

Janke a driving force in track, cross country

GOING THE DISTANCE



Charlie Janke was a longtime track and cross country coach at Jackson High School.

The Charlie Janke file

- Age: 67
- Family: Wife, Jan; daughter, Jennifer.
- High school: Detroit Redford
- College: Central Michigan
- Teaching career: Detroit Redford (1958-59); Southfield (1959-64); Milford (1964-66); Jackson (1966-88), physical education and social studies.
- Head coaching career: Southfield track (1962-64); Milford track and cross country (1964-66); Jackson track (1966-90); Jackson cross country (1966-2002).
- Honors: Michigan High School Coaches Hall of Fame; Michigan Interscholastic Track Coaches Association Chuck Sweeney Award for long-standing and outstanding service to track; MITCA and Michigan High School Coaches Association coach of the year in 1989.

As spectators crowded the route of approaching runners at the J. Chris Jensen Memorial cross country meet this fall, a voice from behind them barked through a bull horn:

"Back away from the line! Give the runners room!"

For those who had been to meets at Sharp Park before, it was a familiar voice. For those who knew Charles Janke was no longer the cross country coach at Jackson High School, it was maybe a comforting voice, perhaps bringing a knowing smile. Charlie Janke was still at it.

He might have gotten out of coaching, but it was going to take more than that to keep him from being involved in the high school sports that he loved so much. A man who cared so deeply about track and field and cross country and the kids who competed in them, who invested so much of himself in many different endeavors for their betterment, was not about to quit cold turkey.

Janke's devotion to high school athletes, and the leadership role he took in developing track and field and cross country not only in Jackson but in the state, have earned him the 25th Al Cotton Award. The award, named for a former Citizen Patriot sports editor, is presented annually by the newspaper's sports staff to an individual whose contributions have made Jackson "a better place to play."

In his 37 years at Jackson High School, Janke was a distinguished figure on the area's high school running scene. From coaching numerous all-state athletes at his own school to assisting those from other schools, from launching events to making sure they ran smoothly, from mentoring other coaches to inspiring many of his athletes to enter the profession, Janke left a mark that will be felt for a long time.

He'd be on the first guy, the 15th guy, anybody who wasn't doing as well as they could. He didn't play favorites."

— Jim Martin, all-state cross country runner at Jackson.

One does not need to talk to many of Janke's athletes or listen very long to get a clear picture of the type of coach he was. He was intense. He was in charge. He demanded respect and he expected the best, and he received a huge measure of both from those who followed his regimen.

"Any athlete who set their mind to succeed and followed the Janke plan would get to where they wanted to go," said Brian Olsen, a state champion in track under Janke and now Jackson's cross country coach. "His goal as a coach was to get the best out of the athlete. He talked about being a 'self-champion,' meaning any athlete, depending on their ability, should be the best they can be. That was what he wanted out of us."

Former runners acknowledge that it was not easy being a member of a Janke team. But the legions of those who succeeded in high school and the world beyond say it was worth it.

"He'd do anything for you," Martin said. "He cared about you as a person. If you stuck with him, he'd stick with you. He talked about giving your best every time out there, and he sure did."

Martin, cross country coach at Sault Ste. Marie High School, is among the numerous Janke athletes who have gone into teaching and coaching. Many of them cite his influence in their career choice.

"You emulate the ones you truly respect," Martin said. "He had a passion for the sport, and it was contagious. He was a good role model, and a father figure for a lot of us. The more I get into teaching and coaching, the more I appreciate him."

Of course, some did not appreciate Janke's coaching methods.

"Charlie had a set of rules that did not allow for deviation," said Wayne McDonald, former cross country and track coach at Northwest High School and longtime colleague of Janke's. "I've seen him with teams he could have won the state with, but there were kids who didn't buy in, and he let them go. He always said that in the end, you're much better off with the kids who want to follow the rules and the training program."

Janke does not quarrel with the assessment of him as a demanding coach.

"My high school coaches were hard-nosed guys," Janke said. "They were

darn good coaches. I evolved from that."

Olsen, an assistant coach for several years under Janke, said little changed when he took over the cross country program this fall — a season in which his daughter, Kristina, placed fourth in the Division I state meet as a sophomore.

"He brought me along to be the best I could be," Olsen said. "I believe in his philosophy. I can use my daughter as another example."

If the coaching style Janke brought to track and cross country was reminiscent of a football coach, that was no coincidence. He started his career coaching football before discovering the distance runners on his track team were not coming out of the cross country season in proper shape.

"I thought, if we're going to have a track program, I need to get involved with cross country," Janke said.

Olsen said he was responsible for Janke still being involved at some meets this year.

"He didn't volunteer his services unless I asked him," Olsen said. "He wanted to give me my own autonomy at Sharp Park. He thought if he was there, people would go to him instead of me."

Charlie Janke on...

■ ... **MIS staff at the state meet:** "Those guys out there are phenomenal. What they do is amazing. There's no place you could duplicate what those guys do for us and what's available to us out there."

■ ... **Running cross country meets without a full team:** "We never had a lot of kids. We had a lot of darn good ones. If kids weren't ready for an invitational meet, I wouldn't take them. I don't like to throw a kid into something he can't handle. But who cares early in the season? They only keep score in two or three meets that count at the end of the year, and you have to be ready for those meets. Everything before that is practice."

■ ... **Coming to Jackson:** "I had other places I was looking at, and I just fell in love with Jackson High School. It was very impressive. I did the interview and I thought, wow, this is where I want to go."

■ ... **Coaching for 45 years:** "I love coaching. I was lucky to be able to do it. I had the best assistant coaches you could imagine. I was blessed all my years at Jackson High School to have great assistant coaches. They were people who didn't mind going the extra mile, donating their time, their money to help kids."

■ ... **His goal as coach:** "We always worked hard on trying to get kids to love what they were doing. And to say they had a great experience at Jackson High School."

■ ... **Cross country at Sharp Park:** "Oh, Sharp Park is special. The history of cross country in that park is phenomenal. And it's such a beautiful park. The teams that come to Jackson love to run at Sharp Park. And it's a fantastic special course."

team," Woolsey said, "Charlie's has always been what will be the lasting impact on the sport."

"There were times the Jensen banquet could have folded up. Charlie was not going to let it happen." — Jerry Reis.

For lasting impact, consider the Jensen meet.

Just a few years after arriving in Jackson, Janke saw the need for a countywide cross country meet, one that could include runners from the largest schools to the smallest. He was among a group who came up with the idea to have the meet be an individual event, with no team scoring.

"We wanted to have something that would allow every kid the opportunity to have some real success," Janke said.

The meet was inaugurated in 1969 and was run this year for the 35th time. Held on the Monday before the state meet, it is a highlight of the season for county runners.

Less than a month before the first meet, Jensen — the long-time Jackson track and cross country coach who Janke replaced — died of a heart attack, and the meet was dedicated to him.

A large part of the Jensen is the banquet held the following week to honor the county's top athletes and coaches. The county coach of the year awards presented at the banquet are named in Janke's honor. In addition to his work on the meet, Janke helped the banquet survive from early years when there was little interest to what is now an event that brings the cross country community together to the tune of 600-plus people each year.

"He put a lot of emphasis on coaches getting their people to come, even if they weren't getting an award," Reis said.

"The indoor meet was a monumental task that a lot of people would have given up on." — Reis.

Between cross country and track seasons, Janke did not relax.

When he started coaching, high school indoor track in Michigan meant competing in costly, nationally sanctioned meets. He thought there should be more for those not involved in a winter sport.

"We wanted to come up with a way that it wouldn't cost a kid \$15 to go run in a track meet," Janke said.

Janke served on the MITCA board during its formative years, including a stint as president. Some of the group's first coaching clinics were held in Jackson. Janke is highly regarded by his fellow coaches for his clinic presentations.

In the early 1970s, Janke took the lead in organizing indoor meets through MITCA. The plan called for coaches to organize track clubs and then charge athletes \$1 to compete in a meet.

There were meets at the University of Michigan and Eastern Michigan University the first year.

"Then I just started calling colleges and asking if they were

interested in hosting a meet," Janke said.

College track coaches eager to bring kids to campus and make some money for their programs latched on. Eventually a full schedule of indoor meets, including a state championship, was in place. Today, high school athletes have their choice of indoor meets all over the state, sometimes four or five per week, in what is known as the Michigan Indoor Track Series.

"He knew that was going to be good for track and field in the state of Michigan, and he did what he could to keep it going," Reis said.

Closer to home, Janke launched and then took the lead in conducting two more long-standing events still on the Jackson schedule. The Jackson Invitational cross country meet began in 1971, and the J.D.'s Imagecraft Invitational track meet was launched in 1981.

The cross country meet quickly took its place as one of the state's big three meets the first three Saturdays of the season, following West Bloomfield and Holly. Teams travel from all over the state, including Martin's teams that have taken a few trophies back to Sault Ste. Marie.

"It's a highlight of the season when we win that," Martin said.

Among other things, Janke devoted himself also to the Selby Classic track meet, bringing together the county's top athletes, which began two years before he came to Jackson; the Class A state track and field championships at Withington Stadium in 1983 and '84; and the Midwest Meet of Champions, a track meet for the best from four states.

"It was amazing what he could do," Ratchford said, "with his connections, his knowledge of the sport, and his insistence that things be done correctly."

"Without his input and hard work, the cross country state championships at MIS would have never taken place." — Woolsey.

When Janke's contribution to high school athletics is fully measured, his work on the state cross country meet will hold a prominent position as a fitting conclusion to his career.

There is a large group of people deserving credit for their work in hosting the all-division state meet at Michigan International Speedway in Brooklyn since 1996. When some of those people use terms such as "ringmaster," "driving force" and "extremely integral part" to describe Janke's role, it is clear how much he dedicated to the event.

With MITCA looking for a site to conduct all four state meets instead of having them at four different places, Janke made the initial pitch to the speedway. With the idea cleared by the Michigan High School Athletic Association and given the go-ahead by MIS, Janke formed a committee to organize the meet.

Every year, Janke and McDonald have worked at MIS for a week before the meet getting the course set up, and on race day Janke has served as a troubleshooter.

"Charlie puts in a huge amount of hours putting the course together. It's a tremendous undertaking," said Barry Gibson, director of operations at MIS.

"Every year we meet with their committee after the state meet, and every year he pushes for improvements," MIS public relations/news manager Bill Janitz said. "It's been such a success because of people like Charlie and the people on the committee, and we're happy to work side-by-side with them."

The single-site state meet got off to a rocky start when problems with timing and scoring highlighted a day that Janke termed "a disaster" that provided fuel to those who were skeptical such a meet could be pulled off.

Tom Ratchford, an assistant track coach under Janke who took over as head coach in 1991 when Janke resigned and moved into an assistant's role, remembers similar treatment.

"He was the best assistant you'll ever see," Ratchford said. "He stepped out of the way and let me do what I wanted to do — much of which was the same as he had done."

"It goes beyond his team. He recognizes talent on other teams as well." — Mike Woolsey, Lumen Christi High School girls cross country coach.

Janke's expertise has not been confined to the athletes and coaches at Jackson High School. Coaches from other schools say Janke was never reluctant to share his knowledge.

"He's such a giving individual," Vandercook Lake High School boys track and cross country coach Tom Gass said. "When I first started, he gave me advice, and he's always been there. He's done so much for everybody."

Gass credited Janke with helping develop some of the runners who led Vandercook Lake to a third-place finish in the Division 4 state cross country meet this fall. Athletes from other teams were often beneficiaries of Janke's tips.

"I never saw Charlie as a rival coach," Woolsey said.

Jerry Reis, now Jackson's head track coach after being an assistant in track and cross country along with coaching at Jackson Community College, said he has been inspired by Janke's passion for coaching.

"He definitely has a thirst for improving himself, improving his coaching, and he gave that to me," said Reis, who first coached with Janke at Milford in 1964 and came to Jackson in 1968, two years after Janke. "He was insistent that we try to improve ourselves."

Janke was instrumental in the early years of the Michigan Interscholastic Track Coaches Association. When the group was organized in 1959, it was the first sport-specific coaches' association in the state. Every sport now has such an organization.

"While many coaches' main concern is what is best for their

"Then it was a war between the people who wanted to keep it there and the people who didn't," Janke said. "I was so discouraged. Our committee met, and we were all discouraged. But we just hung on and kept going.

"Now it's evolved into a tremendous thing for the sport of cross country. For the kids, that's their place. The football finals have their place, the basketball finals have their place, now cross country has *their* place."

Woolsey and Gass, both members of the committee, credit Janke's leadership for turning the meet around.

"He was the one who got everyone back to the drawing board, working out the kinks," Woolsey said.

"There was a whole list of coaches' concerns after that first meet," Gass said. "There were 3 1/2 pages of issues. Charlie spent the next year going over every single one of them.

"That's Charlie. It doesn't matter what he's doing, he jumps in with both feet.

And leaves his footprints.

— Reach reporter Gary Kalahar at 768-4966 or gkalahar@citpat.com.



CHARLIE JANKE

MITCA

- 1965 Secretary - Started first MITCA News Letter 4 Issues
- 1966 President
- 1972 - 1999 Organized and served as Director of MITCA Indoor Track and Field program for boys
- 1979 - 1999 Member of selection committee for Mid West Meet of Champions
- 2006 - 2009 Hosted Mid West Meet of Champions at Jackson High School - Meet Director
- 1973 Organized first MITCA Cross Country Clinic - Hosted by Jackson High School
- 1959 - Member of MITCA since its inception - never missed a MITCA Track or Cross Country Clinic

COACHING - TRACK AND FIELD/CROSS COUNTRY

- 1959 - 2003 Coached Track and Field - 45 Years - 37 at Jackson High School
- 1964 - 2002 Coached Cross Country - 39 years - 37 at Jackson High School
- 1958-9 Detroit Redford High School - Track and Field
- 1959 - 1964 Southfield High School - Track and Field and Football
- 1964 - 1966 Milford High School - Track and Field and Cross Country
- 1966 - 2003 Jackson High School - Track and Field and Cross Country

Cross Country

- Boys - 8 Conference Champs - 6 Regional Champs - Number 5 on MITCA
Best Teams of the Seventies
Dual Meets(Unknown - won a lot - lost fewer then a lot)
15 All State Runners
- Girls - 3 Conference Champs - 1 Regional Champs
Dual Meets (Unknown - won some - lost fewer then some)
5 All State Runners

Track and Field

- Boys - 8 Conference Champs - 6 Regional Champs - 1 State Runner Up
Dual Meets(Unknown - similar to XC)
33 All State Runners
- Girls - 3 Conference Champs - 1 Regional Champs
Dual Meets (Same as above)
3 All State Runners

HONORS AND OTHER STUFF

- 1983 Chuck Sweeney Award
- 1988 MITCA - Coach of the Year - Boys Track and Field
MHSCA - Coach of the Year - Boys Track and Field
- 1990 NHSACA - Region 4 - Coach of the Year
Nominee for National Coach of the Year
- 1994 Inducted MHSCA Hall of Fame
- 2004 Inducted MITCA Hall of Fame
- 2010 Inducted Jackson High School Athletics Hall of Fame
- 2015 Jackson High School (JD's) Track and Field Invitational named Charlie Janke Track and Field Invitational
Sharp Park Cross Country Course named Charlie Janke CC Course
- 1983 - 84 Jackson High School hosted MHSAA Class A Track and Field State Championship Meet Director
- 1996 - 03 Member of committee for organizing the State Cross Country Championships at Michigan International Speedway
- 1969 Member of Organizing Committee for J. Chris Jensen (Jackson Area) Cross Country Championships and Banquet
JENSEN COY AWARD RENAME CJ COY AWARD
- 2000 1981 -03 Co-founder and Meet Director JD's Invitational Track and Field Meet

- 1990 -03** **Meet Director James R Selby Track and Field Classic (Jackson area Honor Roll Meet**
- 1967** **Presented successfully to Representative Counsel to add the Two Mile Run to the MHSAA Order of Events**
- 1965 -83** **Head Shot Put Official NCAA Indoor Championships also officiated at Big Ten Indoor and Outdoor Championships at UM and MSU**
- !990 -present** **Registered ATOM Track and Field Official**