

In Memory of Don Willoughby – NZSSAA Life Member

It is with great sadness that we mark the passing of Don Willoughby, former geography teacher, athletics coach, and life member of the New Zealand Secondary Schools Athletics Association. Don passed away in Cambridge after a short illness, aged 86.

Over many years, Don made an outstanding contribution to school athletics, the lives of student athletes, and the wider New Zealand athletics and Cambridge communities. A quiet achiever with a generous nature, he gave his time and energy freely, especially in support of young people.

For many years while teaching at Kamo High School, Don was a mainstay of Northland secondary school and club athletics, and he continued that commitment after moving to St Peter's School, Cambridge.

Don loved the full range of track and field, cross-country, and road events. First and foremost a coach, he also took on administrative roles to help ensure well-organised competitions where athletes could succeed. From its inception in 1973, he took athletes to the New Zealand Secondary Schools Athletics Championships, achieving significant success with athletes such as David Burridge, Peter O'Donoghue, Aaron Pulford, and Jake and Zane Robertson.

He became Chair of the Waikato Bay of Plenty Secondary Schools Athletics Association and led the organisation for several years, overseeing zone and regional athletics and cross-country championships during his time in Waikato.

From 1987, Don taught geography at St Peter's for a decade and, alongside Robin Ball, helped shape the school's athletics programme. His coaching and encouragement supported many students to succeed at national and international level. In 2024, he was welcomed back to St Peter's with wife Rae for the School's Alumni Awards, where Olympian Stuart Farquhar thanked Don for the many hours he devoted to his development.

Don was also an accomplished athlete, coach, administrator, and team manager. When the opportunity arose to join the NZSSAA Executive from 1990 to 1995 while it was based in Waikato, he served as a committee member with responsibility for cross-country. A highlight was his organisation of the 1993 Cross Country Championships at St Peter's School, which attracted around 1,600 entrants.

Don contributed to the wider athletics community as a leader in his club, Hamilton City Hawks; to the Waikato Bay of Plenty Centre as a team manager and organiser of events; as Athletics New Zealand team manager to the World Cross Country Championships in Poland in 1987 and New Zealand in 1988; and as President of Athletics New Zealand in 2003 and 2004. He was particularly passionate about the National Road Relay Championships and was instrumental, with others, in improving the rules around club team membership and extending the competition categories to make the event more inclusive and to build club spirit and participation. Don was highly respected for his leadership, commitment to the sport, and empathetic, caring nature.

He received one of Athletics New Zealand's first long service awards in 1990 and was presented with a Merit Award in 2007.

He was also remembered as the last known athlete to beat Sir Peter Snell in a race in New Zealand, winning the inter-secondary schools' cross-country event in 1957.

Beyond athletics, Don was a life member and former chair of the Cambridge Tree Trust, and in 2018 received a Kiwibank Local Hero Award for his service to the community. He will be remembered with gratitude for his leadership, humility, and the lasting impact he made on so many lives.