

Drake Relays Watch for Champion

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) – The package arrived unexpectedly in the mail on a typically hot Texas day last July and Ralph Baggett tore into it.

Too late, he saw the note on the outside: "Do not open until Aug. 21" – his 83rd birthday.

"That's kind of a habit I've gotten into," Baggett said. "I don't read instructions anymore."

So he kept digging and eventually uncovered a watch. And not just any watch. It was a Drake Relays watch, the symbol of champions at one of the nation's oldest and most prestigious track meets.

The watch and the note that accompanied it brought Baggett to tears. To understand why requires a trip back in time.

Lean and long-legged at 6-feet-6, Baggett helped Texas win the 480-yard shuttle hurdle relay at the 1940 Drake Relays and received one of the coveted watches presented to champions at the meet.

Nineteen months later, Baggett was wearing that watch when his detachment of 150 Marines on the island of Guam was overrun by 5,550 Japanese troops who invaded the day after Pearl Harbor was bombed.

The Americans were stripped of their clothes and as Baggett stood with his hands raised, one of the Japanese soldiers saw the watch.

"There it was, pointing to the sky," Baggett said. "You couldn't miss it."

The soldier demanded the watch and Baggett gave it up. He never saw it again and spent the rest of the war in captivity in Japan.

Baggett was forced to unload supplies at a shipyard and railyard. He and his fellow POWs were roughed up, underfed and poorly clothed – and Baggett felt he was in one of the better camps.

Seven months after his capture, Baggett twisted his knee when a bag of soybeans fell on him and was on crutches for three months. The following year, he was sent to a civilian prison for four months after striking a guard who had been pushing him around.

Baggett spent the entire four months in isolation, his meager meals slipped to him through a 6-by-8-inch door.

"That was my worst treatment," he said. "It was better in the camp."

But he endured and survived and was freed in September of 1945, a month after Japan surrendered. Baggett returned to Texas, got married and raised a family. Through it all, he kept thinking about that watch.

"I had always regretted losing it," he said. "I thought about it a lot."

He was thinking about it that day last May when, at a reunion of former POWs in Kansas City, he told a World War II researcher, Roger Mansell, his story.

Mansell asked each of the POWs if they had a single regret from their experience. Baggett said he always regretted giving up his watch.

Moved by the response, Mansell wrote to Drake president David Maxwell asking if something could be done. Maxwell gave the letter to Relays director Mark Kostek.

"When I read it, it occurred to me that the only right thing to do was to award Ralph his Relays watch," Kostek said. "As director of the Relays, I have to protect the history of the events, and I truly believe that once an athlete is crowned a Drake Relays champion, they will always remain a Drake Relays champion."

So Kostek sent a new watch to Baggett's home in Granbury, Texas, 35 miles south of Fort Worth, and enclosed a note.

"We cannot tolerate a Drake Relays Champion and a true champion of our country not possessing his rightful award," Kostek wrote. "Therefore, please allow me the honor to present this 2001 Drake Relays Champion Watch. My only regret is that I do not have the 1940 award at present.

"But in true tradition once you are crowned a champion the title goes with you forever. Thank you for your service and loyalty to our country. Your willingness to serve affords my family and me the freedoms that we enjoy today."

Even an ex-Marine hardened by prison camp life couldn't stop himself from crying.

"I was awfully proud of the one I got in 1940," Baggett said. "But I figure this other one's got to be a better watch. It's got 60 more years of know how."

Baggett's relationship with the Drake Relays won't end with the watch. Joined by his wife, Sibyl, and their two children, Baggett will attend this year's meet, April 25-27, as the marshall of the Drake Relays parade.

And the watch?

"You can bet wherever I go up there, I'll have it on," Baggett said. "My wife is going to see to that."