



Photos by Dave Thomas

# BELMONT PLATEAU: KEEPING THE "FIELD OF" DREAMS ALIVE

BY DIANE MCMANUS

The scene is a typical race on Belmont Plateau. Uniforms fan out across the "outside mile" like a moving rainbow. The bodies wrapped in these uniforms change from year to year, but the ritual is repeated, this celebration of autumn, of running, of tradition. Belmont Plateau, with its mix of monster hills and long grassy stretches and sharp turns has made and broken the dreams of generations of runners. Cross-country running is life at its bittersweet fullest, lived to the hilt. It captures the raw joy of victory, the heartbreak of falling short—or simply of falling on the jagged rocks of hills with such vividly descriptive names as Parachute and—in earlier days—Surekill. If you want to be reminded of why you run, this is the place to go: the hurt and the joy so intimately mixed into a riot of fall color, during a season vivid with hope and pain and passion.

Dave Thomas, founder and director of the nonprofit organization, Philadelphia Athletic Charities, understands the pull of this place and is an ardent student of its history. He has researched countless microfilms to trace its past and read the stories of the athletic legends who have run its hills. But this is not just a research project.

Thomas's pursuit is personal and it involves more than learning about the past—although he is working on a book about the history of cross-country running on Belmont Plateau. It taps into his own memories of running for LaSalle and Temple, of many practice and competition hours spent negotiating the hills and woods on the Plateau, learning them by

heart, and pouring his heart into countless races. And it involves his longtime mentor and coach, Jack St. Clair. Known to his runners as the Saint, St. Clair served as Temple's head cross-country coach from 1967 to 1983 and, with former Penn Relays Director Jim Tuppény, had a hand in designing the old college course—the "classic 5" now no longer used—that demanded of athletes agility and courage as well as speed.

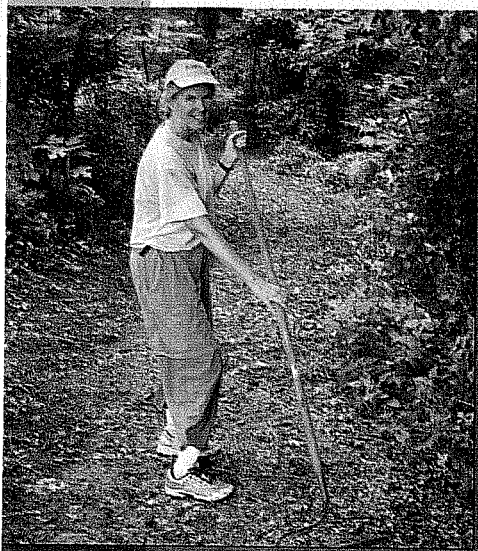
For this reason, Thomas's project is as much about shaping the present and future of Belmont Plateau as learning and writing about its past.

Thomas wants to resurrect the "classic" course, use it for college racing, and possibly a regional or national championship. Over this course, such Olympians as Marty Liquori, Eamon Coghlan, and Sydney Maree raced.

The more recent college course adopted in the 1990s—shortened slightly to accommodate the now standard 8k length and to make it faster—Thomas believes, is "less challenging, too easy." While it isn't exactly a walk in the park, it has been shorn of Surekill as well as other of its more difficult sections. To Thomas, cross-country courses in general have become glorified lawns, their surfaces groomed for speed but no longer a test of heart.

It is time, in Thomas's view, to bring back the challenge. And he is not afraid to face his nemesis, poison ivy, to do so. "I'm sensitive to the stuff," he says.

Even so, to accomplish his purpose, he obtained a permit from Fairmount Park and recruited volunteers to assist him in his



"Belmont Plateau Restoration Project" on August 23, publicizing the event through flyers, a Facebook page, and his own website, [www.gopacsports.com](http://www.gopacsports.com). Although he had hoped as a result for about 25-30 volunteers, the ten who appeared—including Dave and Marie Thomas—made up in energy what they lacked in numbers, fully prepared to dedicate their morning to the project.

Fairmount Park employee Jason Mifflin, for instance, took time out of his vacation to provide truck, tools, trash bags, and muscle. He was joined by a crew consisting in large part of Temple alumni who had run for St. Clair and who were as committed to restoring their mentor's course as was Thomas.

Michael McSweeney, the senior member of this volunteer corps, attended Temple in St. Clair's early days as a coach there. Although he no longer runs, St. Clair and his family remained "a big part of my life," McSweeney said. He has remained a friend of the St. Clair family and thus, "anything that comes up with his name, I try to make it."

For him, it offered a chance not only to give something back to the family but also to meet new people, make new friends. The day also afforded St. Clair's protégées with a chance to trade stories and laughs about their coach—a chance, said volunteer Kyle Mecklenborg, to "bond with other runners"—while threading their way down Surekill with clippers, rakes, and saws, widening what had narrowed into barely a single-track trail, so that it could once again accommodate two or three runners abreast.

The day proved productive, with all but about seventy yards of the quarter mile trail cleared.

"The best part of this," reports Chuck Shields, Thomas's team-mate in their Temple days, and treasurer of the Greater Philadelphia Track Club founded by Thomas, "was realizing how successful a determined group of people can be once they are brought together. It just takes someone to spark the process. And that was Dave. I would not have guessed we would have cleared that much in two and a half hours."

And Thomas continues to be that spark. On September 15, the university held a "Day of Service," canceling classes and providing students and faculty the chance to participate in a variety of community service projects. On that day, Thomas and members of his cross-country team converged on Belmont Plateau for more trail clearing, with the public showing up with an outpouring of support.

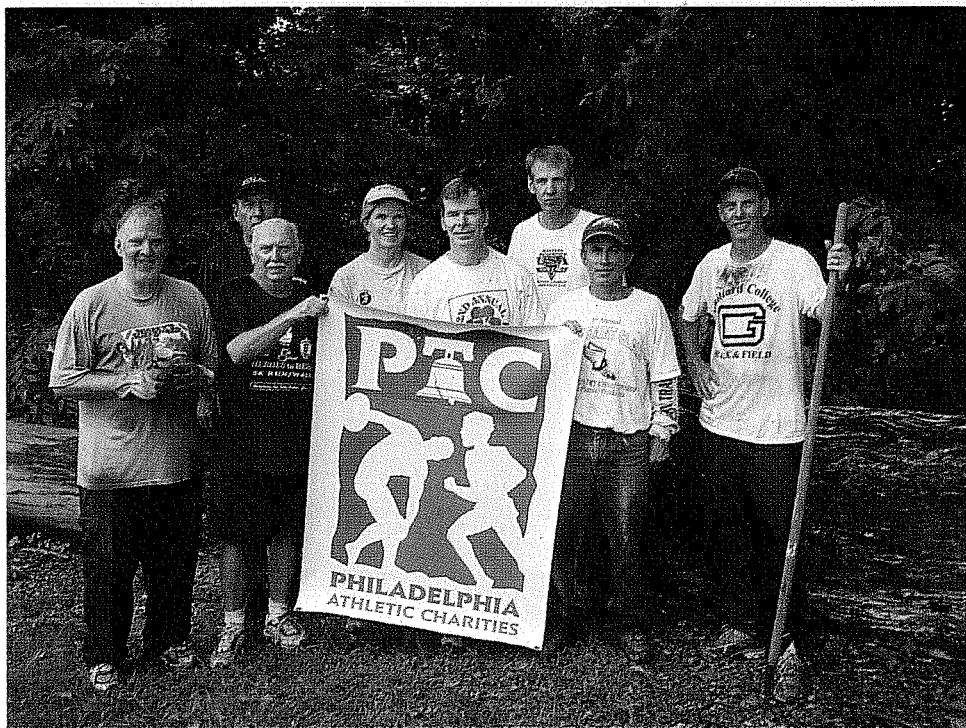
His immediate goal is to have the course ready for the second annual Jack St. Clair Memorial Cross-Country Race on September 27 (Ed. Note – By the time this issue hits streets, the event will have already happened in outstanding fashion). This race is part of a new championship series of cross-country races Thomas set up with the Mid-Atlantic USA Track and Field. Although USATF has had an off-road Grand Prix series that includes some cross-

country events, Thomas wants to "set cross-country racing apart from trail racing," said Fred Kenney, co-founder with Thomas of Fast Cat Sports, a race timing service.

Over the longer term, Thomas plans to submit a proposal at his next coaches' conference meeting in October to use the classic course for future college meets, and also, he hopes, for open regional and national championships as it had been in the past—most notably in 1976, when it was the site of the AAU National Championships. Perhaps it will once again host Olympians, but it could also offer generations of future college and elite runners the opportunity to break the course record of 24:43 set by Penn runner Dave Merrick in 1975 and unbroken ever since.

But even if no course record is set, restoring a classic race course may be akin to restoring a work of art—resurrecting breaths, voices, and memories, while creating new ones—a project well worth the risk of poison ivy and sore muscles.

For more information and/or to volunteer, readers can contact Dave Thomas via e-mail at [thomasd611@yahoo.com](mailto:thomasd611@yahoo.com) or visit his website, [www.gopacsports.com](http://www.gopacsports.com), where they will find a detailed look at Belmont Plateau history.



About the Author: Diane McManus has spent her life pursuing challenges and passions—academic, literary, and athletic. Obtaining a Ph.D. in English (at Temple) prepared her to teach the subject while providing excellent preparation for marathon training: the need to set a long-term goal and keep an eye on it while enjoying the journey there. Diane has learned too that her favorite sports—running and swimming—have a way of sparking the creative process. She has run, and often written about many, races of varying distances from the 100 yard dash to the marathon. You may reach her at [dpmcmanus50@gmail.com](mailto:dpmcmanus50@gmail.com) or leave comments on her blog, <http://initforthelongrun.blogspot.com>.