

Alphonse Bernard

Not many of our Stars of the Road can claim to have been actively involved in the MRA from its inception to the present. Alphonse Bernard is one such Star, and one who has played roles as athlete (regular and masters), race director, board member and most prominently as a coach.

Alphonse first had an interest in running sparked by seeing an indoor track meet covered on Wide World of Sports in 1962 when the 4 minute mile was first broken indoors. A couple of years later it was the Tokyo Olympics which had the most extensive TV coverage of any Olympics up to that time, and Alphonse was drawn to the great Kiwi, Peter Snell, competing primarily against our very own Bill Crothers. But the one race that has remained etched in his memory over the years was the underdog Billy Mills outsprinting the favourite, Ron Clark, in the 10000 over the last lap.

Alphonse was ready to be hooked, but it wasn't easy. He lived in the tiny French community of St. Claude, MB (pop. 590), just east of Treherne that many runners know for its marathon. St. Claude was not known for running in any way, shape or form and anyone who ran there was considered a bit crazy. Alphonse quietly obtained a book from the Winnipeg Public Library entitled, "Run to the Top" by Arthur Lydiard, and copied by hand several of the pages of training programs used by that author's athletes. It would be several years before Alphonse would actually commit to those principles learned from Lydiard. In the meantime, He tried some workouts from the book but had to do it surreptitiously to avoid being labeled "un imbécile" in St. Claude.

When he entered U of MB in 1967, he met a prominent runner of the day, Weldon Newton, who also lived at Tache and recruited Alphonse for the cross-country team coached by Jim Daly, who explained the program to Alphonse. He finally went out for the team in 1968 but didn't make the top 7 to be officially on the traveling team. He did finish 5th on the team in one race in Fargo, though, but when the final selections were being made based on a race in Grand Forks, Alphonse had a cold and ran poorly, being edged out by Laurie Grove. Alphonse trained on his own as there were not many track clubs that recruited post-high school runners at that time. During the summer, he would return to St Claude and run either late at night or drive to an isolated country road to run in peace.

Alphonse graduated in Education and started his career in teaching. In September, 1972, Charlie Paille, who organized the MRA at the beginning, enlisted Alphonse to organize a race and it was the Festival du Voyageur 5 mile race that handicapped the racers by starting the slowest runners first. Alphonse also continued his training after university and increased his intensity. At the same time, he joined the MRA board of directors.

Alphonse taught at the high school at College St. Boniface (now Collège Louis Riel). He returned to university in 1975 and coached a club called “Les Dynamiques” with about 8 – 10 runners. One of his athletes took over the club after the first year. By 1977, Alphonse was back and had some seriously talented runners he was coaching, including Claude Bérubé. In 1978, he joined forces with the Takus Track Club led by Dale Kerr, whose primary interest was sprinters, long sprinters and hurdlers, and so they complemented each other well. Claude’s success drew other talented runners to the club. Alphonse coached such stars as Claude Berube, Marney Deakin, Colette Desrosiers, Rob Guy, Henry Klassen, Bruce McKay, Darcy Ready, Buddy Voth and Chris Weber. Between 1979 and 1983, he had over 30 middle distance and distance athletes. In the early 80’s, there was a national program of centres of excellence being formed across Canada, beginning with Toronto and Victoria, but Alphonse led the 4th centre in Winnipeg from 1981-83. Later Alex Gardiner took that over and focussed on sprinting. Alphonse coached with Takus until 1986.

In the mid-1970’s, Alphonse organized a 25 km race in St. Norbert and ended up with more trophies than runners!

Alphonse enjoyed a powerful tail wind in the 1979 Islendingadagurin 10 miler and ran 55:30, his 10 mile PR by a substantial margin. He had camped the night before in Winnipeg Beach and the wind was so strong, it blew his tent down and he had to try (unsuccessfully) to sleep in his car. After a difficult 1979 first Manitoba Marathon in which he crawled down Portage Avenue and finished a few seconds over 3 hours, he ran 2:49:21 in 1980 in perfect conditions, good for 86th place.

During this period, one of Alphonse’s proudest achievements was coaching Claude Bérubé’s several road race victories and a 30:08 at Nationals in the 10000, Colette Desrosiers to an impressive 5th place finish 2:43 full marathon in Montreal and Henry Klassen’s making the national team for the World Junior Championships in both cross-country and track (1500) in 1986. Also during this

period, Alphonse was the race director for the Bird's Hill 20 km for 3 years, including one year when it was the national championships for that distance.

After a break of about 8 years, Alphonse returned to coaching in 1994. He was teaching in the francophone school division at Louis Riel and started with 1 athlete in the first year, 3 in the second and grew from there. Between 1997 and 2009, the program was making a name for itself winning the Senior Boys X-country Provincials in 2001 and then starring Sara Ann Brault and Melanie Gregoire on a team that won the Provincial X-country Championships 4 years in a row from 2004 to 2007 as well as 2 Provincial track Championships. The team also picked up 66 medals including 16 golds in the MHSAA track and field Championships in his years at Louis-Riel. Sarah-Ann Brault also won silver at the 2005 Canada Summer Games in the 5000 (17:23) as well as silver in 2 National Jr Championships in the 3000 (9:40.45 being her best time). Eight of his athletes went on to run for the U of MB. Alphonse coached high school track there from 1994 until 2010 when he retired from teaching. Thereafter he continued coaching senior athletes and had a number of star athletes, including Corey Gallagher, Sheldon Kilcullen and Gina Tranquada. Various athletes have asked Alphonse to coach them over the past 10 years and he has, when not injured, been racing himself in master's competitions, especially in the 1500 m and the 5000 m. He ran on the road a 22:26 in the 5 km at age 70 and a 21:27 at age 67, perhaps the most impressive times of his career when corrected for age. He placed fourth (2nd Canadian) for his age in the North American Championships in Toronto in 2017 for the 1500.

In reflecting on his very long career, Alphonse takes the greatest satisfaction in the excellent performances of the athletes he has coached. It is also satisfying that athletes he coached have gone on to become coaches themselves, such as Claude with the U of MB and Andy Tough with Stride Ahead Tough Track. He coached Larry Lacroix, who was prominent in course measurement for the MRA.

His favourite event? The Islendingadagurin 10 miler, for its uniqueness and the fan support. His proudest race that he has run was the Manisphere 15 km, when he was doing well and then it started to rain, and he did even better! He thinks the fastest he ever ran was just a training run when he returned to low altitude after 3 weeks of training at high altitude and just stopped beside the road and ran like the wind for 25 minutes.

Alphonse's worst experience in a race was the 1978 Manitoba marathon (Kildonan Park) when he had developed a drink concoction that included orange juice and vomited (for the only time in his career) at the 20 mile mark. He still finished the marathon in 2:55, though.

Best 5 km was 16:15, best 10 km 34 minutes, best 10 mile 55:30, best half marathon 1:18:48, in his early 40's, and best marathon, 2:49:21. All in all, an amazing career for the boy from the village of St. Claude.