

# New Haven Register

## 2002 REGISTER SPORTS PERSON OF THE YEAR: BILL O' BRIEN; On top of his games

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What Bill O'Brien does takes place far from the field, during small meetings and telephone conversations. He does not score touchdowns or lead teams to victory or make headlines. He deals in quiet handshakes and word of mouth, often making certain there are places to play and games to win.

Much of the work the 62-year-old Branford resident does is low-profile, not glamorous and absolutely indispensable.

Bill O'Brien, the 2002 Register Sports Person of the Year, tirelessly promoted the growth of athletics - particularly for young people - in the New Haven area for years, and it has required enthusiasm, commitment, many late nights and a very understanding spouse.

"This is what he loves to do," said Maureen O'Brien, his wife of 36 years who is also deeply involved with the community. "He has always loved sports, he loves kids and he wants to be involved. He's great with everything he does - except things around the house."

It seems Bill O'Brien, alas, does not do windows. On any given day, he could be helping with the operations of the Southern Connecticut Conference (he is the commissioner), the Branford Recreation Department (ditto), the New Haven Labor Day Road Race (21-year volunteer), the New Haven chapter of the National Football Foundation (president for 12 years), the Walter Camp Football Foundation (past president), the Yale University National Youth Sports Program (board of directors), the Branford High School Sports Council (treasurer) or the Branford Sports Hall of Fame (chairman and co-founder).

Or maybe he is at a high school cross country meet or a Yale basketball game, his beloved Nikon F-100 camera in hand, snapping photographs for athletic departments.

Or maybe he is bicycling through the windy roads of his beloved Branford, where he has logged 27,000 miles during the past 17 years.

Or perhaps he is at his day job. Yes, Bill O'Brien, the vice president in charge of business development at New Haven Savings Bank, defies the laws of normal human behavior and somehow manages to hold down a job.

"I guess I just have a lot of energy," he said.

O'Brien got an early start with community involvement. Forty years ago, he was fresh out of Quinnipiac University and working in West Haven at American National Bank, a new operation that was trying to attract clients. One afternoon, he got a call from the head of the local Little League, which needed some help with a fund-raising drive. So O'Brien persuaded several colleagues to stay late one night (some pizzas were thrown in as incentive), as the baseball players and their parents solicited donations in the city and later convened at the bank, where they sorted the money.

This accomplished a couple of things, O'Brien said. First, it heightened the visibility of the bank, and some of the parents opened accounts. Second, the collaborative effort helped a worthwhile cause. O'Brien, as both pragmatic businessman and budding public servant, enjoyed the experience.

Kevin O'Brien, his younger brother, said their parents instilled the values of hard work and social engagement, and "Bill took it one step further." William Sr. worked for the railroad and Mildred for the old AC Gilbert Co.

"There were no airs about them," Bill O'Brien said. "I never remember them missing one day of work."

O'Brien was a personable lad, his brother said, an individual with inherent leadership qualities. Over the years, his affinity for sports only grew, and he found that getting involved at a supervisory level was a way to keep this love alive.

"When you're really passionate about something, the energy just flows," said Diane Wishnafski, the executive vice president at New Haven Savings Bank. "He's been involved with so many aspects of sports for so long, these opportunities just seem to come his way. He's never been able to say no."

Organizations have grown to understand that O'Brien has a rare ability to solicit funds and market ideas. He is a master fund-raiser: The vast network of contacts he has constructed has enabled him to serve as a liaison between the businesses that want to be visible in the community (i.e., donate money) and the organizations that need their sponsorship funds to stay afloat - including the SCC. It involves negotiating, coddling and prodding, and it is never very easy.

Alex Palluzzi Jr., the director of the Branford Recreation Department, said several years ago he realized how well-connected O'Brien was. The two friends went to the Meadowlands to attend a college football game, which was sponsored by the Walter Camp Foundation, and O'Brien managed to get Palluzzi down to the field, where he had his picture taken with the University of Nebraska cheerleaders.

"Bill knows everyone," Palluzzi said, "and I reaped the benefits."

O'Brien's two sons, Gregory, 28, and Michael, 32, arrived at a similar conclusion when their father arranged for Gregory to take Dan Marino to his fourth-grade class for show and tell. Marino was in town for a Walter Camp awards dinner, and, needless to say, young Gregory did not need his pet rock that day.

Perhaps with O'Brien's ability to build bridges in mind, Jake Palluzzi joined him for one of their weekend bike rides about 10 years ago. Palluzzi, the Branford athletic director and Alex's brother, was helping with the formation of the SCC, which remained in its infancy. The SCC lacked a central figure to bring the project together, Palluzzi said, someone with a knack for public relations.

"Hey, Bill," Palluzzi said. "A thought just occurred to me."

O'Brien soon took over as commissioner, a position he has held for the past nine years.

More than 150 state titles later, the SCC has established itself as one of the premier high school conferences in the state. The SCC also was one of four charter programs involved with the Play It Smart Foundation, which is dedicated to melding the academic and athletic pursuits of students.

As the president of the New Haven chapter of the National Football Foundation, O'Brien has organized everything from clinics for high school players, to meet-and-greets with college coaches, to the annual Hall of Fame game between the New Haven and Fairfield chapters, which he co-founded.

At the annual dinners held every April, the foundation hands out scholarships to high school seniors, and more than \$50,000 in aid has been distributed during the past 10 years. Dan Martin, a long-time member of the chapter's board of directors, said O'Brien even helps students find tuxedos for the affair.

"He's the linchpin of it all," Martin said. "I have never seen the guy get upset because he's had too much on his plate. He has a knack for dealing with people in the community, for dealing with any situation no matter how difficult it is."

His commitment to the community has extended far beyond athletics. A couple of years ago, a friend asked if he would assume the chairmanship of a drive to raise \$100,000 for the nascent Branford Animal Shelter. After considering the offer, O'Brien said he realized that "if this thing were done right, it would be a slam dunk."

So he said yes. He asked the first sponsor he approached for a donation of \$5,000. He got \$10,000. Eleven months later, he and his committee had raised \$135,000, well exceeding the original goal. O'Brien and his wife also took home T.J., a mixed Pomeranian with whom Bill has become inseparable.

"Our puppy loves Bill, because Bill is the playmate," Maureen O'Brien deadpanned. "I'm the one who has to deal with discipline and clean-up."

In 1989, the Branford Festival teetered on the edge of extinction, mired in more than \$15,000 of debt. A member of the selectboard turned to O'Brien, who had been known to resuscitate a project or two. Under his leadership, the festival made \$30,000 that summer. O'Brien then stepped aside but left in place a sound infrastructure, and the festival has prospered.

More recently, he co-chaired the Hannah's Dream Playground Project, which oversaw the construction of the beautiful handicap-accessible park on Woodlawn Avenue in Branford.

All of this has been possible because O'Brien has an innate savvy for marketing. For the animal shelter project, he rented a pair of dog and cat costumes, nicknamed the characters Arf and Meow, and threw a pair of volunteers into them whenever an opportunity arose that would bring attention to the fund drive. For two consecutive weekends, they stood outside the Branford Wal-Mart alongside a handful of children holding pails for donations. They raised \$8,000.

"I'm not trying to give away my secrets or anything, but that's what you do," O'Brien said. "You've got little innocent fourth-grade kids standing out there next to a big stuffed dog - how are you going to turn them down? That's the promoter in me."

O'Brien said Branford will always be his home. He cannot imagine living anywhere else. But as he gets older, he said, he might be more reluctant to take on the all-consuming projects. He enjoyed a recent trip to Italy with his wife, and maybe they can do some more traveling.

He also said that he has considered spending just one or two more years as commissioner of the SCC before stepping down, explaining that "it's time for some fresh faces and ideas."

Kevin O'Brien, meanwhile, said that he would believe it when he sees it. "It's tough to give up the things that you love," he said.

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## **BILL O'BRIEN'S RESUME OF INVOLVEMENT**

Southern Connecticut Conference - commissioner

Walter Camp Football Foundation - past president

New Haven Chamber of Commerce - sports council chairman

National Football Foundation/College Hall of Fame - chapter president

Branford Recreation Department - commissioner

Branford High School Sports Council - chairman

New Haven Labor Day Road Race - former board president

Yale University National Youth Sports Program - board of directors

Connecticut High School Basketball Classic Committee - past chairman

Special Olympics World Games - former deputy commissioner, softball committee