THE COACH WHO INSPIRED WOMEN TO BECOME CHAMPIONS

99-year-old sports great saw their potential when society said no

By JO-ANN BARNAS
FREE PRESS SPORTS WRITER

He offers his left arm and escorts you down a flight of steps. "Hold tight," he says. "It's slick out here."

Kenneth (Red) Simmons is 99 years old.

He reaches the passenger side of his gray Impala and opens the door, asking you not to mind the two cushions on the seat that he keeps for his wife, Lois.

He starts the car, turns up the heat and pulls out of the parking lot. He's only a few dozen yards from where — 74 years ago — he raked the long-jump pit on the day track-and-field legend Jesse Owens broke the world record at the 1935 Big Ten Championships at the University of Michigan's Ferry Field.

But this isn't a day for that kind of nostalgia.

For the last decade, Simmons has been heralded as U-M's oldest living former head coach. He became the Wolverines' first women's track and field coach in 1976, although his contributions to women's sports began 16 years earlier when he and his first wife, Betty, started a girls track club in Ann Arbor called the Michigammes.

It was a pioneering program that enabled women to dream as big as men and provided the catalyst to careers in such challenging fields as law, engineering and medicine.

See COACH, 10A
COACH: He paved way for women in sports

From Page 1A

"Back then, people said it wasn't ladylike to sweat," Simmons said. "We just said, 'Let's give women an opportunity to compete.'"

"We thought, when it comes down to it, life isn't just about what you do. It's about what you become." There have been many high points in Simmons' life, but one of the most meaningful for women came in 1990, the year he and Betty Simmons went to Italy to attend the Rome Olympics. By then, Red Simmons — who had retired in 1989 after 25 years as a detective sergeant with the Detroit Police Department — was working at U-M as a teaching fellow in the physical education department. Betty Simmons was a gym teacher at Slumon Junior High in Ann Arbor.

"I was pretty cynical about girls' athletics opportunities for men and women. He eventually said, 'Just don't get in our way.'" Simmons said.

"She is the girl that made me a coach," Red Simmons said. "She's a Wednesday morning, and Simmons is in a weight room at Crisler Arena about to begin his workout when Francis Kruehn Goodridge waits in. They hug.

"I am home and said, 'I think we have our goal.' Simmons said with a smile.

Goodridge was the Simmons' first Michigamme. And she remains their most famous.

Goodridge became the first native-born Michigan woman to qualify for the U.S. Olympic team (Mexico City in 1968 in the 800 meters; Munich in 1972 in the 1,500).

"She remembers the early days well." Simmons said.

Starting a girls' track and field club certainly didn't come without its obstacles. Initially, Simmons said, Den Canham, then the Wolverine's head track coach, was against the idea.

This was a decade before Congress in 1972 passed Title IX, the Education Amendment Act that banned sexual discrimination in education programs that receive federal funding to provide girls and boys with equal opportunities for men and women.

"He eventually said, 'Just don't get in our way.'" Simmons said.

Goodridge said: "One of Red's major gifts is his personality. He can get a lot done in sensitive areas because he is in a way that didn't ruffle feathers. He never lost his temper."

Red and Betty Simmons collected equipment for their team by retrieving spikes, old shorts and warm-ups that were discarded by the men's team. Goodridge recalled that her first pair of track spikes had been salvaged by Red Simmons from a dusty old box at Yost Field House.

"They were ancient: permanent spikes — the length of three-quarter-inch nails," Goodridge said. "They were made of kangaroo leather. Light as feather. Thought I'd fit me like a glove."

Eventually, the Michigammes grew into one of the top amateur track and field teams in the country, producing seven national champions and 19 state champs.

Suddenly, girls whose junior high and high schools didn't have sports teams had a place to run and jump and throw — thanks to Red and Betty Simmons, and other programs like theirs that began sprouting up across the metro area.

"It changed my life," said Karen McKeachie, 56, of Ann Arbor, who was a mile and run cross-country with the Michigammes beginning in the late 1960s. "It got me into a sport that I could keep doing all my life, and it was even kind of responsible for me to going into engineering. Running made it easier to be the person I wanted to be. It opened doors."

McKeachie later became a five-time national and four-time women's age-group world triathlon champion. She helped coach the Michigammes in 1974, when Simmons took a leave of absence to be with Betty Simmons, who was dying of cancer.

In 1976, at age 66, Red Simmons was hired as U-M's first women's track coach. Shortly thereafter, the Michigammes ceased as a club.

A campus future
How do you want to be remembered?

Simmons, who considers himself a centenarian in training, will turn 100 on Jan. 5, 2010.

He's sitting in a corner booth at Benny's Family Dining on South In-

dustrial near the U-M campus in Ann Arbor.

It's just after 9:30 on a weekday morning, and Simmons is looking dapper, as usual. He's wearing a white tuxedo with a blue U-M track sweater, khakis and brown shoes. The buckle on his belt was made from a medal he won running track at the 1990 Drake Relays.

He mentions that he owns a 1932 Penn Relays watch. "It's still running."

"Wore it at Eastern yesterday," Simmons says, referring to Eastern Michigan University, his alma mater. He graduated from EMU — then called Michigan State Normal College — in 1963.

Simmons is a fixture at both campuses, attending athletic events with Lois, whom he married in 1975, the year after Betty Simmons died of can-

cer. They were married 47 years and had two children — Margie, 71, and Larry, 70.

"It's been a continuous adventure being his son," Larry Simmons said. "It's a joy to go with him anywhere. Very seldom do I get to introduce him as my dad. Everybody always says, 'Oh, and that's Red's son.'"

"His circle is much bigger than mine."

His early years

Known by his nickname, Red Sim-

mons was the state's top hurdlers and sprinters at Redford High.

Newspaper headlines in the 1950s dubbed him the Crimson Flash. Sim-

mons also was an all-city halfback and captain of the football team.

"Life was a little different in those days," said Simmons, whose mustuc-colored hair of his youth now is thinned and faded to a strawberry blond. "I started at Beech Road School — first through eighth grade in one room. A wood furnace, two sui-

houses — one for the boys, one for girls — and heroine lamps on the walls."

Simmons, who was born in Cleve-

land, was a track star, wrestler and boxer at EMU.

He once was asked to be a running partner for an amateur boxer, a teen-

ager he came to know as Joe Barrows. For seven weeks — Simmons believes it was around 1980 — the two run side-by-side in the mornings on the streets of Detroit.

Barrows was Joe Louis.

In 1982, Simmons competed in the U.S. Olympic trials in track. He also ran in track meets in summer AAA meets. Often the field included Oe-

en Simmons said he never had beat him.

The two weren't strangers that historic day in 1938 at Ferry Field. Oe-

wen, then a star at Ohio State Un-

"No one knows how long you're going to live," Simmons said. "Do live your life."

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Sportswriter for The Detroit News ken_simmons, 99, of Ann Arbor performs skl-us Wednesday while working out at the Crisler Arena in Ann Arbor. He said he thinks his athleticism came from his parents, particularly his mother. "Boy, she could run," Simmons said.

Simmons was asked to work the event. At the time, he was a Detroit police officer — and the department's star athlete in field-day competitions held across the Midwest and Canada.

A year later, at the 1996 Berlin Olympics, Owens would destroy Ger-

man Chancellor Adolf Hitler's idea of Aryan superiority by winning four gold medals.


"Simmons was the AUA high-bar-

drew some praise from his parents, par-

ricularly his mother.

Her father, Herbert Simmons, was a lumberjacked-turned-barber who liked to work up a sweat as a sporting partner at local boxing gyms. Red Simmons' mother, Margaret, was never a fan of her son's sporting ability around her children.

Simmons recalled how she'd hide up her skirt and challenge him to foot-

paces in the field near their home.

"Boy, she could run," Simmons said. "My first wife, Betty, she was a fine athlete, too. But like my mother, she never really got to compete. It wasn't accepted for girls to be able to play back then. They were born in a time when women just didn't do those things.

"Live your life"

"All these years later, his legacy end-

ures."

"Red Simmons was a multicultural-
aist even before it was a word," said Marcia Karwas, 54, who competed for the Michigammes in the mid-1970s.

"He understood the value of being a human being."

Simmons said: "I had athletes then — and many of them still are. But now they're also lawyers, doctors, profes-

sors — anything they want to be."

Another Michigamme reunion is in the works; the team last came together four years ago. But this one will be to celebrate another milestone: Sim-

mons' 100th birthday.

Ken Simmons, 99, of Ann Arbor performs skl-us Wednesday while working out at the Crisler Arena in Ann Arbor. He said he thinks his athleticism came from his parents, particularly his mother. "Boy, she could run," Simmons said.
Even at 99, coach still enjoys active, on-the-go lifestyle

By JO-ANN BARNAS
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

At 99, Ken (Red) Simmons of Ann Arbor still enjoys many of the activities he did when he was half his age.

• He loves cruising around town. Simmons' vehicle -- a 2005 Impala -- has 48,000 miles.
• He attends University of Michigan athletic events. Last Sunday, for instance, Simmons and his wife, Lois, BS, watched the women's basketball team lose at home. When the couple then met up with the team at a postgame party honoring the seniors.
• He exercises regularly. Simmons works out five times a week, mostly at Crisler Arena. His routine includes walking or jogging up to six laps -- one mile -- around the concourse and carrying 24-pound weights up and down steps. The exercise, he says, is for "strengthening my core."

As he prepares to join the estimated 79,000 centenarians in the United States, Simmons -- who retired from his first job as a Detroit police officer in 1959 and his second as a U-M women's track and field coach in 1981 -- said he credits his longevity to "exercise and happiness."

"Just maintaining an active life," he said.

Simmons, who was born Jan. 5, 1919, said his last physical showed him to be in good health.

"Can't find anything wrong with me," he said.

Simmons said he has lost an inch in height -- down from 5 feet, 10 inches -- and weighs less, at 152 pounds, now than he did 50 years ago.

"I'm a little bit shorter than I was," he said.

Dr. John Poppovich, chair of internal medicine at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, said he believes genetics along with a lifestyle that "preserves function" has a lot to do with Simmons' longevity.

"Simmons lived like his father lived to be 98; his mother, 96. Simmons' brother, Clifford Simmons, died in 1986 at age 98."

"I think he has a magic bullet in regular physical activity," Poppovich said. "It's not only longevity, but where a person is in terms of functionality. A lot of people live to be old, but their quality of life is not as good. He seems to have been blessed by longevity, but he has lived healthily -- he has maximized what he's been given."

Along with regular physical activity, Ken (Red) Simmons said he has, for the most part, avoided the pitfalls that many adults develop as they age, such as overeating, high-blood pressure and other health problems. He said he rarely drinks alcohol but is in moderation. "Maybe a glass of red wine with dinner every once in a while," Simmons said.

Simmons also attributes his long life to having supportive family and friendly relationships.

"And I do crossword puzzles every day -- that helps keep my mind moving," he said.

Simmons doesn't have a cell phone. He also doesn't use a computer.

"No regrets, though. Sometimes I feel like I'm falling behind," Simmons said with a laugh. "But it doesn't bother me."
FORMER MICHIGAMMES SHARE HOPE THEY GAINED

In celebration of Kenneth (Red) Simmons’ 95th birthday in 2005, members of the Michigammes — Ann Arbor’s first track and field club for girls — gathered for a reunion weekend. The club, which Simmons founded in 1960, lasted until the mid-1970s, when the need for a team no longer existed once schools began supporting varsity sports for girls and women in compliance with the 1972 passage of Title IX.

Karen McKeachie of Ann Arbor, with her husband, Lew Kidd, put together a memory book for the Michigammes, asking former members about the role the team played in their lives. The next reunion is slated for 2010, in honor of Simmons’ 100th birthday. Here are some excerpts:

ALICE STEINICKE LYNCH, now 57, a program manager at Hewlett-Packard who lives in San Jose, Calif., and a Michigammes member in 1964-68: “Joining the Michigammes and developing a positive self-image as an athlete was a pivotal event in my life. This couldn’t have occurred at a more critical time — my early teenage years when my self-esteem was shaky at best. Mr. Simmons saw athletic potential in me and through his coaching nurtured a pride in athletic achievement and a love of physical activity that have been central in my life ever since.”

MARIA KARWAS, 54, a professor at California State University Monterey Bay who recently returned to Michigan and lives in Linden, Michigammes 1974-77: “You have coached hundreds of athletes, women athletes, and at that time you were ahead of your time. You didn’t need Title IX to give girls and women the opportunity to compete. You respected us and gave to a cause that legislation had to regulate years later. You were a man of honor and you gave us an opportunity while the rest of the world needed convincing that girls and women competing in sports was an OK thing.”

“Your were a big part of making me feel valuable and important. And when you make a young woman feel as you do, it is only the beginning of a strong-willed, confident, capable person.”

ROBERTA ZALD, 53, of Waterford, director of marketing for KMT Robotic Solutions, Michigammes 1969-74: “A friendly man comes up to a gawky, self-conscious, bigger-than-the-rest-of-the-kids girl at a junior high school track meet and says, ‘You can be really good at this, let me help you.’ Then he comes over, meets your parents, tells you about the Michigammes, puts a homemade weightlifting bench and weights in your basement (boy, it was an ugly thing), and teaches you how to use it. Then he takes you to AUA track meets and encourages you to do your best. You celebrate successes together and are encouraged through disappointments. And for the rest of your life, every time he sees you, he says, ‘Hey, how’s it going? When you’re happy, a big hug and an introduction to everyone around him (because he is always surrounded by people): This is my first shot-putter.’"