

Josh Quinn/Telegram

Gene Deutscher holds the torch he carried for the 1980 Olympic Games in Lake Placid.

## Torch ignites local man's Olympic memories

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Most people will watch tonight's opening Olympic ceremonies with a drink and a snack. Gene Deutscher? He has a torch.

The Temple man earned the spectacular souvenir after he and 51 other runners shuttled the flame 1,000 miles up the East Coast to the 1980 winter games in Lake Placid, N.Y. A former marathoner living in Fort Worth, Deutscher represented Texas after rounds of interviews and running trials.

"It was a rush; it was incredible. I felt overwhelmed with the whole thing," said Deutscher, now 72 and executive director of St. Vincent De-Paul of Greater Temple, a Catholic charity. "I suspect when I watch the

opening ceremonies in Sochi (Russia), I will be thinking more about how wonderful it was for me in 1980."

The team of 26 men and 26 women ages 16-55 became like a family, battling rain, snow and illness during the eight-day, five-state journey from Yorktown, Va., into the Adirondack Mountains and through his native hometown of Irvington, N.Y.

For about 136 of those miles, Deutscher was cradling one of 250 3-foot-long torches in the crook of his elbow.

Small, cheering crowds met runners along their path. As they neared the small Olympic village, applause thundered.

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"You had to feel elevated because of the welcome the crowd gave the flame," he said. "It wasn't us they were cheering for. We were the carriers of the torch that transported the flame. ... We were graced to be transporters of what the Olympics was all about."

They participated in events throughout, including opening and closing ceremonies and medal events. The highlight was the American ice hockey team's "Miracle on Ice" comeback wins over the favored Soviet and Finnish teams to win the gold medal.

The celebration that followed engulfed the small village's narrow, two-lane passages, Deutscher said.

"The New York state police allowed the bars to stay open until 4 a.m.," he said. "That was probably the best party I've ever been to in my life."

U.S. athletes scooped up 12 medals in all, and as events concluded, Deutscher and his teammates discovered there was an award in store for them, as well.

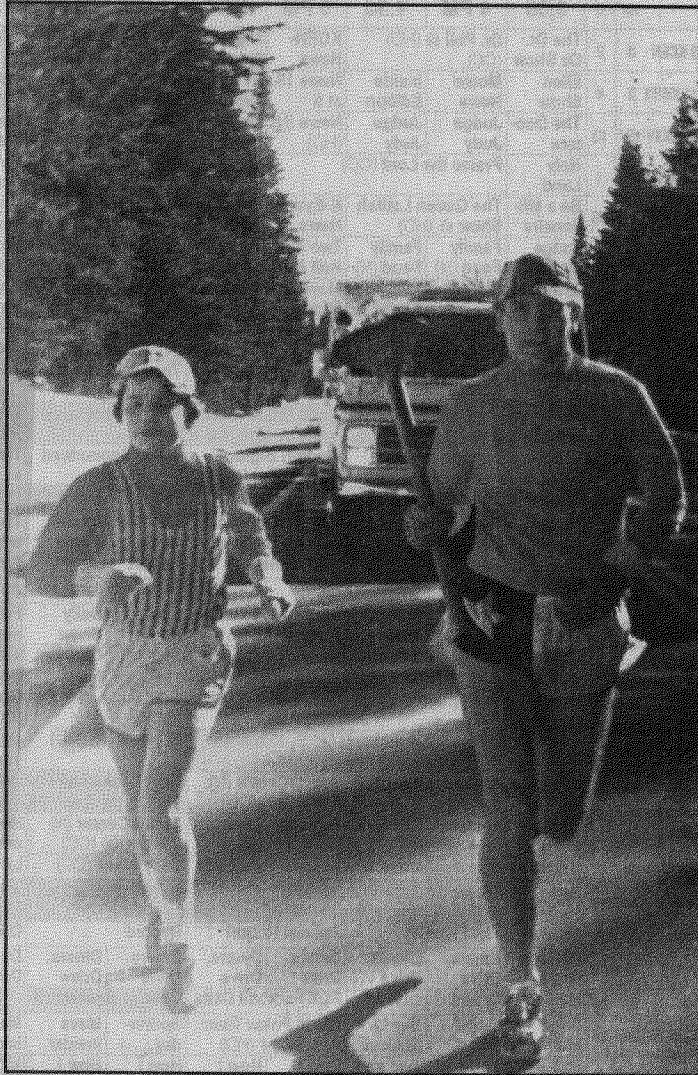
At a final luncheon, each runner was presented one of the torches carried to Lake Placid.

"I still have mine — No. 108," said Deutscher, who hopes to display the torch somewhere publicly. "Mine sits in the closet. I don't know what else to do with it, but it's nice I've got it."

Even more enduring, however, have been relationships the runners made along their 1,000-mile journey. Many stay in touch by annual newsletters and occasional reunions, he said.

"I'm part of a very unique group of people selected to do a very special thing," Deutscher said. "It was a gift I graciously, graciously feel blessed about receiving."

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*Courtesy photo*

Gene Deutscher is seen here carrying the torch in the relay to the Lake Placid Olympics in 1980.