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The Bakers Get Their Due

by Bill Gelman

Whenever talking about Haddonfield Memorial cross country or track and field history, two names that immediately get mentioned in the conversation are Nick and Maureen Baker. Anyone who follows Haddonfield athletics knows the names and their accomplishments well.

As a thank you for all of their contributions to boys and girls programs over the years, the community is honoring them by dedicating the stadium patio and track in their names. The donation drive for the Baker Project is underway.

The effort is being spearheaded by Dr. Joe Serico, a former principal, under the endorsement of the Haddonfield Educational Trust. Serico has a relationship with the Bakers that spans over four decades, and it includes coaching opposing teams. So if there is anyone who knows how deserving the Bakers are of such an honor, it would be Serico.

"Last year I took on the volunteer responsibility to lead a campus wide beautification project at Haddonfield Memorial High School. We were offered the opportunity

to secure naming rights as part of the project," Serico said. "In my view, there are only a very select group of people who have earned the right to be so honored by the school.

"Among the first to come to mind were Nick and Maureen Baker. I proposed to the [board of education] that we name the track in honor of Nick and the stadium courtyard in honor of both Bakers."

The Baker Project dedication page haddonfieldeducation-trust.org/baker-project features black-and-white images of former Haddonfield athletes set to "Rocky" music along with a rundown of the Bakers' career contributions to the Haddonfield middle school and high school programs.

The boys program alone, under Nick Baker's leadership, has won 17 Group I and II cross country championships since 1981 and 34 South Jersey sectional crowns. In terms of indoor and outdoor track, Baker has guided the Bulldogs to nine winter track championships, six state indoor relay championships along with five outdoor track and field state championships. But that's just the tip of the Baker success story. In his 43

years of service to Haddonfield athletics, Baker has compiled a dual meet record of 326-16, which includes a consecutive win streak of 200-plus victories dating back to '97. Haddonfield is only one of two South Jersey programs to accomplish such a feat.

The South Jersey Track Coaches Association probably summed up Baker's career accomplishment best in its Hall of Fame induction program by stating, "Baker is the most successful track and cross country coach in South Jersey history."

While Nick Baker has enjoyed plenty of success leading the boys program, his wife, Maureen Baker, has left a lasting mark with Haddonfield's female athletes.

When the girls track and field program was founded back in '78, she is one who helped build it from the ground up. While others coaches have taken over, Maureen Baker built a program that like the boys, is extremely good at one thing – winning. The Haddonfield Memorial girls program has come out on the winning side of 150 consecutive dual meets and has claimed nine state cross country crowns since the late 70s. This doesn't even

include all the Colonial Conference and sectional titles the Bulldogs have won over the years. She also has done her part building up the Haddonfield middle school program, helping the young athletes prepare for their high school years.

Haddonfield, season after season, continues to be a team to beat, and the Bakers have been a major part of that championship mentality. Serico said whenever he mentions The Baker Project to someone in the community, the immediate response is typically "what can I do to help?"

"Our community takes great pride in the record of accomplishment that both Bakers have achieved. Beyond the nearly unparalleled success is what they have contributed as role models who brought integrity and the highest standards in conducting themselves," Serico said. "They continually gave back by taking leadership roles in their coaching and academic lives. They have acted with uncommon decency, always putting the well-being of the young people in their charge first."

Dave Stewart, who serves as assistant coach for the boys cross-country program, knows

the Bakers well, too. His son Matt Stewart ran for Haddonfield from 2010-14, and the following season, he came aboard to help out with Haddonfield's distance runners. Over that short period, Stewart has noticed that every student-athlete, whether a freshman or a senior, continually believes in the Baker system, and the championship results serve as proof.

"Nick would be the first to acknowledge that the main part of his success is from the kids buying into the program for over 40 years and doing the work needed," Stewart said. "If I could describe better how he gets them to do that and somehow package it I could make a lot of money, but he just somehow has that gift of leadership where the kids take charge and internalize the team's goals."

As far as the dedication goes, Stewart said he can't think of anyone more deserving of the honor.

To learn more about The Baker Project or to make a donation, visit haddonfieldeducation-trust.org/baker-project.

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