Meet Our NEACSM Past President

NEACSM's 11th President: Lee N. Cunningham

Education: B.S. Springfield College, 1958; M.Ed. University of Massachusetts, 1963; D.P.E. Springfield College, 1979

Current or most recent affiliation: Professor of Physical Education and Department Chair, Fitchburg State College, Fitchburg, MA Retired in 2000. Professor Emeritus. Since 2000 I have be an Independent Contractor for Health Metrics, Inc. a small company that develops valid Physical Ability Tests primarily for public safety departments.

Honors & Awards: Distinguished Service Award, Fitchburg State College, 1982; SGA Faculty member of the year, Fitchburg State College, 1982; Sarnicki Manuscript Award, American Association of Diabetes Educators, 1982; Fellow of the American College of Sports Medicine, 1985; Emeritus Fellow of the American College of Sports Medicine, 2013; Honor Award, MAHPERD, 1992; Honor Award, NEACSM, 1993; Vincent J. Mara Award for Teaching Excellence, Fitchburg State College, 1998; Cunningham Gymnasium. Honored by the Narragansett Regional School District by having the Middle-School Gym (The old one) named as above for 8 years of coaching, athletic directing, and teaching physical education during the developmental years of this new Regional High School in Massachusetts.; Lee N. Cunningham Pavilion. Honored by the Joslin Diabetes Foundation by having the Pavilion at the E. P. Joslin Camp for diabetic boys named as above. Early in my career I was the summertime Director of the Joslin Camp for 12 years and served as a cabin counselor, waterfront director and program director for 4 years while in college.

Professional Interests: General Exercise Physiology, physiology of distance running, and exercise and diabetes

NEACSM Service

1. What first inspired you to enter the Exercise Science/ Sports Medicine Field?

I always had an interest in science when in high school and did have a minor in Biology at Springfield. However, my dream was to be a HS and college basketball coach, teach PE and direct an athletic program. Consequently in my undergraduate days the focus was on coaching and teaching and not the science of sport.

2. What made you decide to pursue your advance degree and/ or line of research/service?

After eight successful years of high school coaching, teaching physical eduction, and developing the athletic program at a brand new regional high school in Massachusetts (1959-1967), I had an opportunity to move to the college level. At Fitchburg State College I directed the intramural program, coached varsity basketball and taught physical activity courses. After two to three years the college curriculum committee voted to abolish the two-year required physical activity skills courses and in its place the department suggested a three SH, semester long, course in health & fitness. The course was developed from programs and textbooks from the University of Toledo and Michigan State. I soon realized I did not know much about health and fitness. UMass was offering free tuition to state college faculty who needed to earn additional credits or an advanced degree. The exercise science department at UMass was just starting. I took courses and needless to say I was in over my head. I was learning a lot and the UMass exercise science faculty were very sensitive to my dilemma and helpful given my situation. Needless to say at that point in my career the direction had changed. My interest in athletics was on a downward slope and my interest in exercise physiology on the upward slope. That was when I made the decision to "shift gears" and pursue the doctoral degree at Springfield with a specialization in exercise physiology and to drop basketball coaching.

3. As a student, who were your mentors and what role did they play in your professional development?

I had great advice from Dr. D.W. Edington and Dr. Walter Kroll at UMass. Dr. Edington in particular, although a biochemist, was very interested in "bridging the gap" between the gym and the laboratory in terms of scientific knowledge related to exercise. We presented programs at physical education conferences locally and nationally and eventually published a book called "Biological Awareness." Fortunately the knowledge gap has been met by the number of good undergraduate exercise science program where students are well prepared to spread the word about "exercise as medicine." Dr. Wayne Sinning who headed the Physiological Research Lab and Dr. Emery Seymour who was Director of Graduate Studies at Springfield and taught doctoral level research and statistics. Dr. Sinning set the tone about teaching and research along with hard work and long hours, and Dr. Seymour about the properly designed research project. As an undergraduate I was taught physiology and exercise physiology by the legendary Professor Peter V. Karpovich, M.D.

4. As a professional, was there anyone who was also instrumental in your career development?

Dr. Thomas Battinelli who hired me at Fitchburg State and encourage pursuit of the doctoral degree and was a wonderful colleague for 33 years. Also, Stuart Soeldner, M.D., at the Joslin Research Lab, Boston and Dr. Ray Gleason, a Ph.D. trained statistician. These two were extremely helpful in all phases of my dissertation including publications related with diabetes, exercise and peripheral blood flow in person with diabetes. I continued as a part-time research fellow at Joslin for three to five years after the completion of the degree. I received that degree in 1979, almost 20 years after earning the B.S. degree. I was a very slow learner.

5. What is it about exercise science/sports medicine that still inspires you today?

I was always interested in what made the body "tick." Even as a young high school basketball and baseball coach I wanted to know about the science of training and even why I included a training rule against non-smoking. I never found any adequately designed studies that would support that training rule. I still run 5k and 10k road races. I always wear a heart rate monitor for observation and continue to look in the literature about distance running and aging and other scientific papers related to physical activity. This helps to keep my interest in exercise science.

6. Why and how did you decide to get involved with NEACSM?

I was active with the Massachusetts Association of HPERD. At MAHPERD I was involved in the Research Section along with Dr. Carl Christensen and Dr. Jay Gillespie of Northeastern University. The next step was to get involved with NEACSM and then being elected to the Executive Committee in 1980. This led to being elected president and the three year commitment to the job as president-elect, president and past president, 1983 to 1985. I did serve as treasurer from about 1983 to 1992. Most importantly, it was the professional thing to do!

7. How did your service help you grow as a professional?

When I completed the doctoral degree in 1979 I was the only person in our department at Fitchburg State with a background in exercise physiology. Essentially I had no one to talk with, had no research equipment and no exercise science courses to teach. The executive committee meetings and annual conference allowed me talk with others in the field. I did collaborate on research studies with two Past-Presidents, Don Mahler, M.D., at Dartmouth Medical School and Tom Rowland, M.D., at Bay State Medical Center in Springfield. These contacts at NEACSM were very important for my teaching, curriculum development and research interests. As a side note I did attend the first official NEACSM meeting in 1973 held at Springfield College. I had to leave the meetings early to meet my college basketball team in North Adams, Massachusetts for an evening game.

8. What are your most memorable moments from your service to NEACSM?

Probably the pre-conference get-to-together of the conference committee in the president's suite the night before the meetings. As treasurer I was always responsible for buying the beer (and other beverages) and baking the zucchini bread. It was a wonderful social event that help to bring us all together for a fun couple of hours. Lots of laughs and good-natured kidding. Also, as treasurer, I had to pay the bills for our invited speakers from across the country who were leaders in their disciplines and were well know persons in the 1980s such as Dave Costill, Jack Wilmore, Steve Blair, Peter Cavanaugh, Gunnar Borg, etc. I even received a Christmas card from Dr. Borg. Everyone knows about the Borg Scale I hope. So after the paper work was exchanged I had the opportunity to talk with our well-known lecturers.

9. What were some of the main issues confronting NEACSM at the time of your presidency?

One of the primary problems, but a good one, was the rapid growth in interest in exercise science/sports medicine. In just a few short years, NEACSM, moved from meetings held at a college, university or Natick Labs to a hotel/conference center to accommodate growth in attendance. In the early years the president was responsible for processing attendance forms and handling finances and almost everything else. As I recall, the first part-time administrator was Bernice McPhee from Dr. Bob Cantu's office. That was about 1982-1985. Then BU handled the processing of meeting forms for a couple of years with Dr. Gary Skrinar overseeing the administration of application forms. The next big administrative move was when Dr. Dave Camaione took over the administration of the conference and used one of his graduate students as the Conference Coordinator. Many changes have been made over the next 25 years that has set NEACSM as the top regional group in ACSM.

10. What do you think are your most meaningful contributions to NEACSM?

Each president makes a small dent in the organization to enhance its efficiency as it moves forward. I made two suggestions: 1) was to have state representatives on the Executive Committee and 2) was to appoint a permanent Treasurer to handle the finances from year-to-year for continuity purposes. Prior that time the president got the checkbook at the annual meeting, paid the bills over the year and handed the check book forward to the next president at the next annual meeting. I had a shoebox full of financial stuff accumulated over the 9-10 years I did the job. Dr. Bob Axtell took over in 1992 and has done an incredible job since that time.

11. What do you think are your most meaningful contributions to the field of exercise science/sports medicine?

Compared to Costill, Wilmore, Borg, Blair, etc. as mentioned above, my contribution in a national/world sense was minimal. I was no Bengt Saltin, M.D. However, if the statement, "all politics is local," is correct, then my work in developing the exercise science program at Fitchburg State is perhaps my legacy in this field. In the early 1980s I prepared a course in exercise physiology and offered primarily to students in the biology department. Soon after a major in biology with a specialization in exercise science was approved. Then a collaboration with the business administration department led to a program in business administration and exercise science. We were able to carve out some space in the locker rooms in the gymnasium for use as a lab. We worked with a local hospital using their metabolic measurement cart to test local and regional distance runners during the running boom of the 1980s. All the testing was done with student help. In fact, two students presented a paper in the free communications section at NEACSM. I believe they were the first undergraduate students to present a paper at NEACSM. Also, one of the classrooms in the gym was converted to a fitness center where students in the program were able to gain experience prescribing exercise programs. In conclusion, my most meaningful contributions to the field of exercise science was to give students interested in this field both an intellectual and practical experience. What we did in the 1980s and 90s was to form the foundation for the development of a full-fledged major in exercise science as the department moved to a new building with lab space and a large fitness center in 2000, the year I retired.

12. What advice would you have for future leaders of NEACSM? What advice would you give to students who are looking to pursue a career in exercise science/sports medicine?

Nothing beats hard work, having a goal, passion for knowledge, ethical values and enthusiasm. Be the best that you can be. Make yourself unique. Latch on to a professor and volunteer to help them with research studies or other projects. Be a lab or gym "rat." The circuitous route I took to get training in Exercise Science is probably not best in 2015. A goal to be a college professor in the sciences, for example, is best being done directly from the B.S. degree.