

By Dalton Carver  
Staff reporter

Encouraged by his uncle and brother to get into running, Jim Helmer, head cross country and men's track coach, discovered that he had a talent. "I found out real quick as a ninth grader that it was something I could do much better than most people," he said.

"I just always loved to run," said Helmer, who grew up near Lyons, Kan. "Out there in the country, I ran to get the cows. I ran all over the place. It was just enjoyable to me."

Helmer eventually came to Southwestern College as a biology and education major, where he used his talent at the collegiate level. Helmer competed on relay teams that shattered several school records. "Back then, I was

ence, got better than we were and had a better race than we did."

Other than disappointment, Helmer said the end of the streak was liberating as well. "It was a bit of a relief that I didn't have to struggle to find a way to keep that streak going for one more year," said Helmer. "That ended and now we can focus on what's really important."

Helmer finds that accepting loss is just as important as celebrating success. "I think we've tried to prepare our athletes to be at their best when it matters the most," he said. "After the smoke clears, and we figure out who won and who didn't, just deal with it."

"You prepare to be the best of your ability. You don't take shortcuts, and you put yourself in a position to be at your best when it counts the most," he said. "Then,

love to do," he said. "I'm going to go to practice and meets. I'm going to take care of meet results, records and statistics. I just mowed the cross country course yesterday. I'm going to keep maintaining that."

"As long as I'm here, professionally speaking, it's my life. I knew I shouldn't walk out and never come back," he said. "I'll have a lot more flexible schedule and I'm looking forward to that. I'm going to stay attached and stay involved."

Jimmy Bryant, associate head cross country coach, is slated to be Helmer's replacement. Many may believe those shoes are too big to fill, but Helmer sees the ingredients in him.

"Jimmy was a three-time All-American here. He was an Academic All-American and he spent

## Veteran coach races toward retirement with record setting career

on the two-mile relay, the distance relay and the mile relay," he said. "In 1970, the mile relay placed sixth in the national championship."

After graduating in 1971, Helmer taught biology, health and physical education at Winfield High School before returning to Southwestern College in 1979 to coach cross country and track.

He found success quickly, and Helmer became known as the coach who won the KCAC cross country championship 31 years in a row. That streak continued until the fall of 2011, when Friends University found the finish line before Southwestern for the first time in 31 years.

"I didn't want to see that streak end, but I always knew that streaks like that don't last forever," said Helmer. "It was disappointing, probably more so for guys on the team that were the first ones not to win in 31 years."

"We had a good team, as good or better than a lot of the teams we've had win championships," he said. "It was just that somebody, finally, in a 10-team confer-

if you don't win, you get up the next day and go about your business."

Even though he's found a lot of success, Helmer can pick out some of his favorite instances. "Watching my son and daughter become All-Americans in track, that was extra special to me as a coach and a dad," Helmer said.

"And I think as time went on, I got as much pleasure from watching one of the slowest runners on our team set a personal best and maybe score one point in a conference championship meet and feel how rewarding that is."

As he approaches retirement, Helmer doesn't believe there is a perfect time to retire. "I'll be 64 in [five] days," he said. "I always knew I didn't want to coach forever. No one can coach forever."

"It was just a combination of things that I knew it was time to make a change," he said. "I have no thoughts of 'I should have done this 10 years ago.' It just feels like it's time to shift gears."

Helmer said that he won't completely detach himself from the program. "I'm going to continue to do some of the things that I

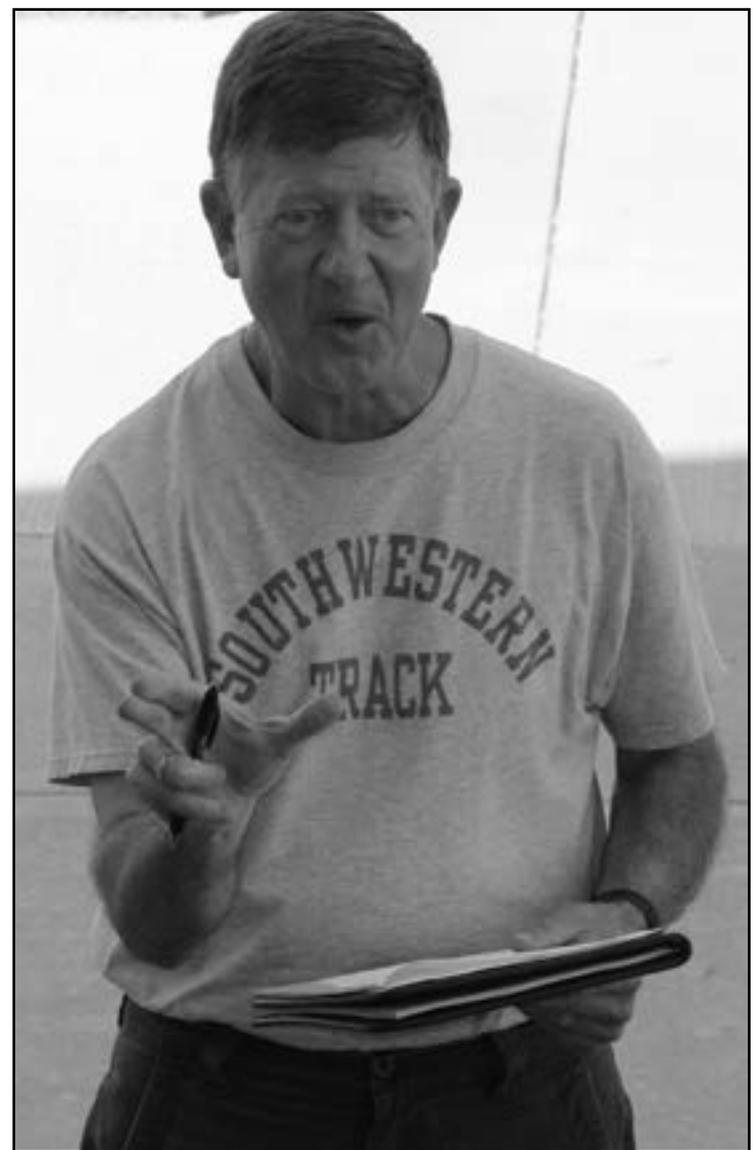
the last two years at Cumberland University in Kentucky as a graduate assistant," said Helmer. "He coached about 10 All-Americans last year. He's already proven that he knows what to do and he's a Builder. He has a passion for this place."

As if Bryant were there in the room, Helmer began listing off advice for the future head coach. "Work hard. Pay attention to details. Be organized. And be consistent and persistent," he said. "Be bulldog-stubborn about the doing the right things over and over and keep your perspective on what's really important."

"Also, be passionate about being good. Try to continue the quality of excellence that's been going on for a long time," Helmer said. "I don't believe in settling for average if you have an opportunity to be better than that."

Helmer has been at Southwestern College since his college days in the 1970s. He's seen the differences in students then and now.

"I think many of them have a different lifestyle now. Thirty years ago, it might have been you go play stickball with your



Jim Helmer, head cross country and men's track coach, praises the team for last meet's results before they head out to practice. Helmer will be retiring at the end of this season. He has been the cross country coach at Southwestern College since 1979. (Dalton Carver/ Collegian photographer)

friends. Now it's video games and modern technology," he said. "There's just so much to keep them amused and entertained, rather than physically active and they're probably not as hard working as what they used to be overall."

Helmer has learned about himself, as well as his athletes and students. He described his coaching personality as "demanding and competitive."

"I think I'm the kind of coach that can get athletes to do what needs to be done and there's a bit of fear factor there that if they don't get it done, there will be consequences," he said. "I'm fairly tough. A good motivator and at the same time, pretty compassionate and really patient with screw-ups and issues, because I know they're young people."

"They're comfortable to be

around me. They're not scared to be in my presence. They trust me, I trust them and we have a good relationship," he said. "I've been doing this for a long, long time. I think I'm a compassionate coach too."

The most visible part of Helmer's legacy may be the 31-year streak, the national trophies and the top 10 finishes. "Those are things you put on the wall and people see that," he said. "But more importantly, I thankfully had the opportunity of getting my athletes prepared for the more important things in life. I've just learned so much."

There may not be a perfect time to say good-bye.

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