

Val Sell

November 1993. The young mother of four finally got a break for herself, and headed over to the SRJC track for a workout and a chance to clear her head. The track was crowded that day with a large group doing a speed workout. She caught up to them and asked what was going on. A nice woman, Pam Horton, answered that they were members of the Empire Runners club, and would she like to join them. And she joined in a big way. Her first real run with the club was a few weeks later, Thanksgiving Day, back in the day when that was a macho over-the-hill 12 miler, none of the “turkey trot in costumes” of today. She hadn’t run in Annadel before then and it showed. She fell twice, broke a toe, and didn’t return for several months.

Thus began a special relationship of Val Sell with Empire Runners. She has become one of our most stalwart advocates, serving as club president, vice president and secretary at various times as well as

race director for the Resolution Run for 15 years. Her greatest volunteer impact has been in the growth in popularity and efficiency of the Kenwood Footrace, our major fundraiser, that allows us to be fiscally solvent the rest of the year. With the help of countless others, her natural inclination has been to improve the race every year for the past 10 years, which now includes chip timing, instantaneous results for 1200+ runners, sponsorships and the festive 4th of July event that it has become today.

Despite Val’s formidable volunteer efforts for Empire Runners, her proudest accomplishments have come from coaching high school runners. Here’s how that came about: She was assistant coach to Danny Aldridge at Maria Carillo for the 2001-2 XC and track seasons. Larry and Tori Meredith had just retired from their storied stint at Montgomery HS, and Josh Dorris who took over for Larry was looking for an assistant with his intent of stepping down in a year. Val, not intimidated by the idea of taking on the program so quickly, jumped at the chance. She served as head XC and track coach for the next 12 years, until she turned over that job in 2015. The results in competitive success and social and emotional growth of her athletes are well known.

Val’s advice for would-be volunteers who think they don’t have enough knowledge: Just do it! Don’t be afraid. You don’t need to know everything about the sport to get involved. Everyone has a specialty that is useful, maybe a bit of nutrition advice, a secret way to tie a shoe, or just being good with numbers. Help time a track workout, volunteer to run a race with newbie at Girls-on-the-Run. The time you spend is incredibly rewarding and will make a huge impact on kids’ lives.

Val’s coaching motto can be distilled to “Be your best no matter how good you are”. She hopes to instill in teens a life-long love of participation that will have a positive impact on their busy lives. She gets to know her athletes personally, and enjoys being a fly on the wall at practice and traveling to meets. Val feels that today’s over-scheduled and digitally connected kids need running now more than ever. The chance to be connected to your body, with a team and with a positive outcome is an important outlet and a chance to unwind.

One of Val’s greatest rewards is to see her countless former athletes continue to thrive and participate and compete long after high school. She vividly remembers sharing a hotel room in 2003 with one of her athletes on a Montgomery team trip to Hawaii. One evening this athlete shrieked as she plucked the first gray hair from Val’s head, followed by a ritual of flushing of the hair down the toilet. That memory is a bookend to the highlight of her coaching career as she witnessed that same athlete’s surreal finish at the 2012 Olympic Trials in Eugene, our local Olympian Kim Conley.

Some of us are convinced that Val is the energizer bunny or her world contains a different sort of clock. Besides coaching, she somehow finds time to raise chickens, design kitchens, grow copious amounts of vegetables, be a mom to a teenager and study French, all the while training well enough to have won the Empire Runners Grand Prix 10 years in a row. We acknowledge Val for her extraordinary efforts and success with our club and our sport. She is an easy selection for the inaugural class of Empire Runners’ Spirit of the Club.

- contributed by Paul Berg



