Simmons was ‘M”s original Red

By Chris Langrill
Daily Sports Writer

Legend. Pioneer. Founding father.
These words are often used by Michigan faithful to describe special coaches who have contributed so much to Michigan’s storied athletic tradition.
They are words used to describe men such as Fielding Yost, Fritz Crisler and Bo Schembechler.
These are men who’s legacies are so great that mentioning their whole name isn’t even necessary to elicit feelings of reverence.

But what about “Red”?
No, not Red Berenson. Although the Michigan hockey coach is a legend in his own right, there is another legendary “Red” connected with the Ann Arbor campus.
That man is Red Simmons, former Michigan women’s track coach. On Saturday, the men’s and women’s track teams will compete in an event named after the track and field legend, the 18th annual Red Simmons Invitational.

Simmons began his career at Michigan in 1959 teaching physical education. By 1960, he had already kick-started the first Ann Arbor women’s track club, “The Michigammas.” By the time he became Michigan’s first-ever women’s track coach in 1976, he had already developed seven national champions, 19 state champions and several state cross country championship teams.

“He is a pioneer, since he started the women’s program at the club perspective and then made it a varsity sport,” Michigan women’s coach James Henry said. “So I consider him the founding father of women’s track and field.”

Although Simmons retired from coaching in 1981, he still lives in Ann Arbor with his wife Lois, and remains a vital part of the Michigan track program. He became the first honorary ‘M’ Man in 1990 and was the first person elected to the Michigan women’s track and field Hall of Fame in 1994.

“He’s involved in many ways,” Henry said. “He’s the number one booster for our program … when he’s available, we bring him to away meets as our motivational mascot.”

But do the athletes, whose parents weren’t even of college-age when Simmons started here, really respond to the 88-year-old Michigan legend?

“They respond to him because he has so much youthful energy … it’s like he’s in his ‘50s,” Henry said.

“So that excites, motivates and keeps our team going to know that the founding father’s around.”

Indeed, at almost 90, Simmons recently competed in the ’98 Senior Olympics, winning a total of five gold medals in the long and high jumps, shot put, discus and javelin.

Henry added that it’s Simmons’ birthday this weekend, so both the men’s and women’s teams will have extra incentive to perform well at the unscored, home event.

“He’ll be walking around like a peacock this weekend,” Henry said.