

Dr. Philip Thomas 1945- 2020

I only had the pleasure of Dr Phil's company in the latter stages of his life and athletics career. I am very grateful for the valued input from his family, other coaches, athletes and officials in putting this colourful and full obituary together. I am also conscious that Phil was a great writer and that he would be scrutinising every word I type- I hope I have done him justice!

Dr Phil Thomas (known to most as Dr Phil) committed his entire life to athletics. He first joined Sutton Harriers in 1965 until the early 1980's and again from late 1990's until his passing. He was always on hand to share his opinion- whether you wanted it or not! He was extremely interested in the politics of the club and local athletics in general. At club level, aside from being a Level 3 Coach (long distance/ middle/ throws and jumps), he also held several positions including Chairman (2002), T&F official, Press Officer, Committee member, event organiser and Team Manager during his 40 years of membership. He also spent just under 20 years coaching at Wigan Harriers. He did compete as a runner in earlier life although I cannot find any race times to share. I remember him saying he did race with Ron Hill on a regular basis and had broken the hour mark for 10 miles so he clearly was a decent runner. But coaching was his real forte. His successful coaching methods led to numerous County selections and titles, Northern and National titles, and International selection as recent as 2019. Outside of his commitments to Sutton AC (formally Sutton Harriers), he found the time to be secretary of the Liverpool and District Cross-Country Union and was on the committees of both the Merseyside Athletics Association and Northern Athletics.

During the 1960s Sutton Harriers ran successful female and junior cross-country teams. Dr Phil organised a number of matches between local secondary schools and established a Merseyside cross-country league for girls. This was believed to have led to an increased interest in the sport and a subsequent influx of female athletes. The Sutton girls took the National cross-country title at Runcorn in 1979 much to Phil's delight. At league matches, he would think nothing of encouraging athletes to take part in as many events as possible in order to score points. This led to many making a debut as a steeplechaser, thrower or jumper! Phil was renowned for his organisational skills and would always encourage as many people as possible to help compete or officiate and was instrumental in leading St Helens Sutton AC through some challenges in the early 2000's.

In 1977, together with Frank Horwill and Wilf Paish, he was the editor of a running magazine called Athletics Review designed to challenge the monopoly held by Athletics Weekly. It had limited circulation but was known to sometimes cover controversial subjects and contained detailed results from specific track and field meetings and road races. In addition to this, he wrote the Athletics news for the Liverpool based Daily Post from 1983 to 2008. In 1982 he wrote "The Centenary History of the Northern Cross Country Association" but no copies are currently available on Amazon! As current as 2020, he was still having his articles and letters printed by the Sunday Times and he thoroughly enjoyed putting his complaints in writing to the BBC, the St Helens Star and the Council. He was an active night owl, and it was not uncommon for him to send emails in the early hours to people- either his thoughts on a performance (good or bad!) or an article he had found which was worth a read. To keep up with his young group, he even joined Strava and took great delight in posting feedback and comments on our training activities. He also started the odd debate...

Phil also has a collection of personal papers which are housed in the Cadbury Research Library at the University of Birmingham. The collection's primary strength rests upon a very large sequence of high-quality photographs depicting athletes and athletics meetings staged during the 1970s and early 1980s. Taken as a whole, the collection is a valuable research tool for athletics historians, and include coverage of athletes such as Seb Coe, Steve Cram, Brendan Foster and Donna Murray.

He loved spectating races and one of us would often pick him up and take him out for the day to an event. Phil was a terrible passenger seat driver, always interfering and making you take a wrong turn, which he never accepted responsibility for; It was a good distraction from the pre-race nerves though. I think part of him enjoyed being back in that world again- he would be buzzing for days with the adrenaline and endorphins it bought. Some of you may be aware that Dr Phil did have an on-going battle with his mental health. The cruel nature of this meant that he could be house bound for days or even weeks. In 2017 we gave our training group the double-edged name "PT Track Therapy". The group was as much a coaching opportunity for us as it was a positive therapy session for Dr Phil.

Away from his athletics life, he loved his family: married for over 50 years to Jeanne and proud Father to Gareth and Sian and Grandfather to Owen and Harry. An intellectual individual, he held degrees in History, Politics and Philosophy from the Universities of Lancaster, Liverpool and Keele and then obtained his PhD writing about the history of the Labour Party. All this despite failing the 11 plus exam. He was very proud to introduce himself as Dr Phil Thomas and went on to teach History at Prescott Grammar School as well teaching at Liverpool and Dundee Universities. He also spent some time working in the Financial sector and for the Charities Commission. He was a magistrate at St Helens Court until he begrudgingly left on his 70th birthday. He also had a great love of country music, which often helped him to relax at home.

When asked to describe Dr Phil, most would agree that he had strong opinions which he was not afraid to voice. He could be challenging, persuasive and at times, difficult. However, he was also extremely supportive, eager to pass on advice/ guidance and had a good sense of humour. I can personally vouch for his support for not only myself, but also a number of athlete acquaintances who had lost confidence or had had bad experiences. Dr Phil had a way of building your confidence and preparing you mentally for training and racing.

I believe that he did mellow a little bit in later life, and he would often joke that I had helped him to change his approach and style - although that still wasn't enough to stop him from "psyching out" any competition before an event! A committed "hands on" coach, he spent most weekends over the last 40 years at Sherdley Park, supporting his relevant group at the time. Pam Appleton fondly remembers Dr Phil spurring her and a few other mums at Sutton get into shape with the ambition of fielding a Sutton ladies Merseyside XC team for the first time in years. He ended up turning a bunch of middle-aged ladies into a reasonable competitive team who completed a full XC season, turning out in the Merseyside championships and the Northern and the National XC Champs- and to Pam's delight a Bronze veteran ladies xc medal. More recently, he would look after my young Son in the pram whilst Kelly and I would run loops round the clump. The end result was County XC team selection and Team Silver in the County Championships.

His passing came as a complete shock to everyone in the local Athletic community. As a current Athlete of Phil's, I feel remorse that the corona virus has taken what would have been our last year together. I am also sad that he couldn't see more people over the last 12 months due to lockdown restrictions and his own health. He thrived in the energy of others and he always walked away from a training session with a large smile on his face. A larger than life character, he will be sorely missed by the large number of people he coached, supported or annoyed over the years.

His legacy is the mindset and attitude we have now towards running. We hope to continue our training group in some form post lockdown and pass on the wise knowledge he shared with us. We have to keep on running. The running is what Dr. Phil was all about.

With personal thanks to the Thomas family, Chris Dempsey, Ray Vose, Pam Appleton, Kelly Hamilton and Julia Hayes for their contribution to this article.

Rachael Fairclough

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