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TOP STORY

## Into the Hall: Jason Bodnar

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Submitted photo

Laurel Highlands graduate Jason Bodnar was an All-American cross country runner at Pitt, a member of the U.S. National Cross Country team at the 1998 World Championships, and winner of the Asheville Marathon in Asheville, N.C., in 2013 among many other accomplishments.

Submitted photo

Jason Bodnar has collected many medals and trophies over the years thanks to his outstanding running career.

Despite garnering all those shiny objects, one of his most prized possessions is a used shirt he collected from a friend for winning a race back when he was in grade school.

Bodnar, a 1988 Laurel Highlands graduate, is part of the 2020-2021 class of inductees for the Fayette County Sports Hall of Fame. The inductees and representatives will be recognized at a Hall of Fame Golf outing/Luncheon/Social starting at 9 a.m. on June 25 at Pleasant Valley Golf Club in Connellsville.

Bodnar's running career includes winning WPIAL track & field gold medals in the 1,600 and 3,200 and in cross country, earning All-American honors at Pitt, securing a spot on the U.S. National Cross Country team in the 1998 World Championships, running in six Boston Marathons and winning the 2013 Asheville Marathon in Asheville, North Carolina.

Bodnar recalls with fondness a running victory well before any of those accomplishments.

"I was running sixth-grade track and we didn't have a track at Laurel Highlands," said Bodnar who spoke recently about his induction on George Von Benko's Sports Line Talk Show on WMBS Radio. "We'd go out to Uniontown and run this meet where all the great schools came together.

"I wanted to run the 400 and there were some really good 400 runners. There was a guy named Rick Puskar who was in high school. He was a family friend. He had a Laurel Highlands undergrad basketball shirt. He told me there was no way I was going to win that 400."

Bodnar disagreed with his friend.

“That day I ended up winning that race and when I was on the bus I was hanging out the window and I said, ‘I told you,’ and he took that shirt off, to his word, and he threw me that Laurel Highlands undergrad tank top.

“I still wear it. When I want motivation with my running, whether it was at Pitt, whether it was getting ready for the state meet in high school ... I actually took it to Morocco with me when I was on the U.S. National team and I ran with it.

“It meant a lot to me growing up, having these guys to look up to and motivation. I still keep in touch with Rick on Facebook.”

Bodnar delved into several other sports growing up but eventually found his calling in running.

“Just like most of the guys where we come from, we all wanted to be a Pittsburgh Steeler or a Pittsburgh Pirate,” Bodnar said. “We had great teams at Laurel Highlands, Uniontown and Connellsville. I started out playing baseball and football at Marshall (Elementary) and baseball in the (R.W.) Clark Little League.

“I think I always gravitated towards running. I loved those sports and I wanted to be real good. I can remember my dad when I was growing up, he’d hit me fly balls and he’d say ‘Get on your horse!’ And I’d take off. The ones I liked best were the ones I really had to sprint after to catch.

“A little later on when I was playing football at Marshall we had a quarterback named Scott DeBerry, who’s now the baseball coach, they’re having some good success I know at Laurel Highlands. Scott would just throw a long bomb out there and there was just nothing better than running under a Scott DeBerry pass.

“At practice when we weren’t doing things right they’d make us run a lap for punishment. For me that wasn’t punishment. I’d try to run that lap as fast as I could.”

Running was a sport Bodnar always admired.

“The Fayette County 10K used to leave Fayette Campus, came right past my house and I would sit out there and I loved seeing it,” Bodnar said.

An injury actually helped push Bodnar away from other sports to running.

“Ultimately I broke my arm playing football, bad,” Bodnar recalled. “I was always a big competitor. There’s a picture right after I broke my arm, I had a black eye because I got kicked in the face trying to make a tackle.

“It was pretty bad. I couldn’t really throw a baseball or shoot a basketball after that. So I started running and it went real good for me.”

Did it ever.

Bodnar didn’t take to competitive running instantly, however.

“I remember going to run with Eddie Filcheck, and Jerry and Roger Maher and Dean Hatcher the first time I ever went to run,” Bodnar said. “We went out along South Union Township Road out to Heritage Hills. Anybody from there knows, they probably cussed at a few runners for holding them up because we’d run along there all the time.

“I had to walk back. I didn’t come back and train with those guys after that. I was so sore the next day, I said these guys are crazy. They’re out here running and running hard.”

Another member of the Fayette County Sports Hall of Fame, Joe Thomas, came to Bodnar’s rescue.

“We used to go up to Craig School to play basketball,” Bodnar explained. “We used to go there and we’d walk up to Morgantown Road and get a Slushy or something, and here comes Joe in that Coke truck, and anybody that knows Joe, he says ‘Hey Turkey’ in that high voice, ‘Where you been?’ I said you guys are crazy.

“He came and got me and brought me back. I’m glad he did.”

Bodnar credits Thomas for much of his running success.

“Joe is like family to me,” Bodnar said. “We spent a lot of time together running, him holding the watch. He’s a big part of who I am to this day. I just love Joe to death.”

Bodnar continued to push himself in the sport.

“A year later I was running with Don Norman and Brent Hawkins and Bobby Costello and some of the other greats, and I had to walk back,” Bodnar said. “I just kept on hammering. I wanted to be good.

“I didn’t give up. I kept trying to get better.”

Bodnar excelled for the Mustangs although he has one regret. His quest to win a PIAA cross country championship his senior year was derailed by an untimely illness and he wound up not placing.

“I’m still sick about it,” Bodnar said. “You don’t have that many chances to win championships. Man, I really hated for that one to go. But that’s life.”

When it came to college, Bodnar had options and he eventually narrowed it down to either Penn State or Pitt.

“At the time Penn State was real good,” said Bodnar, who was also receiving interest from Ivy League schools. Then yet another member of the Fayette County Sports Hall of Fame altered his path.

“John Woodruff, who is our all-time greatest Fayette County alum probably, won a gold medal,” Bodnar said. “I got to spend time with John at the John Woodruff 5K. Everyone knows his story but when you got to sit down and talk to him just as a human, he just made you feel better to be alive.

“He was a Pitt guy and I remember when I was a junior he said, ‘You need to really look at Pitt.’ At the time Penn State was winning national championships and that’s where kind of all the Western Pa. kids went.”

Pitt coach Jim Lear then stepped in and gave Bodnar a memorial pitch to become a Panther.

“Coach Lear came to the house and he said Penn State and (coach) Harry Grove is making a living out of taking tough Western Pennsylvania kids and winning national championships. Let’s keep you guys at home,” Bodnar said. “I really fell for that. I think I was a better racer than I was a workout guy because when I put on that Pitt singlet I felt like I got a lot of energy there.”

Bodnar qualified for the NCAA Cross Country Championships at Pitt and continued his rise after graduating in 1992. Bodnar attended dental school in Florida and then concentrated on distance events.

Bodnar ran in the Olympic Trial Marathon in 1996 and 2000. In addition to his six Boston Marathons, he's run in multiple Pittsburgh Marathons and also marathons in Chicago and New York.

"I had good genetics," Bodnar pointed out. "That's where it all started. My dad worked hard with me. We used to spend endless hours playing basketball, baseball, him getting me out the door to run."

Bodnar also commended his mom for her part in his success.

"Anybody that knows my mom knows she likes a winner," Bodnar said. "If I ever struck out or missed a foul shot or ran the third lap slow in the mile, I heard about it."

The success Fayette County high schools had in multiple sports while he was growing up was another inspiration for Bodnar.

"Going back from when I was a kid and watching the Pirates, Steelers, Penguins, I still remember driving through the Liberty tubes when Uniontown won the WPIAL (1981 boys basketball) title then the state title, everybody honking the horn.

"To me it was normal to see people win, win state championships, John Woodruff would be around, Johnny Lujack won the Heisman Trophy ... growing up, winning and trying to do your best at least or trying to reach the pinnacle was just normal. To us, everybody was getting success. I was there to see everyone working, whether it was in basketball, whether it was in football, the guys were putting in the work. We wanted to get that success, too."

Bodnar, who is now 50, has never forgotten his roots.

"It means a lot to me," Bodnar said of his Hall of Fame induction. "I'd be remiss if I didn't say how proud I am to be from Fayette County. There's not a place I go that I don't tell people that I'm from Uniontown.

"As a matter of fact they're probably sick of hearing about it even here where I live now in Western North Carolina. I'm real proud of here, too, but I never let them forget where I'm from."