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TRIBUTE TO JACK DANIELS (1933-2025)

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The Pentathlon family in the United States and worldwide is in mourning after the sad passing of Jack Daniels, a two-time Olympic medallist in Modern Pentathlon and one of most lauded running coaches in history, who died on September 12 at the age of 92.

Born in Detroit, Michigan on April 26, 1933, Daniels was still an infant when his family moved to the Bay Area of California. He spent almost his entire life devoted to sport as an athlete, an Olympian, a trail-blazing coach and exercise scientist, and an author.

An accomplished swimmer in his younger years, Daniels achieved his breakthrough Olympic moment at the 1956 Games in Melbourne, Australia as part of a formidable USA team. Alongside William Andre and George Lambert, Daniels helped guide the Americans to a Team silver medal in Modern Pentathlon.

Four years later at the 1960 Summer Olympic Games in Rome, Italy, Daniels was back on the podium, alongside Lambert again and Robert Beck as they secured a Team bronze.

A graduate of physical education and mathematics from the University of Montana in 1955, Daniels served a year in the US Army in Korea. He won a military triathlon consisting of pistol shooting, swimming, and running despite describing himself as “a terrible runner”.

Having mastered running enough to make his Olympic breakthrough in 1956, Daniels’ obsession with exercise science and performance took hold. In the lead up to his second Olympics, he juggled his Pentathlon training with further research. He spent 1959 studying anatomy and psychology at Stockholm’s Royal Gymnastic Central Institute in Sweden. Later in the 1960s, he pursued two advanced degrees in physical education and exercise physiology, an M.Ed. from the University of Oklahoma (1965) and a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin (1969).

Daniels’ coaching career took him across America and the world with prolific results. He helped Joan Benoit Samuelson claim the first ever Women’s Olympic marathon at the 1984 Games and held over a dozen senior coaching positions during his career. His method, dubbed the ‘Daniels’ Running Formula’ has been lauded and Daniel was named ‘the World’s Best Coach’ by the esteemed Runner’s World Magazine.

Daniels is survived by his wife Nancy and their daughters, Audra and Sarah.

Dr Doug Stull (USA), UIPM Executive Board Member and Medical Committee Chair, paid tribute to Daniels. Both Stull and his wife Lori Norwood, a former pentathlete, experienced Daniels’ methods first-hand.

“What a brilliant, kind, humble man. He was as passionate about running as anyone I’ve known and Lori and I were both lucky to have had him as a coach back then,” Dr Stull said.

“We had an instant connection given our mutual participation and love for Modern Pentathlon. His training philosophy, which was ahead of its time, just made sense, and especially connected with my empirically-based mind, certainly inspired me as my career in medicine began.

“We were sad to learn of his passing but his impact on distance running will be relevant for all time.”