

...Donald Heinicke

By

PUBLISHED: April 25, 2008 at 12:00 AM EDT | UPDATED: September 30, 2021 at 5:56 AM EDT

Donald Eugene Heinicke Sr., a veteran runner and marathoner who had won a place on the 1940 Olympic team and later founded the Howard County Striders Club, died Wednesday of Alzheimer's disease at Catonsville Commons nursing home. He was 93.

Mr. Heinicke, who was once described as "the Clark Gable of the curbstones" because of his strong chin and porcelain blue eyes, was born in Baltimore and raised on Braddish Avenue in the city's Walbrook neighborhood. Because he had suffered from tuberculosis as a youngster, Mr. Heinicke was told he couldn't take gym at Forest Park High School. To regain his health, however, he played basketball, football and baseball "on the quiet," he told The Sun in 1982. "I lived, breathed and slept sports."

After graduating from Forest Park, he continued playing amateur football and baseball while working at a printing company.

Mr. Heinicke and his fellow football players would train by running, and one day he decided to enter the Easterwood Handicap.

"I didn't do too well. But after that race, which was in the early 1930s, I was hooked," he told The Sun in the 1982 interview.

He also was a runner for the Hanlon Athletic Club and the Stonewall Democratic Club.

Mr. Heinicke went to work for a printing company while hoping someday to become a professional baseball player.

“My first love was baseball,” he told The Sun in a 1987 interview, “but I got my fingers chopped off in a printing press. I still played baseball. They would put me in right field or second base. When I would play second base, the first baseman would say, ‘Who’s that crazy fool throwing a knuckleball over here?’”

He continued running and finally got the attention of Pat Dengis, an Olympian, marathon runner and member of the Maryland Athletic Hall of Fame.

“Dengis tabbed Heinicke as a comer with a good future in distance running,” said the 1982 Sun profile.

He ran his first marathon in Yonkers, N.Y., in 1936, and when he ran his first Boston Marathon in 1939, he finished second behind record-setting Tarzan Brown.

Dengis, who came in fourth, said jokingly that his student had “bitten the hand that fed him.”

He later came in third three times and fourth once in the famed springtime race.

In 1940, he made the Olympic team as a marathon runner, but World War II canceled the games.

By 1942, Mr. Heinicke had earned honors as the nation’s top marathoner.

During World War II, he worked at Edgewood Arsenal, and later worked for 40 years as an automobile salesman for O’Donnell Pontiac, until retiring in 1987. The loss of his fingers prevented him from serving in the military.

In the early 1950s, he abandoned long-distance running in favor of walking. He later returned to the sport and by 1964, estimated he had run or walked more than 50,000 miles.

Mr. Heinicke’s regimen during the 1960s was to run five times a week and no less than 50 or 60 miles. During the 1980s, he was still running 6 or 7 miles a day, and “10 to 15 miles on Sundays,” he told The Sun.

“More than any other sport, I feel running improves one’s mental attitude, because there is no one out there but yourself,” he said in the 1982 profile.

Mr. Heinicke, who ran more than 100 marathons during his lifetime and was also a triathlete, explained to The Evening Sun in 1965 the benefits of running.

“If the body is in good trim, age is no deterrent. For the amount of physical exertion expended, you get more from running than any other exercise,” he said.

In 1972, he established the Howard County Striders, and from 1964 to 1975, he sponsored a 12-mile handicap race that drew hundreds of runners.

“He was always encouraging young runners,” Ed Hewitt, a runner and former Sun editor, said yesterday.

Mr. Heinicke who was inducted into the Maryland Athletic Hall of Fame in 1982, kept running until the early 1990s when he retired from the sport.

The longtime Ellicott City resident was married for 57 years to the former Evelyn Root, who died in 1996.

Services will be held at 6 p.m. today at the Harry H. Witzke Funeral Home, 4112 Old Columbia Pike, Ellicott City.

Surviving are a son, Donald E. Heinicke Jr. of Ellicott City; a daughter, Jean E. Williams of Oella; a granddaughter; and a great-granddaughter.