



Staff photos by Ric Dugan

Brunswick High School cross-country coach Lee Zumbach leads a recent practice. In the 1970s, Zumbach envisioned coaching basketball at his new job in Frederick County. Instead, he has ended up coaching three others for decades.

GOING THE DISTANCE

3-sport Brunswick coach Lee Zumbach has become a Frederick County fixture

By JOHN CANNON

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A note card on a bulletin board caught Lee Zumbach's eye as he left the cafeteria at Bethel College in Tennessee.

It was essentially a want ad seeking teachers for Frederick County Public Schools in the spring of 1970. Hailing from Scranton, Pennsylvania, Zumbach didn't even know where this Maryland county was. Still, he was on the verge of graduation with no concrete career plans, and one of his degrees was in business education.

"My dream job was to coach basketball. That was what I wanted to do," he said. "And I thought, 'You know, if I teach, I can coach basketball.'"

So, Zumbach pursued the opportunity and was hired as an accounting teacher at Brunswick High School. He soon became a coach at the school, too, just not in the sport he envisioned.



With no basketball jobs available when he started at Brunswick, Zumbach's first foray into coaching there came with the tennis team. Looking back, this was fitting. A person can play tennis for a lifetime, and the most striking feature of Zumbach's coach-

ing career is its longevity.

Now a white-haired, 76-year-old retired teacher instead of a fresh-out-of-college educator, Zumbach is still coaching at Brunswick High. His tenure there includes 56 years in tennis, 47 years in cross-country and 42 years in in-

door track and field. Anne Zumbach, Lee's wife, has coached in the latter two sports, as well as outdoor track and field, for decades herself at Brunswick.

"Some people say there are a couple constants in the world, death and taxes," said Brunswick boys tennis coach Larry Collins, who has coached with Lee Zumbach for 20 years. "In Brunswick, there might be three — death, taxes and a Zumbach coaching at Brunswick High School."

Quantity isn't Zumbach's only trademark. His teams and athletes have won state crowns, with the most recent team title coming in boys cross-country in 2021. But he prides himself just as much on working with non-stars, be it under-the-radar runners whose end-of-season times showed marked improvement from August or novice tennis players who spent the spring grasping a new game.

(See **DISTANCE B2**)

Going the distance

(Continued from B1)

"Lee is very down to earth. He works with kids individually, focusing on individual skill areas and areas where they need help," Walt Stull, who has coached with the Zumbachs for more than 45 years, both at Brunswick High and Potomac Valley Youth Association, wrote in an email. "He speaks to the runners in a respectful manner and the runners respond positively."

Zumbach's Brunswick High coaching career began with a request from a couple students.

"These two girls say, 'Mr. Zumbach, we heard you play tennis. Do you think you could help us and be a coach of the team?'" Zumbach said.

Tennis is one of the sports Zumbach took up after his basketball career ended at the junior college level. The other was distance running. While both would figure prominently in his future, there was no such grand plan when he was hired as a Brunswick tennis coach in 1970.

"It wasn't like the principal called me and signed me for the job. I just went down and helped them," said Zumbach, who enjoyed the experience and thought a lot of the players, both girls and boys. "So each year, I just stayed with it."

As time passed, Zumbach's players switched from wooden rackets to aluminum ones. His school's number of tennis courts went from three to eight. And the Railroaders transformed from a middling program to one of Frederick County's best.

By the early 1980s, Brunswick's boys and girls tennis teams more than held their own against the county's biggest ones.

Never a spotlight seeker, Zumbach is quick to credit others for his tennis teams' success. Players like Josette Votipka and Mike Price, and coaches like Ed Sell.

"We were a great partnership for 10 years," Zumbach said of Sell. "You need somebody to bounce things off of."

These days in tennis, Zumbach coaches the girls, while Collins coaches the boys. Both help out the other when needed, however.

Collins pointed out all the off-the-court support Zumbach provides. For instance, Zumbach spearheaded an effort, which involved help from the community, to have a shed constructed for the tennis team.

Likewise, both Zumbachs help develop future Brunswick cross-country and track athletes by working with PVYA. In the past, they often took locals to AAU events throughout the country.

Just as in tennis, Zumbach's tenure as a

cross-country coach started with a request. A pair of sophomore track athletes asked Zumbach to revive the school's cross-country program.

Zumbach was hesitant. But during a vacation to Dewey Beach, Delaware, he began running on the beach each morning with a pair of cross-country athletes from a high school in Fairfax County, Virginia, who happened to be staying in the cottage next door. The runners told Zumbach he should coach his high school team.

"If I hadn't of met those two guys, I might not have done that because I wanted to do my own training. I didn't want to be tied up every day after school," he said. "But the way they kind of persuaded me — I don't know where those guys are today."

At first, Zumbach needed some on-the-job training as Brunswick's cross-country coach.

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LARRY COLLINS,
Brunswick boys tennis coach

"[The athletes] kind of taught me more than I taught them because I didn't know much about how to do cross-country. I just knew miles," Zumbach said. "So we set up a little course out here, and the rest is history. I kept doing it ever since."

A year after re-starting the boys team, Zumbach started the girls team. Also, Anne switched from coaching gymnastics to helping Lee in cross-country.

While Brunswick's boys enjoyed success, winning the program's first state crown in 22 years in 1989, the girls emerged as a juggernaut. The Railroaders girls won three state team crowns from 1982 to 1985 and three straight from 1991-93.

A glimpse of the girls team's dominant future occurred early on during a meet against host Frederick and Middletown, who were coached by legends Jack Griffin and Don Boyer, respectively.

"Don Boyer came running over to me and said, 'Coach, you just beat the state champions, Frederick High School,'" Zumbach said. "[I was like], 'No we didn't. We're just a bunch of freshmen.' I still get chills thinking about that."

Zumbach named Boyer and Boonsboro High's

Dwight Scott as two of his coaching mentors. Like him, both coached cross-country and track and field (Scott did football, too) many decades at their schools.

Granted, Zumbach's most important partner and influence has been Anne, a Myersville native. They've been married for 52 years and have mentored countless athletes.

"It would not have worked if she wasn't there," Lee said. "She knows so much about track and running, and she's so good with kids. I have to give her all that credit because I probably would have got very discouraged a lot of times if she wasn't there to say, 'Relax, we'll get through this.' She's my patience. I have no patience."

Both became fixtures at meets, although the much taller Lee is usually easier to spot in a cross-country crowd.

"When it starts to get a little bit cooler in the fall with cross-country, you're always going to see a faded yellow stocking cap somewhere near a tennis court or somewhere near the cross-country course worn by Lee Zumbach," Collins said.

While wins and titles are nice, Zumbach prizes athletes who overcome adversity, and he rattled off examples. Adrian Unger overcame mono, which nearly derailed her junior season, en route to winning a historic four cross-country state individual titles from 1991-94. Sara Fisher won the 2008 1A cross-country state title shortly after the death of a close childhood friend and earlier took the CMC crown despite having to cover more ground because she took a wrong turn.

During winters, Lee coaches track and field with Anne. His tenure in that sport started after he left as Brunswick's JV boys basketball coach, a job he held for four years, so newly hired varsity hoops coach Jim Sklencar could pick his own staff.

Lee, who's been retired as a teacher for 20 years, has a property business. Like any FCPS coach, Zumbach gets paid a pittance for the time he puts in, although he gladly accepts that situation for continuing to do what he loves in the beloved community he once didn't even know existed.

Zumbach said as long as kids are interested and there's parental support, he and Anne will probably keep coaching. Besides, they always spot kids with potential.

"We just can't drop it. [It's like] let's go a couple more years and see how this group of kids goes," he said. "And we've got parents who give the shirts off their back to help you, and you don't ever want to leave those parents out there."