The sun had begun to dip behind the Sonntags­shorn, one of the majestic mountain peaks in western Bavaria, and wisps of smoke were curling from the chimneys, a welcome sign for weary travelers that the evening meal was being prepared.

Their day of sightseeing completed, the silhouetted figures in the distance hurried toward the train that would momentarily be leaving for Ruhpolding, a quiet German village tucked away in the Alps where many of the American visitors to the Olympic Games at Munich were staying.

As the train lurched forward, one of the figures, Starr Teel, broke into a sprint. He jumped aboard waving at his panting pop, who got left behind.

Bob Teel, the new track coach at the University of Missouri, had lost his first race.

"I had to hitchhike into town," said Bob.

The trip to the 1972 Olympics was a dream come true for Teel, who came within inches of making the United States Olympic team in 1948 as a long jumper.

Sharing with Bob the joys, the thrills and, yes, the tragedy of Munich was Tom Botts, Mizzou’s track coach for 26 years who in June of 1972 had officially handed the baton to Teel, his assistant.

Track and field at Missouri reached the high point of the so-called modern era in the post-war years of 1947-48-49 under Botts when the Tigers won five of a possible six conference indoor and outdoor championships.

One of the Tiger stalwarts in that era of the 1940s was a long jumper from Webb City, Missouri, named Bob Teel. So it was that when Botts stepped down, placing the destiny of Missouri track in the hands of Teel, he did so with full confidence that the program would continue to move ahead in full stride. And it has.

The road to the top at Missouri has been a long one for a guy who as a youngster used to catch a streetcar after school to the YMCA in Joplin to learn about sports at the knee of Walt Wheeler, the Y’s physical education instructor and a man who was to have a profound influence on Teel. Even after an outstanding football and track career at Mizzou, coaching was hardly in Teel’s plans when he walked in cap and gown past the Columns, business diploma in hand, on a spring day in 1949.

Teel wanted to be a cattle farmer. He and a friend headed for Alabama, where he bought a spread. Sports, however, had always been a big part of Teel’s life and continued to be. As a Naval Air Corps cadet during World War II, he had played basketball with Hank Luisetti on the West Coast and football with Johnny Lujack in Florida. In Alabama, he dug out his sneakers and joined a city basketball league in Montgomery.

“There was this small Catholic high school in Montgomery,” said Teel, “and a friend asked me one day if I would like to coach the backfield on the football team.

“I enjoyed coaching so much that when a new high school opened, I thought about applying for a job. Finally, I went to the board of education for an interview. They placed me at the older high school in Montgomery, Sidney Lanier, which is where I wanted to go anyway.”

The challenges of coaching and teaching began pushing farming farther in the background. For six years, Teel contentedly coached football, basketball and track until Botts, seeking an assistant at Mizzou in 1961, crooked his finger and beckoned. Teel sold his farm and returned to Columbia.

“They say you should never look back, but I’ll be honest. I still miss coaching football and basketball. And I miss the closeness with the kids I don’t have, or think it is desirable to have, on a college level. In high school, if an athlete lets you down,

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Bob Teel succeeded Tom Botts as Missouri's head track coach in 1972 after serving as an assistant since 1961. Teel was a star long jumper in the late forties under Botts and also played football for the Tigers, still holding the record for the best punting average for a season.
Mizzou's nationally ranked distance medley relay team has a workout. Although the personnel varies from meet to meet, shown from the left are Tim McMullen, who runs the three-quarter mile leg; Jerry Williams, 440; Dave Roglies, 880; Charlie McMullen, all-American miler.
you feel it more. You’d see the kids in class each day, in the halls, and you knew their families. In college, the kids are away from home and need to learn to stand on their own two feet.”

To know Teel is to understand his fierce desire to keep Missouri track near the top of the Big Eight Conference. He is an energetic recruiter and, importantly, he has not closed off the lines of communication with his athletes. He has rapport with them in an age when coaches and athletes seem to misunderstand each other.

Teel is low-key, sometimes absent-minded but always unobtrusive and self-effacing. His dry wit shows through, however, and in Mizzou’s athletic department his fellow coaches chuckle as they watch him extricate himself from his predicaments.

Teel also is a collector. He saves so many newspaper clippings on sprinters from California, hurdlers from Iowa, half-milers from New York and pole vaulters from Illinois that his office looks like a city dump. When Robin Lingle, his assistant, hears Teel bellow . . . “Now where is that, I knew I had it here someplace! . . .” Lingle nods his head knowingly. It’s time to start shuffling through the piles of papers on Teel’s desk, on the chairs, on the floor and behind the door.

Teel returned from the war to play football at Mizzou in 1947 for Faurot, who had begun experimenting with the split-T. A halfback, Teel set a school punting average record of 43.7 yards that stands today. The next fall, when two-a-day grid practices were underway, Teel missed a morning drill when he helped a friend find a place to live near the campus. When Teel reported to practice, a coach said to him, “Teel, you’ve had it . . .!”

“At that point,” said Teel, “I felt I’d had it. The incident seemed monumental to me then. When I look back now, the whole thing was insignificant. If I had been more mature, I would have gone to Faurot and worked it out. But my football career was over. A lot of people think I had a falling-out with Faurot. It wasn’t that at all. To this day, I don’t think he knows why I quit football. I have the greatest admiration for Don. We’ve gone fishing together and I’ve played squash with him. He never asked me about what happened.”

It was in 1948 that Teel long jumped 25 feet 1 ½ inches, a Mizzou mark that was untouched for 22 years until the incomparable Mel Gray surpassed it by going 25-11 ¾ in 1970.

Teel and teammates Dick Ault, Mel Sheehan, now the school’s athletic director, and Madill Garttizer qualified for the Olympic trials in 1948 at Evanston, Illinois. Teel finished seventh in the long jump. Ault made the team, placing fourth in the 400-meter hurdles in the Games at London.

“When I think back on those years,” said Teel, “the thing that meant more to me, and this might sound corny, was the really close fellowship we had with the guys more than any one thing I might have accomplished.

“We had a heckuva time on the bus and train trips. I think the record will show that we were good competitors. We had a good time at it but when the bell rang, we went at it, too.”

Teel’s coaching philosophy is short and significant. It is also refreshing.

“You don’t have to win to achieve,” he says.

“Track isn’t the end-all in the lives of these young men,” Teel said. “They are at Missouri for an education first and track comes second. I say this honestly. We recognize that they have to give up certain pleasurable and worthwhile things if they want to excel in track. They can’t do everything.”

The Tigers closed with a rush on the final day of the Big Eight indoor meet at Kansas City in March and placed second. There was special satisfaction for Teel when senior Dave Rogles won the 1000-yard run. Rogles had told Teel earlier in the season that he wanted to quit.

Teel listened quietly as Rogles explained his decision. The coach’s mind flashed back 26 years, back to the day he had been late for a football drill.

“I told Dave I wanted him to know I was interested in him,” said Teel. “I told him that the competition and the work he put into track would pay dividends for him later although he might find it hard to realize now. And I told him how I always regretted not sticking it out and finishing football. When Dave came back, he was much more relaxed. He’s happy now and that’s what counts.”

Teel and Lingle complement each other’s coaching talents perfectly. They have put together a nucleus that is perhaps the best balanced of Mizzou’s teams in the last 15 years. The leader is Charlie McMullen, Mizzou’s first sub-four-minute miler. He is followed closely by triple jumper Larry Gray, high jumper Gene Hansbrough and discus thrower Ben Plucknett.

“When I began looking for an assistant,” said Botts, “I wanted someone who was a sound coach. Bob is that. I wanted someone who was a person of integrity and high moral and ethical standards. Bob is that. His senior year he was ill with scarlet fever and was able to jump in only one meet, but he never missed a team meeting and watched every practice. I thought this was remarkable.”

Drake Titze, a junior half-miler, said: “We say that even when coach puts on his practice clothes, he looks like a gentleman . . .”

That’s soft-spoken Bob Teel. Don’t be fooled. Beneath the placid facade simmers an unbridled competitiveness. He’s a winner. He won’t get left behind often.