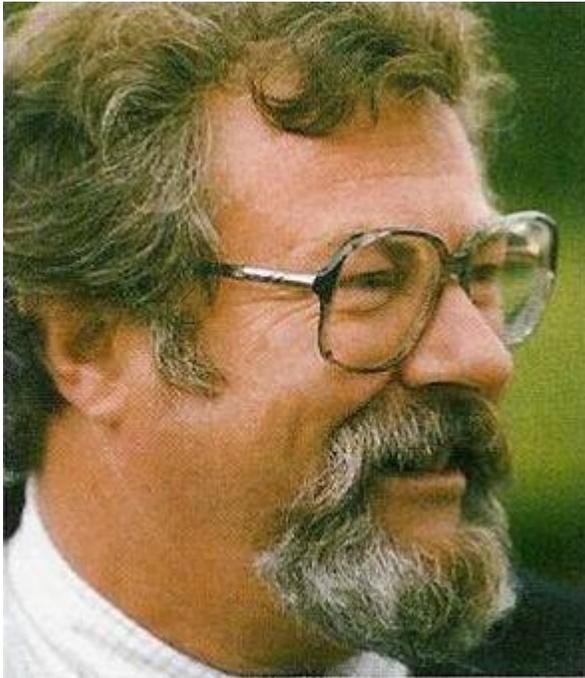


## John Cheffers - BU professor studied sports fans' behaviour

By J.M. Lawrence - Globe Correspondent - November 08, 2012



John Cheffers - BOSTON UNIVERSITY/FILE 1990 –

Dr. Cheffers, who had returned to live in Australia after becoming a BU professor emeritus, died in his sleep Oct. 28 while flying to Sydney from San Francisco with one of his sons. He was 76 and had recently been hospitalized at Massachusetts General Hospital. Dr. Cheffers led the Human Movement Program at Boston University for more than 20 years and advised more than 65 doctoral students. “John’s passion for first-class teaching has influenced hundreds, if not thousands, of his students worldwide,” said Len Zaichkowsky, a sports psychologist who was his longtime colleague at BU. “I want very much to mention the names of many of these individuals, but the list would be too long,” Zaichkowsky said. “It is accurate to say that they have become first-class university presidents, professors, Olympic athletes, sport administrators, sport scientists, and teachers of kids.”

An authority on crowd behavior, John Cheffers studied why sports fans wave giant foam fingers and sometimes angrily pelt players with cups. “The love-hate relationship which spawns so much violence by fans is often ingrained in our youth by the dubious ethic that finishing first is the most important thing in sports,” Dr. Cheffers, a former education professor at Boston University, told *The New York Times*. “The result is that many fans are frustrated athletes who simultaneously love and hate the ‘heroes’ they watch in stadiums and arenas,” he said in 1981. “When a team wins, a fan shouting, ‘We’re No. 1,’ really means, ‘I’m No. 1.’” A burly former player with the Carlton Football Club in Australia, Dr. Cheffers had also been a coach, and he advised the International Olympic Committee and the New England Patriots on crowd control.

“Every sports crowd is different,” Dr. Cheffers, who studied fans at places such as Fenway Park and Boston Garden, said in 1989. “Baseball is the most social crowd. They get up and walk around a lot. Go down below for a few beers. They are not riding on every pitch. The action is not that fast-paced. They even like to play their own games, like when they knock those big beach balls around in the crowd.” He wrote extensively about the science of teaching physical education and also was a mentor to scores of BU students who marvelled at the boomerang he kept in his office and his tales of coaching in South Africa in the 1960s.

Raised in Melbourne, Dr. Cheffers had dreamed when he was a young man of competing in the decathlon. Those hopes were dashed when he tore his anterior cruciate ligament weeks before the 1956 Summer Olympics in Melbourne. He turned instead to coaching and was track and field coach for Rhodesia’s Olympic team in 1968

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when Mexico blocked the team from entering the country by refusing to recognize the athletes' passports. Dr. Cheffers wrote about the perils of mixing sports and politics in a 1972 memoir about the experience called "A Wilderness of Spite: Rhodesia Denied."

He received a doctorate in education from Temple University in 1973 and began teaching at BU in 1978. Known for infusing pedagogy with camaraderie, Dr. Cheffers would accompany students to a pub after night classes or host tastings of Australian wines. "He practiced what he preached," said Eileen Crowley Sullivan of Shrewsbury, who studied with Dr. Cheffers and is now an assistant dean at Rhode Island College. "He taught all of us to really care about what we do and have passion for what we do."

Beginning in the late 1970s, Dr. Cheffers started a twice-weekly program linking his students with Boston public school children who had little access to physical education facilities. He secured funding to bus the students to gym class on the BU campus, where university students ran the programs. One of the longest-running community service initiatives at the college, the program culminated each year in a weeklong spring trip to a camp in Maine, where urban children experienced the wilderness.

Steven Wright, who received a doctorate in physical education from BU in 1992 and teaches at the University of New Hampshire, recalled how Dr. Cheffers once coped with an eighth-grader who brought a gun to the camp in the 1980s. The gun was confiscated, and the young man began weeping. "He was very upset," Wright said. "He said, 'My father gave it to me because of the bears.'" "A lot of these kids had never been outside of the city," Wright said. "It was a powerful program, powerful for the kids who came up and for the students from BU." Wright called Dr. Cheffers a visionary who "thought outside the box." "He had a different view of what physical education could and should be that differed from a lot of his contemporaries," Wright said. "He was all about being humanistic and being the best for kids."

Another former student, Richard Nastasi, who is now a professor of sports science and fitness at Endicott, said Dr. Cheffers put the onus on physical education teachers to find ways to energize their students and reach children of all skill levels. "There wasn't a day gone by that he didn't do something extraordinary," Nastasi said.

Dr. Cheffers became a professor emeritus in 2002 and lived in Murrumbateman, Australia, on his ranch with his wife, the former Margaret Bingham, whom he married in 1958. In addition to his wife, he leaves three sons, Mark of Naples, Fla., and Paul and Andrew of Canberra, Australia; a daughter, Leigh of Connecticut; and 17 grandchildren.

A service was held earlier this week in Australia, where burial was in the Murrumbateman Cemetery. A memorial service is planned for next year at Endicott College in Beverly.

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