

RYUN'S MARK STANDS THE TEST OF TIME

By DON SIKORSKI
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To claim that Jim Ryun was the greatest distance running talent ever born in America would be unfair. Such a statement would imply that Ryan's accomplishments, including six world records, owing the U.S. mile record for over 14 years, and an Olympic silver medal, were strictly the result of good genes. While Ryun was blessed with searing speed and fleet feet, the truth of the matter is that no distance runner ever worked harder than Jim Ryun did. This month marks the 30th anniversary of Tanzania's Filbert Bayi breaking Ryun's world record mile best of 3:51.1, which stood for over 9 years. No American has held the record since. Morocco's Hicham El Guerrouj owns the current mark, with his 3:43.13 clocking in July of 1999. Ryun, now a 58 year-old five-term Republican congressman from the state of Kansas, can look back proudly on his accomplishments and despite his Olympic disappointment, know that he gave everything he had as a competitor.

It was 40 years ago this month that Senior Jim Ryun of Wichita East (KS) High School became the first schoolboy to break the 4-minute mile barrier against high school competition when he ran 3:58.3 to win the Kansas state title. Between 1964 and 1972, Ryun was honored on the cover of Sports Illustrated seven times. High school and collegiate runners admired Ryun as their idol, and his world best clocking in track and field's most prestigious event stood as gospel. Ryun's accomplishments as the first high school runner under the 4 minute barrier and the media's attention to that feat pulled along the competition; Tim Danielson of California ran a sub-four-minute mile two years later, and New Jersey's Marty Liquori, who would go on to star at Villanova, achieved the standard a year later. Then suddenly, there was nobody. A 34 year drought elapsed before Reston, Virginia's Alan Webb became just the fourth American high school runner to dip under the four-minute mile barrier in 2001. By comparison, Ryun had run 3:55.3 before entering the University of Kansas, and then proceeded to set the world record in 1966 with his 3:51.3 clocking, 2.3 seconds better than France's Michael Jazy had run a year earlier. On June 23rd, 1967 at the AAU Nationals, Ryun knocked the mark down to 3:51.1 in Bakersfield, CA, a mark that would stand for the next 9 years. Clearly, Jim Ryun was at the top of his game.

But Ryun's running career also suffered through some rough patches. Following a victory over Kenyan star Kip Keino in Los Angeles, Ryun suffered with bouts of mononucleosis and subsequently retired from running after the 1969 season after being defeated by Liquori at the NCAA Championships and a DNF at the AAU Championships. He would later return for one of the most highly anticipated races in track history, a race against his rival Liquori in the "Dream Mile" at Philadelphia's Franklin Field. It was the ultimate matchup of two different tacticians; Liquori's fearless front running versus Ryun's blazing finishing kick. Under near-perfect conditions, Liquori and Ryun hit the opening ¼ in 61.1 staying in the middle of the 11 man pack. Ryun moved to the front at the halfway point with Liquori in striking distance, hitting a conservative split of 2:03.3. Liquori pressed at about 700 meters out and Ryun followed closely. The two hit the ¾ mark in 3:00 flat (a 57 second split) and hit the final backstretch stride for stride. Ryun made his move down the final stretch, but it was Liquori who would have just enough to hold off Ryun in a final memorable stretch battle. Both runners were timed in 3:54.6, a personal best for Liquori. The "Dream Mile" matchup will forever be remembered as one of the greatest track races of all time.

Jim Ryun was also not one to shy away from hard work. His grueling workout regime became folklore, with twice-a-day workouts, including up to 20 quarter-mile intervals at top speed with paltry rest periods, becoming a staple of his training. He logged 85 to 100 miles per week as a high school senior and pushed that volume up to 120 leading up to the 1972 Olympic Trials. Ryun was rumored to have completed workouts like 20 x 440 meters averaging 60.5 seconds with only a 1 minute rest interval or an amazing 40 x 440 meters with under 2 minutes rest, workouts he would later reflect back on and wonder if it did more damage than good to his body.

Ryun is also remembered by his Olympic disappointment. He made the 1964 Olympic team at the age of 17 but failed to qualify for the finals. He returned to the Olympic Games in 1968 in Mexico City as the favorite in the 1,500 meter run, but earned a silver medal behind Kip Keino's heroic front running effort at high altitude. At the Munich Games in 1972, Ryun fell after a collision with another runner in a qualifying heat. Despite his protests, officials refused to reinstate him. He would retire from competition years later and has since made peace with his Olympic fate.

It wasn't until Webb's record breaking run in 2001 that Ryun began receiving media attention for his part accomplishments. And while the majority of his political constituents are probably unaware of Ryun's history, the fact is that 40 years ago, Jim Ryun was arguably one of the very best athletes in the world.

Racing Calendar

Don't worry if you can't find the Reliance House 5K Road Race on any race calendars this May or June. The race will take place, but with a brand new date and location. Because of construction issues affecting downtown Norwich, the Reliance House 5K, which for the last 19 years had started in front of the Norwich YMCA and finished at Billy Wilson's Ageing Still on Franklin Street, will now take place on Saturday, October 15th in the center of Norwich's Mohegan Park. The race will begin at 11:00am and feature a new course that may even incorporate a portion of cross-country racing, according to new Race Coordinator Kerry Bilda. This year's event will be conducted in honor of the late Joe Lonardelli, an honorary member of the Mohegan Striders Association who donated many hours of his time assisting with youth athletic events in Norwich. Look for applications to hit the streets this week, or contact the Reliance House at 887-6536 for more information.

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