

Lambley closes the book on half-century coaching career



Nathan Arneal
Editor

After years of molding young minds and bodies, after stops at several schools in Iowa and Nebraska, after starting two cross country programs from scratch, Fred Lambley decided to retire from coaching. He and wife Lois were ready to move on to the next phase of their lives.

The year was 1976. Lambley had already taught in six different school districts, coaching basketball, track and field and cross country along the way. But money was tight for a family of six trying to survive on a teacher's salary. The Lambleys decided it was time to try something else.

Lois had done some freelance work for the Albion and Norfolk newspapers. Fred had done some writing on the side as well, so when they saw that the North Bend Eagle was for sale, they took a chance.

The move also allowed them to get closer to their roots. Fred grew up as an only child in Tekamah, where he began seeing Lois (she finally said yes to a date on his third attempt) from nearby Craig during high school.

The Lambleys packed up the farm trucks and pickups they had borrowed from some of Fred's Albion students and made the move to North Bend in May 1976.

One of their first stops was in downtown North Bend to deliver some boxes to the Eagle office. It was there, tired, sweaty and dirty from moving, they first encountered the youth of North Bend when a handful of high school kids stopped to greet the newcomers.

"They just started taking to us like they'd known us all their lives," Fred Lambley said. "A lot of times people are kind of standoffish, especially to new people.

It just stuck in my mind, I thought, 'My gosh, how friendly are these kids?' That was a clue. That has stuck in my mind as much as anything I've experienced in North Bend. I've been places where kids don't do that."

By mid summer, Lambley had settled into the life of a newspaper man. His previous life – 13 years of teaching and coaching – began to fade into the rearview mirror.

Then one day late in the summer of '76, NBC superintendent Francis Masten walked into the Eagle office.

"So, I hear you're an English teacher," Masten casually remarked.

Lambley didn't know what Masten was getting at. "I used to be," he replied.

It just so happened that NBC had an English teacher tender an unexpected late-summer resignation, leaving the school scrambling to find a replacement before classes started. Masten asked Lambley if he would fill the teaching position.

Temporarily, of course. NBC would seek a full-time English teacher to take over for the '77-'78 school year, Masten said, if Lambley would agree to help out just for one year.

Fifty-one years. Fifty-one years of calling out splits on the back corner of the track. Fifty-one years of demonstrating how to drive your knee in the high jump. Fifty-one years of telling triple jumpers they need to work on lengthening their middle phase a bit.

During his 51-year high school coaching career, Fred Lambley has coached basketball, cross country and football, but track and field has been the one constant throughout the decades.

The final 37 years of that career occurred at North Bend Central, where his Tiger track squads were a model of consistency and success. During those

years, the NBC boys won just under half of the available East Husker Conference championships, claiming 16 titles and 11 runners-up.

His final team didn't win a conference championship this spring, but its surprising charge to second-place in a newly expanded 14-team EHC will be one Lambley remembers forever.

"I would have never thought we would get second in the conference this year," the coach said. "It's kind of like you wanted to pinch yourself, you were so proud of them. I don't think those kids realize what they accomplished. It's not like it's an eight-team conference anymore."

Much of Lambley's coaching philosophy was formed early on, with much of the credit going to three mentors.

Wes Shepard, a Nebraska High School Hall-of-Famer, was his basketball coach at Tekamah High School. In Shepard, Lambley first caught a glimpse of his future career as a high school sophomore.

"Wes Shepherd turned me on to the coaching profession," Lambley said. "He didn't do it on purpose. I just respected him as a coach. That's the guy who got me started."

After high school, Lambley ran track and cross country at Dana College for coach Darrell Zimmerman, who would later go on to enjoy hall-of-fame careers at Valparaiso and Pacific universities. If it was Shepard who persuaded Lambley to go into coaching, it was Zimmerman who convinced him it was the right path to follow.

While working on his masters degree in P.E. at Kearney State, Lambley was assigned as an adviser Charlie Foster, the legendary Lopers coach who was known as "the father of Nebraska cross country."

Needless to say, Lambley approved of his pairing with Foster.

"In summer school the last two summers out there," Lambley said, "about three nights out of five I'd go over to his house and try to learn something more than I was getting in the classroom. I was really blessed."

From these mentors Lambley

learned that every event and every athlete is important to a track team and should be treated as such.

"You have to have an understanding of where some of these kids are," Lambley said. "For some kids, a sixth-place medal or getting into the finals is a big deal. This goes back to Charlie Foster and Darrell Zimmerman. Those guys just drilled in me that every place is important."

Perhaps the most important advice Lambley received didn't come from a coach. It was one of his education professors at Dana College who asked him what he was going to major in and teach.

He was a P.E. major and would probably teach history, Lambley told her. After all, that's what all coaches did in the early '60s.

The professor rolled her eyes. Told him he was stereotyping himself, limiting his job prospects. So Lambley took the unusual step of being a coach that taught English, a subject he learned to love, especially the creative writing classes.

"That was a wise piece of advice," Lambley said. "I even had administrators when I'd compete for jobs, especially in the '60s and early '70s, they'd ask me, 'Why are you in English? Coaches don't do this.' I knew where they were coming from, but it opened doors for me where there weren't doors."

In 2001 Lambley reached the pinnacle, the ultimate goal for any high school coach, a state championship.

That Tiger team won NBC's sixth straight conference title, broke five school records at a single meet, and scored more points at the state track meet than any previous Class B track team in Nebraska history.

"They were so talented and they were so sure of themselves," Lambley said. "I went down to them before the (state meet) 1600-meter relay and I said, 'Don't do nothing stupid. Just pass the baton legally. Don't take any chances.' I remember Mark Richardson and Syd Hamilton saying, 'Don't worry.' They were acting like it was another day at

the office, but it wasn't another day."

Following that 2001 season, Lambley was named the Nebraska Coaches Association's track coach of the year. Following his 51st track season, he was a finalist for the 2013 national track coach of the year.

Lambley struggles to come up with reasons why his teams have been so successful over the years.

"I guess it's a pride (the athletes) have within themselves," he said. "I think we have good pride in our community. I'm proud to be coach here, and I've never been ashamed of being a coach here. I don't want the kids I coach to be ashamed of wearing the black and orange."

He says kids haven't changed too much in a half century, though he isn't a fan of athletes concentrating on just one sport.

"I'm very much against specialization," Lambley said. "I like to see kids go through all three sports. I think they learn different skills, and different social skills, too, communicating with different kinds of teammates."

When it comes down to it, Lambley said, coaching track is about cultivating potential.

"I believe there are so many kids who don't know what they can do," he said. "That's our job as a coach, to bring that out of them. Make them realize they can contribute. For the most part over my stretch of years at North Bend Central, I think we've done a pretty good job of trying to get that across."

Lambley, now 72, retired from teaching in 2000 but continued as NBC's boys track coach. While not being in the school building has made recruiting kids to come out for track a little more difficult, it also had its advantages. Lambley enjoys greeting his athletes with a clean slate every day after school.

"Maybe you had them in the classroom," he said, "and you just got done handing your star high jumper a 65 on an English test and he's not happy to come out and see you at 3:30 (at practice)."

This spring Lambley had a chance to watch a Dundy County-Stratton junior high track meet. His son Scott is the varsity track coach at DCS, and his granddaughter Madison is a budding distance star.

As he watched Madison race around the track in times that would have won the EHC varsity meet, Fred Lambley began to think about how fun it would be to watch her high school career and watch Scott coach. He knew that would be awfully difficult as the head track coach of North Bend Central.

He struggled with the thought of retiring all through May. At the state meet he asked several coaches for advice. At the national coaches' convention this summer in Des Moines, he did the same.

"I told them I've never wrestled with anything like this in my entire life," Lambley said. "I didn't think it'd be this hard to do."

All the coaches gave the same advice: go watch your kids and grandkids do their thing. A high school career is a narrow window. Don't miss it.

When he returned from the national convention in late June, his mind was made up.

On July 8, he informed the North Bend school board that he was retiring from coaching track and field, effective immediately.

Though he has coached his final track meet of a long, illustrious career, his legacy will be felt for decades to come. Eleven of his former Tiger athletes have become head track or cross country coaches, along with countless assistant coaches. North Bend is known as a track school.

Leaving the sport will be very tough for Lambley, but he wouldn't have it any other way.

"I suppose it's good that it's hard to give up," he said. "Otherwise, you probably don't care that much. The hardest part for me is that I love my North Bend kids."

See more online. We couldn't fit all the stories former athletes shared with us. Read more in the Eagle Web Log at northbendeagle.com.

Former athletes pay tribute

The best thing has been having his support, especially since I have been head coach. He is always one of the first people to offer congratulations if we had a good meet or would offer an ear if things didn't go as well as one would hope. He, coach (Rick) Watson, and their qualifiers came down to the state meet Friday this year even though they didn't compete. Coach Lambley said they came down to support the girls team. Those things have meant a great deal to me.

- Jeff Voss, NBC Class of '87, NBC girls track coach

In 2001 we were in a battle for the state championship with one race left, the 4x400m relay. As the clerk of the start was giving instructions, I glanced towards the fence to see Mr. Lambley talking to Mark Richardson, which was pretty customary all year. That day was a bit different. Mr. Lambley motioned for me to come over to talk to him. He explained to me the teams we needed to beat in order to win the championship, and offered some words of encouragement which he was well known for in his calm, collected manner. As I turned to walk away he stopped me and looked me straight in the eye and said, "Withuhn, we can't win this race if we don't run this race. I don't care if you're the last guy out of the blocks, let's make sure we give ourselves a chance. Good luck." That would turn out to be the only time in my four years that I could feel a sense of urgency or anxiousness in Mr. Lambley's voice.

- Chris Withuhn, '03, 8-time state medalist

I know certain coaches and programs even now who only coach the most talented kids and largely ignore the others, or they only work on the events they have talent in. That's not treating the sport or the kids with the respect they deserve. North Bend has been fortunate to have had Dad (and assistants) who coached all of us and all 17 events. That's why NBC just wore other schools out at track meets. We just kept hammering away, every event, even nickle-and-diming in those events we were weakest in.

- Bryce Lambley, '80, Fremont High track coach, son

Coach Lambley is the only head coach I would have in high school as a cross country, basketball, track athlete. He would be that second dad to me as he was for many of his student-athletes. Now entering my 24th year of teaching and coaching, I still to this day thank coach Lambley for the influence he had on me. From my first years at Bellevue West to now my years at Lincoln North Star, I still hear myself saying things to my athletes he said or wonder to myself, "What would have coach Lambley done in this situation?"

- Matt Musiel, '85, 1985 3200m relay state champion

It's easy to get excited about state medals and championships, but I remember his excitement and encouragement for me when I was a skinny, slow sophomore setting a (maybe non-scoring) PR early in the season. It caught me off-guard a bit early in my career because that's not something you see often enough in sports. That was obviously not the case with coach Lambley.

- Neil Hines, '02, 2007 Big 12 decathlon champion



The Lambley Coaching Tree

Former NBC athletes that ran for coach Lambley and went on to become head high school track and/or cross country coaches:

- Nathan Arneal, Columbus Scotus
- Brian Heese, Modesto, Calif.
- Kory Kavan, Lincoln Christian
- Jon Ladehoff, Sutton
- Bryce Lambley, Fremont
- Scott Lambley, Dundy Co-Stratton
- Matt Musiel, Lincoln North Star
- Todd Nott, Plattsmouth
- Steve Shannon, Wahoo
- Shannon Stenger, PLV South
- Jeff Voss, North Bend

District championships:

	1979	2001
Number of teams in the East Husker	1989	2002
	1993	2003
	1998	2005
	2000	2011

