

A Lawrence Institution: Don “Red Dog” Gardner and his Dog Days Exercise Program

By Marsha Henry Goff

Don Gardner was in junior high when Coach Nanny Duver nicknamed him “Red Dog.” The moniker stuck all through school, his time in the Marine Corps, his service as a Douglas County Deputy Sheriff and a Lawrence Police Officer. Now, even though his flaming hair has faded, he is known to everyone as “Red Dog,” leader of “Red Dog’s Dog Days,” a free year-round community exercise program he began in 1984.

The program started with six Lawrence High School football players who needed conditioning during the summer. “I had my daughter Leslie taking roll and my friend Jim O’Connell calling out whatever the workout was that I made up. I worked out with them on the Lawrence High football field. It was grass, itchy and awful. The following year, I went to Coach Temple at KU and asked him if we could use the stadium.”

At Dog Days’ new location, Gardner had participants run up the stadium steps in one workout. He admits that was a difficult exercise, but not as hard, he claims, as running up bleachers, which Coach Beatty has his football players do.

Dog Days quickly grew to include community members of all ages, occupations and genders. Gardner says the first adult to attend Dog Days was Stan Herd, an internation-

ally recognized Lawrence artist who still occasionally shows up when he is in town. The oldest participant to date was in his 70s, the youngest, Piper Glide-well, three days old. “Randy and Catherine brought her right out of the hospital,” Gardner says, proudly adding that Piper’s parents “met at Dog Days. We know there have been at least five marriages of couples who met at Dog Days.”

Using a bullhorn, Gardner urged participants to compete: “You married ladies, you go. You high school seniors, you go. College girls, show them how to do it!” Still, he knows there are limitations to what some can do and just expects them to work hard and do their best. He recalls his own limitations running a mile for Lawrence High back in the day. “I was just starting my fourth lap and Billy Mills [Haskell and KU runner who would later win gold in the 1964 Olympics] is finishing.”

Gardner credits his wife Beverly, whom he married in 1995, with streamlining Dog Days. “I had given away all my T-shirts — beer shirts, Jack Daniels, KU, Lawrence High, even West Texas University — to participants. Now, thanks to Bev’s organization, everything runs smoothly.” Additionally, he praises those who have assisted him through the years — helpers, sponsors, participants — and believes the success of the program is due to them.



Early arrivals line up for some stretching exercises.

Each year, a special Red Dog’s Dog Days T-shirt, highly coveted, is given to participants who complete the required number of sessions in a designated time. To pay for the T-shirts, Gardner solicits sponsorships from businesses whose names are printed on the back of the shirt. There are so many eager to help that, Gardner says, “Get ten feet away and you can’t read the names.”

During the winter, Dog Days’ sessions were held in Allen Fieldhouse. However, present rules do not allow the use of the stadium or fieldhouse so Dog Days’ sessions are held in South Park. The adjacent Community Building is used during

inclement weather. Sessions are held twice a day at 6:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Dog Days also has a Saturday Run beginning at 7:30 a.m. “So many people like to be outside that, unless it’s just zero, we’ll have anywhere from 15 to 55 running in the cold,” Don marvels. “And I’ll tell them, ‘Go!’ and I’ll run and get in my truck.”

Dog Days’ largest session, held in the stadium several years ago, consisted of 1,004 participants, including Seal Team Four and the first — Chrissie Wellington of Britain — and second finishers in the Ladies Ironman Triathlon. Later, in

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Saint Louis at another Iron-man competition, Gardner was approached by a British soldier who happily announced that he had just “married number one.”

In 32 years of Red Dog’s Dog Days, there have been very few medical emergencies or injuries. “We had a kid running up the bleacher seats, high school, and he split his shin open and Jim O’Connell was just sure we’d get sued and the next day — that’s when we ran noon and evening — the next noon, here came the mother,” Don says. “Jim, he took off, ‘She’s going to sue us.’ And she said, ‘Mr. Red Dog, I want to thank you for what you do for my boy. The doctor taped him up and said he can’t run the stairs this week, but then you get on him.’”

A young girl snapped her wrist trying to break her fall while running backward on the stadium field. Gardner always instructed participants running backwards not to try to break a fall, but to land on their posterior, something the

girl’s father reminded her of as he stood over her on the field. Even when adding one mild heart attack after a session and a fall resulting in a head cut that did not require attention, Dog Days has an exemplary safety record. Gardner, his wife, helpers and some long-time participants are all trained in first aid and CPR.

In his nomination of Gardner for the 2014 Home Instead Senior Care Salute to Senior Service, Jeff Dahnert accurately wrote, “There are countless young people who have made better life choices because of the effect Don Gardner has had on their lives. There are countless adults whose lives have been saved because Don has provided an opportunity for fitness where none may have existed otherwise.”

Don’s passion is improving the lives of kids. In following that passion, he has volunteered for agencies that do exactly that, among them, the Ballard Community Services Center, Van-Go, Inc. and the Boys & Girls Club. It is, therefore, entirely fitting that Lawrence’s new Boys & Girls Teen Center will be named “The Don and Beverly Gardner center for Great Futures.”

Live long, Red Dog!



Gardner displays the 2015 long-sleeve Winter T-shirt while wearing the 2014 Summer T-shirt.

Don “Red Dog” Gardner’s Awards

- Optimist of the Year – Breakfast Optimists, 1989-90
- Friends of Education Award – USD 497, 1989
- Certificate of Outstanding Citizen of the Year – USD 497, 1989-90
- Testimonial of Appreciation – Breakfast Optimists, 1990-91
- Liberty Bell Award – Douglas County Lawyers Association, 1993
- Public Servant Award – KSBA Hall of Fame, 1994
- Heroes Award for the State of Kansas – SGMA (Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association), 1996
- Top Ten in the Nation finalist – SGMA Heroes, 1996
- Sportsman of the year – David Lawrence Sports Talk – KLWN/KLZR, 2000
- Lawrence Lions Alumni Association Hall of Honor, 2002
- Outstanding Contribution to Lawrence Athletics – David Lawrence Sports Talk – KLWN/KLZR, 2003
- Don Volker Leadership Award – Chamber of Commerce, 2005
- Hometown Health Hero – Governor’s Council on Fitness, 2006
- Silent Hero Award – Ballard Community Center, 2007
- Star of Excellence Award – Lawrence Bank, 2008
- Seaver Award for Community Service – Senior Center, 2010
- President’s Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition Community Leadership Award (one of only 28 such Awards for 2010), 2010
- Local Winner (State of Kansas) – Home Instead Senior Care Salute to Senior Service, 2014

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