

William J. Bowerman

Oregon '33 • Oxford Cup Roll No. 068

In 1964, William J. (Bill) Bowerman, *Oregon '33* entered into a handshake agreement with Phil Knight, a runner he had coached in the 1950s, to start an athletic footwear distribution company called Blue Ribbon Sports, which was to become Nike, Inc.. Knight managed the business end of the partnership, while Bowerman experimented with improvements in athletic footwear design.

His design ideas led to the creation of a running shoe in 1966 that would ultimately be named “Cortez” in 1968, which quickly became a top-seller and remains one of Nike’s most iconic footwear designs. Bowerman’s design ideas were incorporated into many Nike shoes, but he is best known for ruining his wife’s waffle iron in 1970 or 1971, experimenting with the idea of using waffle-ironed rubber ripples to create a new sole for footwear that would provide increased traction and be lightweight.

Bowerman’s design inspiration led to the introduction of the so-called “Moon Shoe” in 1972, so named because the waffle tread was said to resemble the footprints left by astronauts on the moon. Further refinement resulted in the “Waffle Trainer” in 1974, which helped fuel the explosive growth of



Blue Ribbon Sports/Nike, and which helped athletes worldwide to achieve maximum performances.

His obsession with shaving weight off his athletes’ running shoes was legendary. He believed that custom-made shoes would weigh less on the feet of his runners and cut down on blisters, as well as reduce the overall drag on their energy for every ounce he could remove from the shoe. Today, Nike’s headquarters is located on Bowerman Drive in homage to the company’s co-founder.

After graduation from the University of Oregon, Bowerman was set to teach school for two years, and then attend medical school. He taught biology while coaching football and basketball in Portland and Medford. His track teams at Medford High School won numerous state championships and developed many outstanding young men.

Bowerman enlisted in the United States Army in the days following the Pearl Harbor attack, and his legendary Tenth Mountain Division was assigned to Naples, Italy. He negotiated a stand-down of German forces near the Brenner Pass in Italy. Bowerman was awarded a total of four Bronze Stars and a Silver Star.

After the war, Bowerman returned to his position at Medford High School. The family then moved to Eugene, Oregon, where his “hero,” Bill Hayward, asked him to return to the University of Oregon in 1948. Bowerman’s “Track Men of Oregon” won 24 NCAA individual titles (with wins in 15 of the 19 events contested) and four NCAA team crowns (1962, 1964, 1965 and 1970) and posted 16 top-10 NCAA finishes in 24 years as head coach. His teams also boasted 33 Olympians, 38 conference champions and 64 All-Americans. Bowerman always considered himself a “teacher” rather than a “coach.”

At the dual track meet level, Oregon posted a 114-20 record and went undefeated in 10 seasons. In addition, Bowerman coached the world record setting 4-mile relay team in 1962. Among athletes that he coached was the legendary Steve Prefontaine.

Bowerman created a training program for adjusting athletes to the high altitude they would experience at the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games. He was the 1972 Munich Olympic Track and Field head coach, and coached members of teams from Norway, Canada, Australia and the United States.

During a trip to New Zealand in 1962, Bowerman was introduced to the concept of jogging as a fitness routine through a jogging club organized by his friend and coaching colleague Arthur Lydiard. He brought this concept back to the United States, and began to write articles and books about jogging. Bowerman also created a jogging program in Eugene that became a national model for fitness programs. “A Jogger’s Manual,” a three-page guide, was published shortly after he returned from New Zealand.

In 1966, along with cardiologist W.E. Harris, Bowerman published a 90-page book entitled *Jogging*. Short and to the point, the book sold more than a million copies and was credited with igniting the jogging phenomenon in the USA. To this day, jogging remains a popular form of exercise for men and women of all ages.

In 1971, Bowerman stepped back from day-to-day coaching activities to spearhead the fundraising for the renovation of Hayward Field grandstands before the 1972 Olympic Trials.

Bowerman is a member of the National Distance Running Hall of Fame, the USA Track and Field Hall of Fame, the Oregon Sports Hall of Fame and Oregon’s Athletic Hall of Fame. He passed away in 1999, at the age of 88. Bill and his wife Barbara have three sons: Jon, Thomas and William J. (Jay) Jr., *Oregon* ’65.