

BIG MAN

ON CAMPUS

GRADUATES

If you graduated from UBC sometime in the last 25 years, you've met this man. He's also the guy who crafted the most respected (and popular) intramural program in Canada.

NESTOR KORCHINSKY has met about 90,000 UBC graduates during the 25 years (and 300 graduation ceremonies) he's served as the university's congregation marshal. Add that to his 35-year run as assistant professor and director of Intramural Sports and you come up with an outstanding career. But like all good things, and all good people, his time has come. Immediately after the last graduate is officially admitted at the upcoming spring convocation, the big man himself will bid farewell to Point Grey. It promises to be a hell of a party.

Nestor "Nick" Korchinsky came to UBC in 1967 as a newly hired lecturer in the school of Physical Education. He took over a fledgling intramural sports program and built it into the largest and most comprehensive in North America. His motivation was simple: a passion for sport and the creative energy to use it as a tool to enhance UBC's learning environment.

"My life changed in 1977," says former student Joan Pilcher Webster. "He was this enormous man who walked into the classroom with an idea for a new intramural event and he wanted a student to help organize it. He came in like a hurricane, full of energy, humour and creativity, and so alive. I wanted to be a part of that world." Webster became the first full time administrator in the Intramural Sports department.

Hurricane Nestor blew in from the plains of eastern Alberta, the son of Ukrainian immigrants who settled in Vegreville. He attended the University of Alberta where he was a conference all-star basketball and football player. A naturally gifted athlete with an imposing 6'5" frame, he swam for the



Nestor Korchinsky defined intramural sports at UBC and across Canada. He retires this year.

university in a championship meet one day and played an entire basketball game later that evening.

His first road trip with Alberta's basketball team was to UBC. "I remember riding in a van out to War Memorial Gym," he recalls, "and seeing these beautiful surroundings, the golf course and these gorgeous homes where I imagined the faculty must live."

Fate intervened four years later. Shortly after he completed an MA in Physical Education, his adviser returned from a conference where he learned that UBC was looking for a person with a peculiar combination of skills – someone who could coach football, basketball and teach swimming. He told Korchinsky, "you'll be getting a phone call from a Bob Osborne." Osborne, who was one of Canada's finest basketball players and coaches in the '30s and '40s, was the director of UBC's school of Physical Education.

Korchinsky recalls the phone call he received the next day. "He said 'How does \$8,400 a year sound?' I said that sounded fantastic. He said 'how do you feel about starting August 1?' I said that would be fantastic. I think it was probably the quickest appointment ever made at UBC."

And one of the best, according to UBC Athletics historian Fred Hume.

"He took UBC's program to a prototypical level in Canada," says Hume. "It has been acknowledged nationally as the standard to which other universities should aspire."

His vision for a sport and recreation program was sparked shortly after his arrival in 1967. Standing on the north plaza of War Memorial

Gym looking out at the empty field (now home to the Student Recreation Centre), he thought back to his days at Alberta where, ironically, UBC graduates Maury Van Vliet and Clare Drake had helped create an outstanding athletic program. While there was no mistaking the success of UBC's varsity program, there was something missing at UBC that was in evidence at Alberta.

"I was overcome by the silence and it suddenly struck me that UBC didn't have a soul," he recalls. What UBC missed, he felt, was an intramural sport program that would provide opportunities for all students, regardless of their ability.

"Academics give a university its character," he says. "Extracurricular activities give a university its personality. Together they give it a soul." He saw UBC as a commuter campus to which students would travel, go to class, and go home. "It was like a bus stop in a student's day." He immediately went to Dick Ramsey, the

BY DON WELLS

faculty adviser to Intramural Sports, who then went to Osborne to tell him about Korchinsky's vision. Ramsey returned later that afternoon and gave him the news. "You're in charge."

The program, which now has 8 sports leagues and a wide range of special events, began to take shape in the early '80s after the participation numbers justified hiring Joan Webster as associate director. Together, she and Korchinsky built the department into one of the crown jewels in Canadian post-secondary education.

The special events programs are open to local high school students, part of a strategy to link the university with the community and attract students looking for a unique university experience. The annual triathlon exemplifies his think-big attitude, attracting participants from across North America and eventually becoming the official Canadian University Championship.

But sometimes thinking big works too well. One day while rummaging through a collection of old trophies, he uncovered a tarnished cup engraved with the words "Arts 20 Relay." The race, cancelled during World War 11, traced the route of the Great Trek from the old Fairview campus to Point Grey. He decided to resurrect it.

It became an enormous event, but ultimately too successful. The 5,000 odd participants so congested traffic on Oak Street one year that an airport-bound diplomat missed an international flight and complained to city governors, who asked Korchinsky to restrict it to the campus. Confined to Point Grey, it lacked the historic element and



participation numbers dwindled until it was eventually shelved for a second time.

One of the most simple but compelling testimonies of his reputation came from a UBC student who was a friend of another young man who eventually became Korchinsky's step-son. The stepson-to-be told his buddy that his mother had become close friends with a professor from UBC named Nestor Korchinsky. Asked if he had heard of him, the friend replied "Nestor Korchinsky is a (expletive) legend at UBC."

He earned part of his reputation through the vibrant social life he encouraged among student staff of Intramural Sports. Following one festive departmental Christmas party in SUB, Korchinsky and two staffers took a half-full keg of beer down the hall to the Pit Pub, where a long line of students waited in vain to enter. Korchinsky and company lifted spirits by handing each student a pint.

He shakes his head, relieved to have survived such spontaneous, but harmless indiscretions. The truth is that his popularity was founded primarily upon the opportunities he provided for students.

"He launched careers," says Webster. "He took a very corporate approach to running the department," explaining how 125 students were hired each year to run the entire program, including 11 support departments responsible for research and development, communication, recognition and community outreach. "Nestor made it clear that it wasn't his program; it was theirs," said Webster. "He didn't want recognition for anything either; that too was for the students."

He named sport leagues and divisions after students who had contributed extraordinarily to the program's development. He also insisted on each year having a theme, based on a student survey to determine the needs of the campus population. One year was devoted to female participants when the R&D team concluded that many female students had never been in a gymnasium. Another year's theme was communication, in which he and Webster launched UBC TV as well as a weekly sports newspaper, *The Point*, currently in its 15th year of publication.

Corporations including McDonald's and Coca-Cola took notice of the participation

numbers and signed up as sponsors. By the late '80s, the program had outgrown UBC's sport facilities. Labatt Breweries and the AMS then teamed up with the university to build the Student Recreation Centre.

As Korchinsky prepares to depart, his program attracts as many as 11,000 students annually to at least one of its leagues or events. It's clearly one of the dominant features of UBC student life and a legacy that is bound to endure long after he is gone. The irony is that Korchinsky himself doesn't appear to have any less energy than he did in 1967, and in fact, his retirement is an early one. He says he is merely following his mother's advice to preserve some energy for his senior years.

"I'm not an old fart," he said recently. "I've still got energy, I've still got drive. There's just a limit to it now."

Many friends still can't believe he is leaving the university with which he has enjoyed a 35-year love affair. Most feel that he has earned his place among the likes of Gordon Shrum, Frank Gnuip, Bob Osborne, Marilyn Pomfret, Bus Phillips, Harry Warren, Barbara "Bim" Schrodt, Bob Hindmarch, Buzz Moore and Father David Bauer – educators and sports figures who left indelible marks on UBC and its students.

As he subs out of the biggest game of his life, he will no doubt receive a well-deserved ovation. Webster promises that his May 31st send-off at the Hotel Vancouver Ballroom will be a grand event with some special guest appearances and more than a few surprises.

Typically, Nestor Korchinsky will leave UBC in the same manner as he arrived – like a hurricane. ♦

Nestor Korchinsky and Sue Demaine

RETIREMENT PARTY

Saturday, May 31, 2003

Hotel Vancouver

Former Intramural Sports administrators

please sign up at:

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