

Angie Gioiosa

Long-distance pioneer ran all the way to the Hall of Fame

By NEIL RUDEL
Altoona Mirror

Almost anyone who has lived in Blair County over the past 40 years has seen Angie Gioiosa running along the back road to Bellwood.

"That was my course, 220, Pinecroft -- winter, spring, summer, autumn," Gioiosa said, "I know it like the back of my hand."

He ran it all the way to the Hall of Fame.

A Division II All-American at Slippery Rock in 1961, Gioiosa helped pioneer running in Altoona.

"In the late 1950s and early '60s, you were really an odd person if you ran outside," fellow runner Dick Gottshall, who will present Gioiosa for induction, said. "So many people start to exercise and then stop. Angie was the first long-distance runner who continuously ran without stopping."

Not only was the sport taxing physically, but there were social barriers to pass. Gioiosa took up the sport before people understood it, before motorists respected it, before it was fashionable.

"I actually ran in dungarees," he said. "If people would see you running in shorts, they'd beep and holler at you, maybe throw things at you. It was tough. Even when wearing shorts became accepted, I was still wearing kackis."

Gioiosa proved you didn't need a ball to become a great athlete and, as is the case with many recreation sports, athletes often get better with age.

He was a member of Altoona's PIAA cross country championship team in 1954 and ran in the state tournament his senior year. But he was just getting warmed up as a reserve on both squads.

"I was just a spear-carrier," he said.

He credits local runner Eddie Ammerman and high school coach Paul Adams for getting him interested.

"I knew Eddie, and Paul was the guy that lit the Bunsen burner," Gioiosa said. "He was very unique, very tough -- old school, trained under (1990 inductee) Dick Bartholomew."

Gioiosa graduated from Altoona in 1956 and



Angie likes to kick up his heels while assisting the Altoona High School track team.

during a three-year stint in the Navy, he hand-wrote letters trying to get schools interested. Slippery Rock welcomed him.

There, he was inspired by former teammate Dick Shirey, a four-time All-American, and coach Campbell Snowberger.

"Slippery Rock is where it started to come together for me," Gioiosa said. "The interest started in Altoona, but it started to transpire at Slippery Rock."

Once he returned here, Gioiosa began running with Gottshall and the likes of Bob Jones, Irv Dietrich, Ralph Trenger, Charlie Harter and Bill Braven.

"The YMCA race started in 1973," Gioiosa said. "That got me back into it."

Gioiosa peaked at age 37, when he won the John F. Kennedy 50-mile run in Hagerstown, MD. Each year since 1963, the Cumberland Valley Athletic Club has hosted the JFK, known as America's oldest ultramarathon.

An ultramarathon is any organized footrace extending beyond the standard marathon running distance of 42 kilometers, 195 meters (26 miles, 385 yards). Ultra races typically begin at 50 kilometers and can extend to enormous distances. There is no limit. Gioiosa won the race in 1975, becoming its oldest winner. He completed the course in 6:27.58. There were 623 starters and 344 finishers.

He was followed into the bathroom by a televi-

sion cameraman searching for some footage and reaction.

"The guy asked me how I did it," Gioiosa said.

"I was so tired, all I could think to tell him was: "Spaghetti and Gennesee."

Gioiosa, known also for his one-liners, "Angieisms," Gottshall calls them, laughs at the memory.

In the '60s, there were very few marathons nationally besides Boston, but after Frank Shorter won the Olympic gold medal in 1972, "that set off an interest in distance running and now every little hamlet had a race," Gioiosa said. "Interest just exploded."

Gioiosa, who began coaching the Altoona High School cross country team and assisting with the track team in the mid-60s, had built himself up to about 100 miles of training per week. Still, he had no idea he could even finish the JFK, let alone win it.

"I ran it as a lark," he said. "There was a guy in Lakemont, named Miller, who had run in it and he told me about it. I went down just to run and I just fell in behind some guys and the pace seemed slow, and all of a sudden, I'm in the lead."

Gioiosa was surprised to have a 15-minute lead with eight miles left.

"I was getting delirious," he said. "I was weaving. I remember finishing that baby, and it was like my 15 minutes of fame."

Sports Illustrated called and marked the achievement in its Faces in the Crowd section. Gioiosa returned the following year and finished third. He has competed in more than 50 marathons throughout the nation, including Boston 10 times and won his age division in Pittsburgh in 1991.

"Running is the only sport where you can warm up with the best in the world," Gioiosa said.

That included when Bill Rodgers came to Altoona for the July 4th YMCA race in 1979. Gioiosa and Gottshall ran the course with him the night before.

Gioiosa's resume and passion for running have long been an AAHS track asset.

"Angie's been the epitome of running here," AAHS track coach Tom Musselman said. "There's not a race he hasn't been to, a story he doesn't know. He's just a wealth of information for our high school athletes. We refuse to allow him to

quit. He understands the sport better than anyone else I know."



Angie often still runs up to six miles per day.

At the same time, Gottshall said, "Angie was never one to use personal success to motivate his students."

Dave Patterson, a '69 Altoona grad, became Gioiosa's most accomplished protege. Patterson's career includes a first-place finish in the 1981 Philadelphia Marathon, a third at the Los Angeles Marathon and three top 20 finishes at Boston.

"Angie was the first person I knew who was a good runner," Patterson said. "I used to think, if I could only run as fast as Angie. And the neatest thing about Angie is he did a lot of things in running, but he never wanted to talk about himself. He always wanted to talk about how you were doing."

Gioiosa was stricken with cancer in 1987 and, nearly a half-dozen operations were used to remove most of his stomach. Two years ago, he was running over the 8th Street Bridge and got a cramp.

"I thought I was having a heart attack," he said.

It turned out to be an infection that nearly cost him his life. He underwent surgery at Presbyterian Hospital in Pittsburgh and returns twice annually for checkups. It hasn't curtailed his routine.

"I just jog now," he said. "I go out maybe 5-6 miles every other day, maybe every day depending on how I feel. I'm still addicted to physical exercise."

An avid sports fan who could often be seen keeping score at high school basketball games while seated by himself in the corner of some gym, Gioiosa has watched, taught or coached many of the greats that have come through Blair County. All the others he heard about from his late, great friend, Bob Seitz.

He knows his induction will stir nostalgia.

"This means a lot," he said. "It's the highlight of my life, and that's where the emotion comes in. The first thing I thought about were my grandparents, who came here from Italy, and my dad, Mike, who died in 1991."

Gioiosa lives with his mother, Elizabeth.

"I can't explain it," he said.

"I'm not married, I don't have any kids. To me, this is about the best I could do."

Gioiosa bio

Sport: Running.

High school: Altoona, 1956.

College: Slippery Rock.

Hall of Fame achievement:
Won the Cumberland Valley Track Club's 50-mile JFK race in 1975, beating more than 600 starters.

Current residence: Altoona.