

Nulato youth rush into running with fervor

A Hall of Fame track coach and Alaska Airlines have teamed up to give 30 Nulato youngsters a much-needed education in track and field. Bob Maplestone, a recent inductee into the N.A.I.A. Hall of Fame, conducted a two-day clinic for the young Athabascan Indian athletes.

Alaska Airlines sponsored the transportation costs for Maplestone and his assistant, Scott Knoblich, track coach at Bellevue Community College.

The clinic proved to be an education for both the youngsters and the urban-oriented coaches.

"We were amazed. I couldn't

believe that children living in such a desolate, isolated environment could be so enthusiastic about sports," said Maplestone. "They were, by far, the most attentive and appreciative group I've ever coached."

The clinic was conducted in the tiny village gymnasium and the snow-bank-surrounded gravel airstrip located 1-½ miles from the village.

Basic, fundamental instruction in long distance and sprint running events, combined with jumping and field skills, gave the athletes a good perspective of the sport. The workshop was the first of its kind conducted in Nulato.

Bob Simpson, Nulato's high school coach, conceived the clinic idea but needed financial assistance to transport the coaches.

"Our kids are starving for professional training. Unfortunately, we can't afford to bring in the talent urban children have access to," said Simpson. "So, I contacted Alaska Airlines and they pitched in immediately. They showed a genuine concern for our needs."

Nulato, a subsistence fishing village located on the Yukon River 300 miles west of Fairbanks, has blossomed into a running-crazed town just like the rest of America. The impe-

tus for the sport's popularity has come from Rodney Hildabrand, a 15-year-old who met the late Jesse Owens two years ago.

"Ever since Rodney met Jesse during his victory in the ARCO Jesse Owens Games in Fairbanks, the whole town has become running crazy," noted Simpson.

Last summer, a group of young runners, organized by Rodney, travelled from Nulato to Yakima, Wash., to attend Maplestone's summer cross country running camp.

The four-time national N.A.I.A. record holder has been impressed with the native youths

ever since.

"I still find it hard to believe how seriously they take the sport. Especially since they are dealing with the most primitive conditions imaginable."

Plans are being made for future clinics in other Yukon River towns and Maplestone says he will be glad to participate.

"If the kids learned half as much as I did, it was well worth all our time and effort."