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The Hays Daily News

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Retired coach keeps eye on FHSU

By ADELE SHAVER
Hays Daily News

Alex Francis keeps his eye on Fort Hays State University athletics.

The retired faculty member and track and field coach can see the university's Lewis Field Stadium from his home.

"I go down there every night. I check everyone out, see what they're doing," Francis said recently.

Francis attended FHSU from 1931 to 1935 and returned in 1946 to coach and teach for 34 years, retiring in 1980.

FHSU students recognized the familiar figure by voting last year to name the stadium track after him and the Board of Regents formally approved the recommendation Sept. 17.

Both the track and football field are slated for renovation next year with \$1.25 million in bonds paid with student activity fees committed in the same election.

Those bond sales now await final legislative approval.

The artificial turf field and rubberized track, the first phase of the renovation of the stadium, are expected to be complete by next fall, when dedication ceremonies will be scheduled, according to FHSU President Edward Hammond.

Francis, 82, also taught golf and, even with an artificial knee, still plays as often as five days a week with a group he refers to as "a bunch of outlaws."

"I'm very popular," he said. "They can all beat me."

He added, "I've had my day, though."

During his historic tenure at FHSU, Lowell Alexander Francis became known as the "dean of Kansas track coaches."

He coached 139 students to All-American status; his cross country teams won four National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics titles and finished runners-up four times.

His track teams captured 14 league titles, his cross country teams won 11 league titles and his teams won numerous District 10 (Kansas) titles.

Internationally known for his expertise, he was asked by the United States government during the 1960s to serve as a track and field specialist for the Vietnamese national team.

He was named head coach of the Western Hemisphere AAU team which toured Europe; was the U.S. coach of a track and field



Alex Francis, retired Fort Hays State University track coach and faculty member, stands near the track at Lewis Field Stadium. The track, which is slated with the football field to undergo a \$1.25 million renovation next year, will be named after Francis.

team in the Pan American games; coached a U.S. Olympic team in Nevada; and was a member of the U.S. Olympic Committee for 18 years.

He was the first president of the NAIA Track and Field Coaches Association and has been named to the Helm's Athletic Foundation Hall of Fame, the Kansas State

High School Activities Association Hall of Fame and was recipient of the Outstanding Faculty Member Award at FHSU.

The Dunbar, Neb., native attended high school in Oberlin and, after earning his bachelor's degree from FHSU, where he lettered in football and track, coached in Oberlin and Abilene high schools.

He also holds a master's degree from the University of Missouri, Columbia.

"It sure will be nice to see the track," Francis said.

The cinder track, built by the WPA in the 1930s, is no longer used.

"It was obsolete when they put it in," Francis said.

Cinders are hard on the runners' legs and the loose surface can

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cause slipping.

Sliding "used to hurt a lot on relays. You just closed your eyes and hoped you made a pass," Francis said.

"If we could get a really good track, it will mean a lot to the program."

Coaching is "pretty much the same fundamentals," Francis said.

"The secret is getting those good guys."

"One thing that helped me, I was here all the time. I had a guy and his dad or his son. One family I had three generations.

"I was always pretty proud of

that," Francis said.

At least one of his first student athletes, Virgil Jacobs, still lives in Hays.

Before he graduated, Francis said, his very first coaching job was at the nearly forgotten William Picken Training School, a high school set up for training teachers at Picken Hall.

"All kinds of people never heard of it," Francis said.

The school had only two graduating classes before being closed as too costly.

Jacobs played center on Francis' basketball team.

"We had a pretty good team. We were fast, but we weren't tall. One year we won all our games

except one," Jacobs said.

"I loved those guys, they really fought. At the coliseum, they were hard to beat," Francis said.

"I can hardly go some place where I don't see someone I coached or had in class.

"It doesn't matter. Normally, you like them all."

"Really and truly, I had the best job in the world, fooling with track and cross country," Francis said.

The winning effort was always a goal.

"My philosophy is go out and beat somebody," Francis said.

"You can run without any guts, but you can't beat anybody."