

# Contributor of the Year: Brian Diemer

By Scott Sullivan

Thirty years ago Aug. 10 Brian Diemer — who learned to steeplechase running and jumping electric fences at his family's nursery — stood atop (well, almost atop) the world.

The Cutlerville native, who had won a state mile championship for Grand Rapids South Christian High School, then NCAA 2-mile indoor and steeplechase titles for the University of Michigan, had gone Hollywood (well, almost), running for the United States at the Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles.

Check out the race yourself. There, in grainy 1984 color film on YouTube, stands Diemer, 22, having passed through two qualifying heats, on the far outside at the start line. He wears a mustache and looks slight, even among the steeplers.

He runs near the rear in the early laps, works his way up, then drives through a thrilling finish to claim the bronze medal in 8:14.06. Joining him on the podium are Kenyan Julius Korir (8:11.80) and Joseph Mahmoud of France (8:13.31).

Diemer ran in two more Olympics — 1988 in Seoul and 1992 in Barcelona, the latter as U.S. men's track and field team captain — and competed worldwide for years. All of which led home, where he is Michigan Runner magazine's 2014 Contributor of the Year.

The family nursery? It's still there. Today Diemer, his sister Ellen and brother Brent run Everett's Land-

scape Management, founded by their father Everett, in Cutlerville. Brian still lives and runs, though not quite as fast now, where he grew up, on the streets and countryside he feels in his heart and bones.

Diemer ran for Nike, but declined its urging to move to and train in Portland, Ore. Success gave him leverage. Today what he takes from the land and sport, he gives back.

He has coached men's cross country teams at nearby Calvin College to four NCAA Division III titles, all since 2000, giving credit to his assistants and former U-M coach Ron Warhurst for shaping his philosophy.

"Coaches need to believe in their athletes," Diemer told peers at a 2008 Michigan Track Coaches Association seminar. "Athletes will do just about anything for you if you positively encourage them.

"Step back, take a look at what you need to address with that kid, and do it with love and encouragement. Then try to give them a picture of what it could look like if they follow through on that," he said.

Diemer took the Calvin helm when he was 24, 29 years ago. The Knights last fall won their 28th straight Michigan Intercollegiate Athletic Association championship. He became Calvin's women's coach, too, eight years ago. The Knight women have won all eight MIAA titles since then.

In 1990, Diemer, then 27, and sponsors started a 5K road race named for him. The Brian Diemer Family of Races marked its 25th anniversary June 14 with more than 1,300 finishers tackling its fast, flat course through Cutlerville.

This year's celebration included a pre-race pasta dinner, five bands on the course, Mobility 5K for handcycle and wheelchair athletes, junior jogs for boys and girls in many age groups and a mile run for more-ambitious kids. Then came the Cutlerville Days parade down the course finish area and day-long community-wide festival.

There was also the tweaked-each-year stuff that is just plain goofy. Diemer celebrates Father's Day eve by surprising his dad with a new way to start runners every year. This time Everett, as good a sport as you'll find at age 82, rang hand bells.

And let's not forget the traditional Diemer donut challenge. Beat Brian — no easy feat, even though he is now 53 and has ceased training to compete — and he buys you a donut. In case you're not sure where he is on the course, he has one of his



Photo by Scott Sullivan

RD Rob Hyde (l) and Brian Diemer start one of the kids' races at the Brian Diemer Family of Races, June 14, 2014.

Calvin athletes run next to him, tethered to colored balloons and carrying a giant donut.

Diemer and his wife, Kerri, have four children: Kelsey, Kaitlin, Mackenzie and Matthew.

Kelsey, now married to youth pastor Joel Klingenberg, moved in September to California. Diemer was visiting them when we phoned to tell him about the Contributor of the Year award, to celebrate the birth of his first grandchild.

Kaitlin, a successful South Christian and Calvin runner, is a recreation therapist at Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital in Grand Rapids. "She is one of the main reasons we've ramped up our race's Mobility 5K," said Diemer. "She works with athletes like those. Kaitlin also qualified this fall for the Boston Marathon.

Following Dad's footsteps? "I never ran that far. Never wanted to!" Diemer said.

McKenzie, a Calvin junior, is studying to work as a hospital child-life specialist while running steeplechase for the Knights' track team. "She knows better than to train on electric fences," her father said.

Matt, 17, a South Christian senior, plays football. "Matt takes after his mother; he's a sprinter," said Diemer. "He disdains running 400 meters, much less anything longer. I'd like him to try it next spring for the track team, but we'll see."

Diemer was pleased the 18:05 he ran at the last summer's Diemer run held the number of donuts he had to buy under 50.

"All the thoughts and ideas I had in '84 are still fresh in my mind," he said. "My limbs and muscles don't respond quite the same, but running is still a joy for me.

"I love seeing other people get out and learn who they can be, too." - MR -



Photo by Victah Sailer / Agence Shot

Brian Diemer (bib #8) beat Mark Croughton (bib 538). 8:24.9 to 8:25.99, at the Mobile Outdoor Championships, June 16, 1990, Norwalk, CA.