



Yosemite High cross country coach Ellen Peterson talks to her runners before a workout.

The human magnet

Wherever coach Peterson is, that's where her Yosemite students, athletes want to be.

By Lisa Houk / The Fresno Bee
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OAKHURST -- Ellen Peterson's classroom resembles a cozy student union minus the coffee, deli sandwiches and pizza parlor.

The Yosemite High history teacher and cross country coach proudly points out a new piece of "Badger blue" furniture in the back of the room.

"I finally got a couch, and look, the kids are all on it," said Peterson, dressed in plaid draw-string flannel pants and slippers. "It's pajama day so we're having even more fun."

Her eyes light up, defining a face full of healthy laugh lines. Thirty-two years of teaching has only enhanced these lines, and her love of hanging out with students has never faded. The room is full of trophies, posters and the back wall is plastered with team photos.

Wherever Peterson is is the place to be. Her classroom is packed with 65 boys and girls from her teams. The girls are ranked second and the boys sixth in the Division III Central Section. The runners are feeding off their coach's energy, laughing and smiling and eager to get outside and tackle the beautiful fall day.

Having 65 kids come out for cross country is unheard of at a school with 1,100 students. Peterson still draws them out to a sport she's coached for 23 years.

"This is one of our biggest teams, we usually average about 40," said No. 1 runner Julianne Warmerdam, a senior and granddaughter of track legend Dutch Warmerdam. "When I first met her, I just remember how enthusiastic she was. It's fun to be around her."

Kellie Solomon, one of Peterson's former students, teaches English next door.

"I was a history major because of her -- she brings the subject to life," Solomon said. "I still remember her lectures. She impersonates Teddy Roosevelt, Marilyn Monroe and Mae West. She has such a passion for life, and I can hear her laugh through the walls. It's contagious."

Peterson's enthusiasm has rubbed off.

Dave Dooman, an assistant coach for five years, has seen her change lives.

"A couple of the kids couldn't even run from her classroom to down the road to where we stretch," he said, "but now they're running every day and have lost 30 pounds. She's nonstop, and is the first person on campus and the last one to leave every day."

Peterson, 56, runs marathons and ultramarathons (30 miles or more) with her husband and assistant coach John Peterson. She was named Teacher of the Year for Madera County in 2000. But it's never about her.

"I get to be with the kids more than their parents," she said. "I get them all day in class and at practice, it's such an honor. They really keep me going."

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ERIC PAUL ZAMORA / THE FRESNO BEE

Yosemite High's 65 cross-country athletes cram into coach Ellen Peterson's classroom before a recent workout. Peterson (in back) has been lauded for her enthusiasm and her ability to relate to high schoolers during her three decades as a teacher.