

Haddonfield Memorial High School dedicates track to longtime coaches

By **BOB HERPEN** - May 24, 2019



On May 20, the track behind Haddonfield Memorial High School was officially dedicated in honor of long-time track and cross-country coaches Nick and Maureen Baker. From left: Nick, son Colin, Maureen and daughter Courtney as the Baker patriarch cut the ribbon.

After 44 years of dedicated service, you might believe Haddonfield Memorial High School track and cross country coach Nick Baker is ready for a nice, long rest and rewards that come with retirement. But he doesn't see a "finish line" just yet.

"I'm looking forward to next cross country season, and then we'll look forward to the winter and take a little time off ,and then get ready for the spring season. That's the way I take it," Baker said.

The Bakers, Nick and Maureen, along with their children – daughter Courtney and son Colin – were present as the track that rings the football field at the rear of the high school was officially dedicated in their honor during Haddonfield Distance Night on May 20.

Part of the plans initiated by the HMHS Beautification Committee, the track dedication was an outgrowth of original efforts by several track-and-field alumni to raise \$100,000 to name the stadium patio area in honor of the Bakers. Clearly, the school district raised its game and offered a fitting tribute.

Nick Baker came to Haddonfield in 1975, serving as high school track and cross country coach as well as several other positions within the school district. He was instrumental in beginning the boys' cross country program at the middle school to grow a pipeline of talent.

That pipeline has paid dividends. One of the multitude of achievements during his coaching career, as of the fall of 2017, Baker's Bulldawgs reeled off an incredible 202 consecutive wins in dual cross country meets, dating back to the second term of the Clinton administration 20 years prior. At the time, it was the second-longest streak for any school in South Jersey (only Paul VI High School had won more) as well as the rest of the country.

"What a night for the Baker family, well deserved. They have dedicated their lives to being mentors to so many student-athletes and I'm so glad our board of education gave them this honor tonight," said HMHS athletic director Lefty Banos.

Maureen Baker helped inaugurate a girls' cross country team in the middle school and served as head coach, but in recent years, helps Courtney coach and mentor the co-ed middle school cross country squad.

Commissioner Jeffrey Kasko added his regards just prior to the ribbon-cutting, saying, "as a parent of kids who have been coached by both Bakers, on behalf of all the parents in the past present and future, I'd like to say how much we are grateful you have been a part of our success."

On this night, multiple schools across the region sent athletes to Haddonfield, congregating on the football field in between events. However, most visible were the dozens of former student-athletes, parents and other well-wishers who all jockeyed for a minute of time with their former coaches and mentors for a hug, handshake and brief conversation.

"We'd always been so proud to watch and to be a part of our parents' coaching career. Throughout the years, they collected an impressive number of titles: conference, county, state championships, coaches-of-the-year, national championships, but with all these accomplishments and awards we can list, the impact as coaches can't be measured in those numbers," said Courtney Baker.

"It is evident in the community they have built in the track and cross country families, and over five decades of friendships and camaraderies that have evolved and that span the generations."

In a reflective mood after cutting the ribbon on the track that will bear both his and his wife's names, Baker was still able to muster up some advice for current and future Bulldawgs.

"It's overwhelming after all this time. Just to see so many people come back. I don't think about wins and losses, I think about the personalities and the memories. The one thing I preach to the kids, there's no magic workout, it's all about hard work. You just keep chipping away, chipping away and eventually you get there. It's a great lesson for a lot of things in life. It's been a journey," he said.