

THE DECATHLON ASSOCIATION

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BIL GILBERT OBITUARY

Bil Gilbert
Augusta, Michigan
1927-2102

Naturalist, author and friend
RIP.



Hello Again..... The inclusion of an obituary in the DECA Newsletter is a rarity. In the previous 32 years of newsletters it has happened but three times. But my friend Bil Gilbert died last evening and you should know of his influence on our sport. Bil was one of America's top writers, a contributing editor at *Sports Illustrated* and won so many awards for his writing that they it would be unworkable to enumerate them all here. Of his books, *Westering Man*, *God Gave Us This Country*, *Natural Coincidence*, and *Our Nature*, are the best known and have earned the highest reviews. Suffice to say that when he was inducted into the Journalism Hall of Fame some time back it was for a lifetime of outstanding work as America's top magazine writer. (aside: frequently irascible, he claimed it was the only time he was induced to wear a tuxedo). For more than 30 years, Bil (not "Bill") was the fellow who wrote long, serious pieces that stamped *SI* as a thoughtful magazine. He was a long time contributor to *Smithsonian Magazine*, had numerous articles reprinted in *Readers Digest*, and so on. His stories and essays (more than 400) appeared in so many of the nation's top magazines that some colleges began to offer literary courses in "Bil Gilbert."

So why is he now part of the *DECA Newsletter*? Until just a few years ago Bil was



Bil Gilbert, 1927-2012

a neighbor, living in Fairfield, PA a small town just over the Maryland state line. He dabbled as a youth track and field coach and frequently used the track at the local college where I worked. We became fast friends and he once asked why I spent so much time with the decathlon, an event he thought was just for mediocre athletes. I replied that I was a numbers person and published record books and results for DECA, a non-profit arm that never had more than \$32 in its treasury. "What the hell is DECA?" he asked. I replied "that's exactly what the IRS wants to know." That conversation led to a lengthy 1979 decathlon

story in *SI*, and, although he might have been reluctant to admit it, made Bil a decathlon fan. A few years later he found a publisher (Leisure Press-Human Kinetics) for my first book, *Decathlon*. Bil provided advice and encouragement for all of my succeeding decathlon books. We collaborated on a number of stories including his *SI Classic* gem on Fait Elkins, a Caddo Indian who was the national decathlon champion in the 1920s. It's why we once found ourselves in Southeastern Oklahoma interviewing the remnants of Elkins' relatives. At the time of Bil's death he was working on a historical novel about Elkins and the 1920s Gatsby era. We researched together at some of the nation's best (and least known) libraries, from the National War College (site of the former Carlisle Indian School), the National Sporting Library in Middleburg, VA, and the Wisconsin Historical Society Library in Madison. And others. He, more than he ever realized, was responsible for much of my decathlon publications which continue to this day. I did not had to be told that there would never much of a market for decathlon books...records, history, training, whatever. Regardless, Bil always encouraged me to write and publish maintaining that, as he would say..."someday, 50 years from now, someone will find your books on a library shelf, read them and claim 'I'm really glad we have a record of all this.'" Bil Gilbert is the reason, *by the time I retire*, I want to have a complete and comprehensive record of our event. Interestingly, Bil recently wrote the forward for one of my upcoming books.

But what he provided mostly was friendship. Bil was a writer of social and natural history. I'm an economist. He claimed that, rationally, it is surprising that the two of us had been such close friends for so long because temperamentally and vocationally we are a fairly odd couple. He favored crows, I cats. I favored numbers, he words. Bil once asserted that "one word was worth a thousand numbers." We met for lunch (until he moved

back to Michigan) virtually every Saturday for twenty+ years. Arguing on the merits of his Detroit Tigers and my St. Louis Cardinals, our bets never exceeded \$2, but provided plenty of fodder for discussion. Yet, for me, his most important gift was introducing me to golf. An amateur champion while growing up in Michigan and later at Georgetown, Bil had located a small and beautiful golf course in the hills of Adams County, PA and we played frequently. I can now be found at that same course every summer afternoon. I owe Bil Gilbert a lot and so does our event. I'll miss him terribly.

*Frank Zarnowski
Emmitsburg, MD
January 28, 2012.*