championships is a legacy in its own right, but what is not reflected in this number is the influence Al has had on Dalhousie's student-athletes, as people. He was a coach, a

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teacher, a mentor and a friend to hundreds of student-athletes, spanning six decades. Al's contribution to sport at Dalhousie has been immense. It would be difficult to find anyone in the history of coaching that has given so much of himself to Dalhousie athletics. He is, without question, a Dalhousie coaching icon.

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