

Tribute to our friend and team mate Penny Thompson

Good afternoon. My name is Bill Corcoran. I was Penny's cross country running coach. I knew her for about 6 or 7 years, and I got to know her a bit better over the past three. Penny and I have travelled together to a number of races around the province and around the country and gone head-to-head as competitors in running and x-country skiing.

On behalf of Wolves Athletics, the College, and the local running community, I'd like to express our deepest condolences to Lyle, Lyle and Penny's family, and her many friends and colleagues.

When someone passes away and people come forward with rememberances, you often learn many new things about that person. Some of you may have visited the Facebook site "In Memory of Penny Thompson" this week and learned some pretty interesting stuff about Penny. I know I did. For example, this week I learned

- Penny was born in England
- Penny had the messiest binder in the entire Grande Cache High School
- Penny went through a Boy George phase sometime in her late teens or early twenties

I only knew Penny the Athlete really well – I think Penny the Boy George Fan Club President would have been a pretty cool person to hang out with.

Anyhow, I'm going to stick to what I know this afternoon and speak a little about Penny the Athlete.

As some of you know, Penny came to sports later in life. I've been told she wasn't an athlete at all until the tail end of her first university degree. Her progress was amazing. Starting from scratch in her mid 20s she became a force in a number of sports: mountain biking, x-country skiing, cycling, triathlon, biathlon, road running, and x-country running. She won scores of local and regional races over the years.

I like to relate a couple of stories about Penny the Athlete that speak to her fine character and sense of fun

My favourite Penny story has to do with the Birkebeiner, a 55 km x-c ski race where you have to carry a 12 lb pack. A few years ago, after she won her second straight women's title, I got it in my head that I was going to beat her in the race next year. And for those of you who know me, on occasion, I'm not exactly the world's most humble person.

So every time I saw Penny over the next 12 months, I'd say something like, "I hope you're training hard for the Birke, because you'll need to be very fit if you want to keep up with me," or "I'm skiing very well, are you sure you really want to race me this year?" Every time I baited her, she just smiled at me and said nothing.

Race day came and I skied very well – I finished about 10 minutes faster than I had planned. Moreover, I didn't see Penny once in the race – surely I must have kicked her butt. Wrong!

I met up with her about 15 minutes later, we compared times, and she had finished about 10 minutes in front of me. Penny didn't gloat, she just smiled and congratulated me on a good race. I walked away and thought "Hey, I got off pretty easy."

Two days later I showed up for work and noticed a large pink banner on my office door. In 5 inch high letters was written G-I-R-L-E-D – girled. Yes, I'd be been girled by Penny Thompson and now I was being publicly taken to task for my year of trash talk.

I left the banner up for a few days. Then I took it down and stuck it to the side of my filing cabinet. I was going to use this for motivation. Every time I looked at that banner, I was supposed to be inspired to train harder so that next year so I wouldn't be girled by Penny again.

Well the next Birke came, and the result was the same. And in the Birke after that, yep, the result was the same again. And in every other x-c ski race I went head to head with Penny, I lost – some times by a little, often times by a lot.

Last summer I moved my office and threw the banner out. It had no motivational value – I was never going to beat her at x-c skiing. It did have some educational value though – I had learned to shut up and be a bit more humble.

My second story about Penny the Athlete is about getting her to joining the x-country team at GPRC. I'd tried for a few years to get her to run for the team, but in 2004 she finally agreed. A week before the provincial championships, she had run a few times just to prove to herself that she could go 5 kms without hurting her Achilles Tendons. Apart from that, that's all the running she'd done all season.

On race day, she took off like a shot and the pre-race favourites were wondering "who the hell is this." Penny led the race until about 500m to go and was passed by 2 women just before the finish line. In her first ever x-country running race she ended up 3rd in the provincial college championships.

Two weeks later at Nationals, she employed the same strategy and ended up in 4th place. While most people would be pretty darn satisfied with a 4th at Nationals, Penny wasn't. Next year was going to be different – next year she was going to win it all.

So during the spring and summer of 2005, Penny added running to the list of things she raced at. When she showed up for cross country season in September she was ready to go. In her first race, she destroyed a field that not only included college runners, but the best U of A runners too. She won 3 more races before provincials to boot.

Now, unfortunately, life is not always like a Disney movie and Penny didn't end up winning Nationals that year. She blew out a calf muscle at Provincials and ended up 6th place. Two weeks later at Nationals, essentially running on one leg, she gutted out a 5th place finish.

While she may not have won, but she impressed everyone with her commitment to a goal, tenacity, and overall toughness.

My third story about Penny the Athletes is more of a general observation. Boy could that girl eat – both in quantity and frequency. You could always count on Penny to be stuffing her face with a bowl of oatmeal 30 minutes before a race. I think she must have had a cast iron stomach.

I hope I've been able to illustrate that the Penny I knew was an independent, smart, compassionate, competitive, humble, hard working, and fun loving person. A number of her team mates have told me this week that "Penny was my role model." Now I'm sure she never consciously set out to be a role model to anyone – it wasn't in her nature to be loud and showy. She just did her thing and did it well. But her actions certainly spoke louder than her words.

Penny we missed you at the Steve Burgess race last Saturday. And we'll miss you at the cross country running, mountain biking, biathlon, cross country skiing, road running, and cycling races in and around the area in the upcoming years. Penny, you inspired us with your tenacity, work ethic, and competitive spirit. And we're all better athletes, and a better people, for having known you.

Rest in peace.

The preceding tribute was read at Penny's Memorial service on September 21, 2007 in Grande Prairie