



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

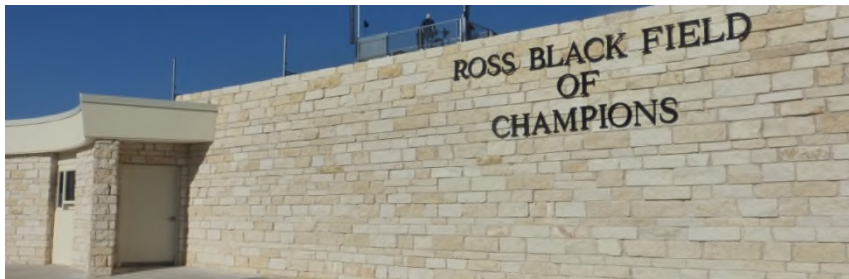
A Field for a Champion

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April 30, 2015

Walt Whitman was one of the most influential (and beloved) poets in America. He was shunned by more conservative readers because his *Leaves of Grass* was judged to be obscene. Apparently, Mr. Whitman's leaves of grass did not cover enough of the human anatomy. Nonetheless, as a pioneer in free verse, he wrote these thoughts. They came to mind as I sat down to write this essay about my brother Ross Black:

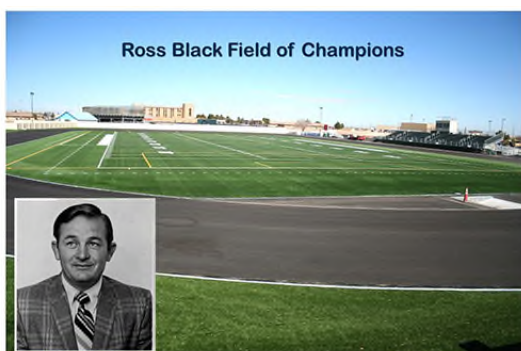
We try often, though we fall back often. A brave delight, fit for freedom's athletes, fills these arenas, and fully satisfies, out of the action in them, irrespective of success.¹



On April 18, 2015, a track and field stadium was dedicated to Ross, who had passed away last year. As seen in the figure to the left, it is called the *Ross Black Field of Champions*. It is located at New Mexico

Junior College, (NMJC), a school where Ross coached basketball, and track and field teams.

The name was aptly chosen. Ross was a champion athlete and as a coach, produced many championship athletes and a track and field team that won the national championship for junior colleges in 1971. (Four members of this team were in attendance.) The facility is top-notch. With additional seating planned, it will surely become a site for major junior college track and field meets.



The figure on the left shows a picture of the new facility and a photo of Ross as a young coach. The reader can go to the NMJC website to learn more about Ross' career and highlights of his exploits.² I would like to use this space to take the story onto a couple additional routes: the effect teachers can have on their students and the scope of these effects in relation to fame.

In my youth, my role models were my older brothers and several teachers. Ross served several functions during my youth: my coach (of the high school basketball team, where I sat a record for gathering splinters on the bench), my older brother, and as model for what a father should and could be. For the latter role, I watched Ross and his wife Cherrill as a young couple during

¹ Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 1871 in Leonard Roy Frank, *Quotationary* (New York, Random House, 2001), 233.

² <http://www.nmjc.edu/whatis happening/mediareleases.asp?storyid=1173>

my junior high and high school years. While my parents were supportive, they had few clues about child-rearing. It was my staying with Ross and Cherrill that I learned about the partnership of marriage and parenthood.

It is impossible to measure or perhaps even guess with any accuracy the effects our family and teachers can have on our personalities, our dispositions, even our very natures. But we know, each of us, that the effects are profound. That is the tragedy of so many poor and under-privileged children in the world. They have very little chance of succeeding in much of anything.

I have had discussions (late into the too-late nights) with friends about the question of how influential can a person be if the pond in which the person is swimming is small? Is a junior college track coach in a small rural area of the southwest of less importance than a famous coach, such as Bill Bowerman, of Oregon? (Bowerman coached several national champions as well as several Olympic champions.) Is it best to be in that large pond where the person of influence can influence more of those around him?

Given that I believe much of our nature comes from those with whom we associate, especially during our youths, I suppose Bill Bowerman would be considered a person of more consequence in the world of track and field than Ross Black. Nonetheless for this writer, it is of no consequence.

Several of my brothers and teachers will never be famous. They will never be known as “a big fish in a big pond.” But they are famous to me. Not a week goes by that one or more of them do not come to mind and evoke pleasant memories about what they did for me and how they helped me through my childhood and teenage years. Not a week goes by that I do not miss their presence in my life.

Given the way our society behaves, where Maureen Dawd observes that, “Celebrity is the religion of our time,” I might be in the minority. But I hope not, and I hope most people absorb the positive attributes of those “fish swimming in the same pond as we are,” regardless of their size or the size of the pond in which we swim. Besides, who is to define what big pond is anyway? It’s a relative matter.

One of the lessons I learned from my music teacher and two of my brothers, Tom and Ross was that success does not come easy. They taught me, much through my observations of their behavior, that effort to succeed is as important, perhaps more important, than natural ability. Because this essay is about Ross and champions, I would like to share the story on the next page, which is an excerpt from my *The Light Side of Little Texas*.

During the dedication ceremonies, Hobbs city Commissioner, Garry Buie, Lovington Mayor Scotty Gandy, and Lea County Commissioner Ron Black (no relation) each proclaimed April 18th would be celebrated as Ross Black Day in the cities of Hobbs, Lovington, and Lea County.

Those cities and the county are larger than the state of Rhode Island, the nation of Luxembourg, or even the Vatican. Lovington, Hobbs, and Lea County form a pretty big pond.

From *The Light Side of Little Texas*,
Lea Country Museum Press

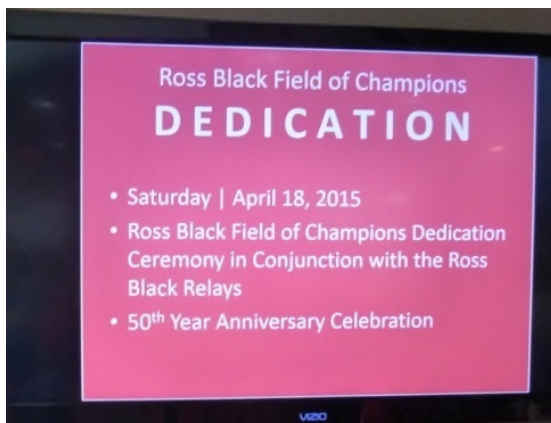
I have mentioned how talented some of my brothers were on the athletic fields. Three of them were high school “all-state” in one or more sports. Some had college athletic scholarships. One was named Athlete of the Year at his university. Two were voted all-conference in their college sports. Another was an All-American in junior college track and field.

They too served as role models, but in a different way. Perhaps one story will explain what I mean. My brother Ross played on a high school basketball team that won the New Mexico state championship. In those days (1949), the state’s athletic programs had no divisions based on population or enrollment. Lovington, a backwater town, defeated school teams from large cities. This championship became the stuff of legends, at least in a small town in New Mexico.

When my brother Ross was a teenager, he developed a love for track and field. His favorite events were the high jump and pole vault. He wanted to practice after hours on the school’s fields, but they were in continuous states of disrepair. Across the street from our home in town was a vacant lot. On this small pasture, Ross constructed a vaulting/jumping pit and a runway. He built a vaulting box and the supports for the cross bar. He borrowed the school’s (Swedish Steel) vaulting pole and went to work.

In those days, synthetic foam had not yet been invented. The high quality vaulting and jumping pits located at major track and field venues were filled with sand. New Mexico had an abundance of sand, but Ross had no way to haul the sand to his private stadium. Without any other alternative, he broke dirt clods into smaller pieces and piled them up where he thought he would land. [One reason he had serious leg problems later in his life.]

Ross worked-out at this private arena almost every day. I watched him jump and vault—over and over again. He was motivated to work on technique; the approach; the lift; repetition in order to excel. He provided motivation to my becoming a better swimmer. If he could do it with a vaulting pole, I could do it with a swim kick.



The dedication ceremonies unveiled the plaque shown to the left. It will be held in memory for as long as the stadium stands. Ross will be held in the memory of the athletes he fostered, mentored, and succeeded for as long as they stand.