

Keeping the long view

Fleet Hower celebrated for holding course record for 20-plus years

STEPHANIE PORTER-NICHOLS
Staff

Fleet Hower can zero in on a goal with an intensity that leads to records that don't easily fall. More than 20 years after he set the cross country course record at Sugar Hollow, he returned there Thursday. The Marion Senior High grad knows that one day someone will break his running time, but it wasn't last week.

As a youngster, few would have guessed that Fleet would earn scholarships and the title All American as a runner. His first love was baseball.

Looking back, Fleet said, "I was determined to be a pro-baseball player."

However, baseball wasn't where his athletic talents existed. Early in high school, Fleet said, it was evident that he was "OK" at baseball. His older brother, Layton, who was a senior at Marion Senior High when Fleet was a freshman, ran cross country and introduced him to the sport's culture and social group.

For the first two years, Fleet said he didn't take running too seriously. He was likely a better-than-average runner, he said, "but not spectacular. I was still into baseball."

That changed just prior to Fleet's junior year.

He made a bet with himself that if he ran all summer he'd find himself in an improved position. He ran 30 to 45 minutes every day.

With a competitive streak, Fleet said he learned to harness his focus.

"I got more and more serious," he said.

Fleet read about running. He tweaked his technique. He credited his coach with guiding him.

His commitment paid off. During Fleet's junior year, he placed fifth in the state cross country competition.

Yet, Fleet's intensity carried a price.

In the spring of his junior year, he said, overtraining led to stress fractures in his shin. Getting the injury diagnosed proved difficult, but finally an orthopedist in Roanoke did.

"To me," Fleet said, "it was a devastating injury." He feared he couldn't come back. "It knocked me out," he remembered.

Through that spring, Fleet swam and undertook rehab. And, he did come back. He worked to find a balance between his training, his competitive streak, and the reality that "in high school, you know you have limited time" to achieve goals.

He found the balance.

In high school cross country, Fleet explained, a national championship of sorts exists. In four regional meets around the country, runners compete. The top eight finishers of each regional meet go onto the national contest.

"It's like the holy grail for high school runners," he said.

"Also," Fleet said, "it's the ticket to big-time college recruiters."

The goal of reaching that national competition drove Fleet's training the summer and fall of his senior year.

The work paid off. He competed nationally.

It was also during his senior year that Fleet set the course record that still stands for Bristol's three-mile Sugar Hollow route.

The course hosts a number of meets and hasn't changed much



EMILY BALL, BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Fleet Hower walks to the awards table at the conclusion of the Randy Smith Classic, 50 years of Running Through the Pines. After 21 years, the Marion Senior High graduate still holds the course record.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Also during his senior year, Fleet Hower competed in a national cross country event.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Fleet Hower went on to run for Georgetown University for five years. He was named an All-American his senior year.

over time. "That makes it a nice barometer of a runner's time," Fleet explained.

His senior year, the district and region cross country meets were being run at Sugar Hollow.

When it came time for the district meet, Fleet said, "It was the windiest day and the course is exposed."

He ran well with a time of 14:44. The course record then stood at 14:40.

Still, Fleet recalled, "It was a good effort but I was bummed."

When the day for regional competition arrived, Fleet said, "You couldn't compare the weather. It was a beautiful fall day." The times were faster.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

During his senior year at Marion Senior High School, Fleet Hower set the Sugar Hollow three-mile course record during a regional cross country competition.

Fleet's was the fastest then and still is. On Nov. 2, 2001, he ran the course in 14:26.

He broke several records that year and kept breaking them. In 2005, Fleet set the course record for men in Wytheville's Chautauqua 5K with a time of 14:23.

At that time, Fleet was running competitively for Georgetown.

He'd been recruited by several colleges and universities. A son of Tom and Marilyn Hower, he looked hard at his dad's alma mater, Duke. Stanford also had his attention for a time. He wanted to compete but he also wanted solid academics.

The prospects of being in Washington, D.C., the camaraderie he'd experienced on a visit with team members, and a good connection with then GW Coach Pat Henner sealed the deal.

Fleet ran for Georgetown for five years and earned the title of All-American his senior year.



EMILY BALL, BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Fleet Hower is the son of Marion's Tom and Marilyn Hower.

Looking back, Fleet, who now lives in Brooklyn, New York, credited an "amazing support network" made up of his family, his MSHS coach, his friends and fellow athletes. That year, he said, the football team, the women's basketball team, the golf team and others performed quite well.

As Fleet prepared to fly in for Thursday's 50th anniversary meet, he laughed and acknowledged that it "feels fantastic" to still hold the record. Those months of his life, he said, were quite special.

However, Fleet also said, he's not protective of the record. "At some point, someone else will have it," he said. "It's just nice to be back."

These days, Fleet said he only runs recreationally. "I moved on after college," he said.

Fleet studied architecture in graduate school in Philadelphia and then moved to the New York, which, he said, "is the center of architecture in the U.S."

Fleet does some design work, teaches at several universities, and runs a small business that makes designer collectible toys, Locknesters.

Yet, life lessons from his years of running competitively still linger with Fleet.

He noted that the importance of taking the long view in distance running and that persistence and determination pay off.

Fleet then summed up the lessons, saying, "Keep your head down and take it day by day with the long view."

Osborne publishing new material on Mets

STEPHANIE PORTER-NICHOLS
Staff

For two and a half to three years, Chad Osborne worked to get a phone interview with baseball legend Nolan Ryan. On a January day in 2021, Osborne was in a Lowe's parking lot on a call. His cell phone alerted him that another call was coming in. He saw the number and quickly excused himself from the first conversation. He got 15 minutes with the Hall of Fame pitcher.

In an interview earlier this month, Osborne declared, "He was great."

Should readers want to know the details of their conversation, which focused solely on Ryan's time with the Marion Mets, Osborne shares those via his new website/digital newsletter at <https://marionmets.substack.com/>.

While Osborne has long researched the Marion Mets, the Saltville native and Marion resident has recently started publishing his information through the online platform.

This fall, he said, "I started getting antsy about all the information I was compiling from old newspapers and phone interviews."

So, while sitting in a garage waiting on repairs to be finished, he launched the Substack newsletter.

Later this week, Osborne is releasing a special interview he did with Jim McGregor, who played with the Marion Mets two years after Ryan in 1967. McGregor, who recently rekindled ties with the community, will return later this week to serve as grand marshal for Marion's Dec. 2 Christmas parade and help with the tree lighting on Dec. 1.

Osborne, a member of the Society for American Baseball Research, plans to publish his interview on Dec. 1.

Today, Osborne is the father of Grace, 21, and Ty, 17, and he and his wife, Tina, are marking 25 years of marriage. His love of baseball and his fascination with the Marion Mets predates those relationships by decades.

Growing up, Osborne watched baseball games on TV and listened to them on the radio with his grandfather.

One Tuesday in 1981, they were taking in a game when Jim Bibby pitched a nearly-perfect game, allowing only one hit. His Pirates went on to defeat the Atlanta Braves, 5-0.

Osborne's granddad mentioned that Bibby used to pitch in Marion.

That remark surprised Osborne. "He was the first person to tell me about the Marion Mets."

Since then, he's collected enough material for a book,

but Osborne wonders just how many people would buy it.

Social media has helped him find former players to interview.

Osborne wanted to interview Larry Berra, one of Yogi Berra's sons. Larry played for the Marion Mets.

While Larry didn't share his dad's skills or talent for baseball, he did hit his first and only professional homerun in Marion.

Osborne typed Larry's name into the Facebook search bar. Among the results was a photo of another man pictured with Larry. Osborne reached out and in short order had Larry's name and number.

In the interview, he asked Larry if his dad, known for his quotable remarks, had any "Yogi-isms" about Marion. The answer was short: No.

Osborne's had good luck with cold calls too. He's been going through Marion Mets rosters, come across a unique name, typed it into a search engine, and gotten a phone number. He loves it when he shares his reason for calling and the voice on the other end says, "That was me."

His research even led Osborne to learning about the Marion Athletics, a team that moved to the community in 1955 from Welch, W.Va., to address an attendance problem.

Osborne celebrates "the thrill of the chase and finding a story."

His professional life has helped him hone those skills. He worked as a freelancer and staff member for newspapers early in his career. Osborne read newspapers throughout his childhood - "sports pages first."

Studying at Emory & Henry, a professor nudged him toward writing. "It just took that boost of confidence," he said, plus a good dose of curiosity.

For the last 17-and-a-half years, Osborne has written magazine and other articles as part of Radford University's public relations team.

Beyond his research, Osborne still loves to take in a baseball game. "There's something about the pace of baseball," he reflected. Plus, he noted, there's the music, hot dogs, seventh-inning stretch, and even the distinctiveness of each ballpark.

Osborne and his family love to take in regional games, including those in Bristol and Johnson City. And, he wants to visit more Major League ballparks, including the stadiums for the Pirates, Yankees, and Dodgers.

Still, his fascination lies with the Marion Mets, and he welcomes anyone who has a story to share about the team to connect with him.



STEPHANIE PORTER-NICHOLS, SMYTH COUNTY NEWS & MESSENGER

Chad Osborne has begun publishing his considerable research on the Marion Mets. He plans to unveil a special interview this week.

Canes coach highlights community

BY STEPHANIE PORTER-NICHOLS
Staff

Earlier this month, with paint brushes and rollers in their hands, about 40 members of the 'Canes football team were preparing for the coming season. They weren't on the Marion Senior High football field. They were on downtown sidewalks, helping prime and paint the exterior of Yummy Yummy.

Under the watchful eye of their new head football coach, Jack Ginn, they got the project, long-desired by Marion officials, done in about four hours.

From his arrival, Ginn instituted a new requirement for all the 'Canes football players: They must complete at least 10 hours of community service.

Ginn explained that the new rule has multiple benefits for the players and team.

First, he wants them to "learn to serve." The Richlands na-

There's More

The Hurricanes had their first taste of Friday night football this season with a trip to Fort Chiswell. See photos from that pre-season benefit game on Page B1.

STEPHANIE PORTER-NICHOLS/SMYTH COUNTY NEWS & MESSENGER

On Saturday, Aug. 13, about 40 members of the MSHS football team undertook a project for downtown Marion, priming and repainting the exterior of the Yummy Yummy Japanese restaurant, which sits on the busy intersection of U.S. 11 and Rt. 16, a gateway into the town.

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Canes

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tive described himself as a big believer that for teams to succeed the individual

players must take an attitude of serving the team. Good teams, he said, possess that quality.

Ginn also believes that service is a “way for the team to connect with our

community and our community to connect with us.” The athletes, the coach said, need and want the community to be involved

with their endeavors – to attend games and support fundraisers.

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Canes

From Page A3

Ginn believes the players are learning that can't be a one-way street. For the community to support them, they must be involved in the community.

A college football coach for 32 years, Ginn said he's walked in hundreds of schools and seen the good, bad and ugly. This idea of community service struck him as especially good. He credits two of his sons' coaches, Ben Burk and Duane Watson, of Allendale High School in Michigan.

Both of his sons, Ginn said, performed community service for their four years of high school. "To this day," he said, they're service-oriented people.

On the day Ginn arrived at his new Rural Retreat home from Michigan, several players helped unload the truck. Since then, they've also helped mulch and improve local parks and playgrounds, assisted a retired teacher with moving, supported a local goods drive for Kentucky flood victims, and updated the Japanese food restaurant's paint job.

At one practice, Ginn said he told the team that 10 or even 20 years from now they can take their family downtown, point to Yummy Yummy, and say, "I helped do that."

Ken Heath, Marion's community and economic development director,

explained that Ginn and the team got a project off the ground that he's been trying to accomplish for years.

Since at least 1998, Heath said, downtown beautification has been one of the Marion Downtown Revitalization Association's four guiding principles.

"We've offered facade grants and design assistance through Virginia Main Street since we first were accepted into the program," Heath said. At the corner of U.S. 11 and Rt. 16, the restaurant project was "a special one, because it's in such a prominent location."

For Heath, Ginn is a Godsend. He said, "I've tried organizing volunteers for years to get this done, but failed every time - until I met with Jack. His passion for our community, the kids, and instilling a strong work ethic is evident. He was looking for a project, and this seems to be a perfect fit."

With the building now freshly painted, Heath said, "Rachel Gibson at The Ford Studios will install colorful koi fish to pull it all together. It's just another way this wonderful community is coming together to grow."

With the volunteer work taking place when the football season is just a short time away, Ginn said adding community service to their schedules takes more commitment, which is what he wanted to see.

Coming Season

The 2022 MSHS football team boasts a roster of more than 50 players. Ginn plans to build on that foundation.

"I enjoy our team a lot... I do... have good kids," said Ginn. "It starts with people," the head coach said, noting that he has "good people" and he feels good about developing their talent.

He is trying to prepare them for the challenges ahead.

Ginn has told the team that the "toughest opponent we face is MSHS." The challenge for the team, he said, is not to beat ourselves, but "make the other team beat us...." He's confident the players will improve week to week.

With a grin, Ginn reflected, "Everybody loves us now. We're undefeated."

The making of a coach

Football and athletic training are Ginn's passions and have been for a long time.

"My hobby is football and physical development. That's what I enjoy," he said, and there was no beginning point for that fervor. "I was born that way," Ginn declared.

Sometimes others recognized that truth even before he did.

He enrolled in pre-med at Emory & Henry with the idea of becoming a veterinarian.

As he hit the midway

mark, Ginn called his mom to tell her he'd switched his major to PE.

At 57, he remembers her reply: "It's about time!"

Then and now, Ginn wants to be a role model like his high school coaches were. His parents divorced in the 1970s, before such breakups were common. "My coaches were so important," he said, and, to this day, some remain close friends.

Ginn acknowledged that everybody wants to win, and, he said, wins are great. However, the impact on the person is really the win, he said.

"Whatever the score is on Friday night," Ginn said, "I'm over it by Monday."

For him, the reward comes when he goes on social media and sees former players being good dads and successful citizens. "To know if I'm successful," he said, "come back in 10 years."

Fans hope Ginn, a former E&H player and coach, will help bring in more wins than last year's single 'Canes victory.

Ginn knows something about coming back from hard places.

Over the course of his career, he's served as an assistant coach at E&H and coached at Shepherd, Wartburg, NCAA Division II Grand Valley State, Division III North Carolina Wesleyan, where he earned a playoff victory.

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However, after three decades of collegiate coaching, Ginn was fired.

Then COVID-19 struck.

Ginn, who hadn't experienced such a termination, acknowledged, "I was scared." He asked himself questions such as "How is my son [who was then a high school senior] going to go to college?"

Ginn turned to his faith.

Then, he found his way to substitute teaching and volunteered to help coach at a local high school. He discovered something: "I loved it."

"I'm still learning," Ginn declared.

He gave significant credit

to his wife, Chilhowie native Sherri Davidson Ginn.

When the position at MSHS came open, the couple was ready to return to their native Southwest Virginia, where they could also be close to their daughter, Katherine, who teaches and coaches in Wytheville and lives in Marion.

Looking Ahead

As for the job so far, Ginn said, "I love it."

He's also enjoys working with teenagers. At 57, Ginn said, "I don't consider myself close to that [age]." He credits the players who are always young.

As head football coach, Ginn wears many hats that extend off the gridiron and

include servant tasks like doing laundry, mopping floors, helping paint the field, running the weight room, and organizing fundraisers.

"If I do it right," Ginn said, "being head coach is a full-time job."

In the long run, he hopes "the players experience successes and feel good about what they're involved in."

For himself, Ginn hopes in 20 years he's still here coaching football.

Should he retire or win the lottery, Ginn said he'll ask around to see "who could use some help coaching football."

This Friday, Ginn plans to be serving his team as they take on county rival Chilhowie at 7 p.m. at home.