Never give up, advises 93 year old Huskie

By Shaylon Marchus

Have you ever wondered how we became the Redford Huskies? After digging in the Redford archives, an answer was discovered. It goes back to a 1928 Redford grad, Kenneth "Red" Simmons.

In the late 1920's, Simmons was an All City halfback. He was known as "Red" because of his red hair. "I was the first "Red" in Michigan," says Simmons, making reference to the University of Michigan's Red Berenson. Simmons was going into the one of the first games of the football season, and Redford didn't have a team name. So Redford's coach, Frank Hermanson, asked Simmons what he wanted the team to be called. Simmons said, "How about the Huskies." The name stuck.

After graduating from Redford, Simmons attended Michigan Normal College, known today as Eastern Michigan University. Simmons was having a pretty hard time staying in school because he didn't have enough money to support himself. "It was the time of the depression in 1929. I didn't have any money, so Principal Lang let me $13.20 for six weeks, and because I wasn't able to stay on campus, I hitchhiked from Grand River and Telegraph to Ypsilanti, carrying only my lunch in a brown bag." He continues, "I didn't have any books, so I just listened and tried to do my best in class".

Since Simmons didn't have any books, he wasn't able to pass his classes, but he was such a great runner, beating all of the varsity kids as a freshman, that the coach helped Simmons. He got him a part-time job cleaning the gym, and he gave him a room in the basement of a dean's house where he could stay.

Simmons was involved in many sports at the school. He was a conference middleweight champion in boxing and wrestling three years in a row, and he ran many distances in track. He ran against great runners such as Finland's Paavo Nurmi and Jesse Owens, with whom he became a good friend. "I ran against him in 1937. Sometimes we ran together or against each other. I never beat him, but I held a record at Michigan and he broke it," says Simmons. A year before graduation, he finished fourth in the 400-meter hurdles at the US Olympic trials, and he served as an alternate on the Olympic team.

Simmons fell in love with Betty, a pretty girl who was tutoring him. Eventually they married and raised a family. After finishing college, Simmons became a Detroit policeman. He participated in many Police Field Days at the Detroit Fairgrounds where the policemen competed with officers from other precincts. Simmons was shot during the city's race riot of 1943, and he has suffered many other wounds, but he says he's proud that he "never fired my revolver", referring to his .38 caliber handgun.

His days as a police officer differed from those of today's cops. "In my day, there weren't as many drug problems as there are now. There was prostitution and gangs, but I don't think it was as bad then as it is now," says Simmons. When I was an officer, I helped quite a few boys 15 and under," he adds. When he was 49 years old, Simmons retired from the force in 1959.

After leaving the police department, he wanted to work with young people, so he decided to pay a visit to the University of Michigan. He went into the Athletic Department and said to a secretary, "Who's the head man?" She sent him to the office of Fritz Crisler, the athletic director at U of M.

After seeing poor performances by distance runners at the 1960 Olympics in Tokyo, Simmons decided to do something. That's when he formed the Michigammas, a women only track team, in Ann Arbor. His first recruit was a 13-year-old girl named Francine Kraker.

Then other recruits started coming in. He trained them hard like men, because he knew that girls weren't weak and fragile. In 1967, Kraker set the world indoor record for 600 yards. In 1968, she ran the 800 meters in Mexico City, and in 1972, she ran the 1,500 meters. Another one of Red's recruits, Karen McKeeskie, is 46 today and is one of the fastest master triathletes in the world. All of the girls who ran with the Michigammas had great success.

Simmons today is known as the "Father of Women's Track" at the University of Michigan.

Today Simmons is 93, but "My hair is still red," he says. He is still involved in athletics, only now he competes in the Senior Olympics. "I have competed in five and won in all five," says Simmons. He works out at the University of Michigan on a regular basis, and in the last Senior Olympics, he won the shot put, long jump, and discus for his age group.

Red Simmons, Redford Class of 1928, congratulates Chuck Kocis, Class of 1931, when Kocis was honored at the Annual Huskies Open in July. (Photo: J. Druskis)

Simmons loves young people, and he has overtaken several Redford students on tours of the university and the athletic complex. He still supports the Huskies by coming to the Annual Huskies Open dinner each summer. His advice to young people is "Keep your eye on the dollar and never give up." He also says there are three things that count in life: family, friends, and health. Red Simmons is a man for all ages and a great friend and fan of Redford and the Huskies.