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Oral history interview transcript with Ruth Van Kuren

Ruth Van Kuren

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RUTH VAN KUREN
INTERVIEWED BY MARY FREDRICKSON
EWU Women's Oral History Project
EWU 984-0094 #90
OCTOBER 12, 1982

Fredrickson: This is Mary Frederickson interviewing Ruth Van Kuren for the Cheney women's oral history project. Her topic concerns youth groups, particularly athletic activities. The date is October 12, 1982. Ruth, I know that you and your husband have been instrumental in bringing track to Cheney. How long ago did you establish the Cheney Track Club?

Van Kuren: We established it in 1972.

Fredrickson: Were you yourself active in sports as a youngster?

Van Kuren: Yes I was, to the extent that girls had opportunities, but that really amounted to just PE in the school program and we didn't have any really organized sports. Things have changed a lot and there are a lot more opportunities, but no, I wasn't as active to the extent that the kids are today.

Fredrickson: Okay. Well when did you first get interested in track?

Van Kuren: In 1966 my husband started teaching at the Cheney Junior High and they gave him the choice of being the track coach or the wrestling coach. He'd done neither, because his school didn't have either sport either. There's a lot of eithers there, but he chose track because in the airforce he'd had some physical fitness program that involved running. He took a workshop and he became a track coach.

Fredrickson: Oh. So this led eventually to you and your husband starting the track club. Why did you get involved in this?

Van Kuren: Well he started it with my help to supplement his track program and to involve more kids in what he thought was a very good sport.

Fredrickson: How did the formation of the Cheney Track Club come about?

Van Kuren: Well in 1972 my husband was very involved in local men's service organization and the kids and I felt sort of left out and we asked him to drop out of that organization which he did. The next thing I knew there was an article in the Cheney Free Press and anyone interested in started a track club to call our phone number. When my husband came home that night I said, "now what am I suppose to tell these people when they call?" He said, "Just get their names and if there's enough people interested we'll have a meeting," and that's what happened. In May of 1972, we held our first meeting to see how many interested people would show up and about twenty-four people did and we thought that was plenty to get started. So the Cheney Track Club got started at that point. We were very small to begin with at twenty-four. Our dues were fifty-cents per family and we were planning just to be an informational source where we would receive the entry forms to the different runs and meets that came up and we would contact all the club members who were eligible by age, etc. for the particular meets and we would help them with their paperwork and that was gonna be what the Cheney Track Club was. Well, within two weeks we were having practices and within that two weeks, I'd become a track coach, assisting my husband. The first year we had ninety members. In less than a month after we started the track club we were putting on our first meet. A meet director had

planned a junior Olympics qualifying meet for our area and something had come up and he wasn't going to be able to handle it and we took it over sort of at the last minute. So I learned how to be the meet registrar within a month. The first year we also put on a marathon and got the course certified and one thing and another and at that point, in 1972, a marathon was a very unusual event. Not many people knew what it was and we had huge turn-out of thirteen people. The second year the club grew to a hundred and sixty members and we got our first uniforms and as the club grew I got more involved with whatever its next step was.

Fredrickson: So you kind of got involved all at once and in a hurry.

Van Kuren: Right. I had helped my husband with his junior high track meets as the track official, but I didn't have much experience on any other level.

Fredrickson: Were you surprised at the response and quick growth in a year for what, twenty-four to over a hundred?

Van Kuren: Yes. I guess it was one of those things that the time was right, because it just grew tremendously in a huge hurry.

Fredrickson: I was gonna ask, how has it changed through the first eleven seasons and of course, one way would be numbers, but what are some other...?

Van Kuren: Well, it varies from year to year, but we now average about a hundred members a year. Our dues are two-dollars a family...or two dollars per person or five dollars a family and some years we have families of up to six members that join for the five dollars. Our club now involves athletes from two to...well we say a hundred and two, but the oldest members we've had have been in their sixties. We have regular scheduled practices now that are scheduled Mondays and Thursdays during our entire season. We have sponsored a lot of different events over the years. Some years we've sponsored as many as ten events in a season, but we now average about five events during the most recent years.

Fredrickson: It really is a family oriented activity isn't it?

Van Kuren: Yes it is. It's much better than the service organization my husband belonged to, because the whole family is totally involved and it keeps us busy.

Fredrickson: What can an athlete do in the TAC Track Program? Oh, by the way, TAC stands for...

Van Kuren: Stands for The Athletics Congress.

Fredrickson: Okay, what can an athlete involved in the Athletics Congress program do?

Van Kuren: Well there are many levels. They can compete on the local level and we had several different levels here, some of them being developments, which are very low key, up to the championship meets. We have regional championships and we also have national championships in this program and that eventually can lead to the Olympics. We had six girls in the National girl's age group championship this summer and all of them placed. That's really exciting.

Fredrickson: That's really remarkably.

Van Kuren: It's fantastic. We also had two in the national junior Olympics meet in Lincoln, Nebraska and one in the national boys age group meet in Omaha, Nebraska. One of the functions of the club is to raise the funds to support these athletes in their travel.

Fredrickson: So how are you involved in local...the entire local track picture?

Van Kuren: Well, in the Cheney Track Club I've been secretary treasurer forever.

Fredrickson: Since the beginning I guess.

Van Kuren: Since the beginning. I think it's going to be permanent, the way it looks now. I've been the assistant coach now for a long time, but during the spring when my husbands involved with the junior high track program, myself and several mothers hold the after school practices. I have gone to a few work shops along the way, so I have a little more knowledge than I used to. I'm also the record keeper for the club. We give record patches for each event for children who...and adults who better existing club records. I'm the buyer for the concession stand, which is our main source of income and you name it. I also time and officiate at the local junior high, high school and some college track meets and cross country events.

Fredrickson: What about track beyond the local the local level? Are you involved in anything there?

Van Kuren: Yes, I'm active in the Inland Empire board of Athletics. I'm presently the registration chairman and treasurer, which are the generation and the spending of all the income. I have been the secretary for about five terms. Our club also started the developmental program and that's a program for athletes six and under. It isn't exactly competition, but they do participate in the meets. They have five events to choose from. They are the fifty, the hundred, the two-hundred, the baseball throw and the standing long jump. These little tikes get out and compete or do their best and every athlete who crosses the finish line gets a ribbon or throws the baseball even once gets a ribbon. The highlight of our season is to watch, sometimes the kids the diapers come roaring across the finish line. My husband and I also were on the Blooms Day advisory committee. Lawsen set up the now famous finish line with the multiple shoots that was used and we've done some advisory work to different long-distance running organizations.

Fredrickson: Well what about on the national level?

Van Kuren: On the national level I've gone to the convention for five years and we'll attend again this year in Philadelphia. Presently I'm the national youth athletics records chairman and also for youth athletics and the Inland Empire I'm the representative for registration to the national TAC registration committee. I'm the Inland Empire board of athletics representative to the national youth athletics committee and I'm delegate at large on the national men's long-distance running committee.

Fredrickson: It's interesting to me the way your life seems to have a taken a turn there. Eleven years ago you probably didn't have any idea that all this was going to come about from that first small meeting.

Van Kuren: I certainly didn't.

Fredrickson: You never know exactly what...what turn your life is going to take and I think that's very interesting. What have you found most fulfilling about working with young people and sports?

Van Kuren: Well I think the most fulfilling part is actually the first track meet of the season. We've been working with some kids for the former years, but every year we have some new kids and we don't know what to expect from them and the first meet usually brings us several surprises of the child who doesn't seem to have a lot during practice and the adrenaline or something brings out real performances and we see surprises every year and it's really unique to see the kids excel and find themselves in sports. Also over the years we've seen some of these kids now for over ten years and how they change and develop and to see a child catch fire with the excitement of a new found sport. As they get

older there are new events that they can go into and often that event collects and it's the one that they can really excel in and it's just exciting to see them when they do bloom.

Fredrickson: Well I imagine that there have also been a few frustrations along the way. Would you like to tell us a little bit about that?

Van Kuren: Well the main frustration is getting help to carry out the program. We live in a very busy society and when we get ready to put on one of our major track meets, it takes about two-hundred and fifty people and it's a battle to get enough people to put on a good program. We have dropped the Cheney marathon that we put on for about five years...Excuse me, about eight years, because we were to the point where if we lost any more officials, we didn't feel that it would be a safe event anymore. It runs on a loop of twenty-six miles out in the country and we needed enough man-power for safety and I guess that's the main frustration. We'd probably be able to do more if we had more help.

Fredrickson: Do you have any future goals concerning youth sports in Cheney and in the Inland Empire?

Van Kuren: Well we kind of take it year by year, but my husband and I think we're probably involved for at least the next five years in the TAC program because of our youngest daughter. She told us that she'd like to go the Olympics some day. That isn't our goal for her, but we will stick by her and show that the program is still going to help and develop her and her skills. If she really wants to we'll help her all we can. So for specifics, it's just mainly to keep this as strong a program as possible.

Fredrickson: Well I thank you very much for your time. It's been nice talking to you about the track program in Cheney.

(End of Tape).