“Passing the Torch”

You’d think by the title that I’m writing about the 2016 Summer Olympic Games, but a much more significant development for the sugarbeet industry is occurring this fall. Jim Johnson, President of the U.S. Beet Sugar Association is retiring at the end of the year and a new president, Brian Baenig, is taking over the helm.

It’s hard to overstate what Jim Johnson’s leadership has meant to the U.S. sugar beet industry. His intelligence, dedication, passion, wisdom, and foresight have guided our industry through very challenging public policy and public relations battles. Through five farm bills, numerous trade agreements, dozens of anti-sugar amendments, quota circumvention schemes, industry lawsuits, political turmoil, changing administrations – the list goes on and on – Jim has provided American Crystal Sugar Company and the rest of our industry the sound leadership and good judgment to not just make our way through, but to win. The sugar industry is known as a very successful lobby in Washington, DC because we carefully pick our battles, we work hard, and we find a way to succeed. We owe much of that success to Jim Johnson.

Jim’s work for sugar didn’t start when he joined the U.S. Beet Sugar Association in 1989. He worked on Capitol Hill, in the House agriculture committee, during those tense years of the 1980s in agriculture. You’ll recall the years of drought, the hemorrhaging of farms and rural communities, the near collapse of the farm credit system, the fledgling nature of the crop insurance system…all devastating to the farm sector. Jim was one of the key people writing laws to save the farm credit and crop insurance systems, providing disaster assistance and funding for Farmers Home loans, and providing a safety net through the 1981 and 1985 Farm Bills that helped many farms stay afloat. We all benefited from his dedicated public service during those years.

Brian Baenig is a terrific choice for Jim’s replacement. Through years of stellar work at the USDA and on Capitol Hill, Brian has a reputation as a politically savvy, cool-handed advisor who gets things done. He’s the right person to lead our association going forward. But he has big shoes to fill.

On a personal level I can tell you Jim is a wickedly funny guy, a meticulous editor, a Frank Sinatra fan, a fierce advocate, a clear and deep thinker, and a truly devoted friend.

So while we may not be putting a gold medal around his neck and singing the National Anthem upon his retirement at the end of the year, Jim deserves all that. He once even had the opportunity to meet somebody who knows a little about winning medals and lighting the torch: Mohammed Ali. As far as I’m concerned there are two champs in that photo.

Kevin