

# KELLEY GRATEFUL TO HAVE FOUND RUNNING

By DON SIKORSKI  
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He has competed in two Olympic Games. He is also a two-time American record holder in the marathon. As a high schooler, he was a New England champion in both cross country and the outdoor mile. He has won the Yonkers Marathon a record eight consecutive times and has claimed a total of 20 AAU national road racing titles. He won the Boston Marathon, the Super Bowl of distance running, in 1957. He is a member of the National Distance Running Hall of Fame, and is considered to be one of the best American marathon runners of all-time, with over 1,000 competitive racing efforts under his belt. Yet it his pedestrian-paced running efforts, tackling the trails and backwoods with only his dog accompanying him, that Mystic's John J. Kelley derives the most pleasure from as a runner these days.

As a New London youngster, Johnny Kelley's introduction to the world of distance running was a result of rebellion more than anything else. Showing little interest in school, Kelley was urged to try Bulkeley High School in an effort to instill academic discipline in the youngster. "My plan was to mix, mingle, and then get out," explained Kelley of his first day strategy at Bulkeley. "I was playing hooky every day. It was a case of being disinfected with high school and my own little silly take on the world," reflects Kelley of his teen years. Then something changed young John Kelley's life forever. It was a bulletin board in the school hallway, created by Bulkeley Cross-Country Coach Malcolm Greenaway, recognizing the accomplishments of Bulkeley's star runner and two-time New England champion George Terry. A young Kelley stood there mesmerized by the display when none other than Terry himself walked up and introduced himself. He asked Kelley if he would be interested in joining the team. By season's end, Johnny Kelley was Bulkeley's 2<sup>nd</sup> runner with only Terry left to catch. The two went on to become close friends, and much of Kelley's success in the sport is attributed to Terry, as they continued to train together in their post-collegiate days. "We lived running," says Kelley of his climb to a national caliber distance runner. "George Terry and I, for a time, we ate, drank, and slept running. He was most helpful and inspiring." Terry himself would go on to develop an impressive running resume of his own, earning All-American honors and IC4A individual championships in both cross-country and track at Boston University. Terry also competed in the Boston Marathon several times, finishing as high as 6<sup>th</sup> overall in 1961 and 7<sup>th</sup> in 1962. But Terry's greatest contribution to Kelley's life was the young runner's transformation from slacker to worker. "Running changed everything for me," said Kelley. "Suddenly, I didn't think of truancy anymore".

As a senior, Kelley was named top schoolboy miler in the country after running a 4:21.8 mile in 1950. And his running career would continue to flourish despite a rough start to his marathon running career. Kelley was still in high school when decided to run the Boston Marathon for the first time in 1949. He did not finish. But he would return to race again in Boston 4 years later, now as a student at Boston University, to finish 5<sup>th</sup> overall for top American honors. He went on to finish 7<sup>th</sup> in 1954 and earned runner-up honors in 1956 before breaking through for the biggest race of his career, the 1957 Boston Marathon. In the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games, he had led the marathon for nearly halfway before submitting to the 85 degree heat and fading to 21st place. The Boston win was redemption for Kelly. He would also race the marathon in Rome at the 1960 Olympic Games, again finishing as the top American in a time of 2:24:58. Kelley would go on to finish the Boston Marathon 34 times, highlighted by his 1957 win in a personal best time of 2:20:05. He also earned runner-up honors at Boston five times, and won the Yonkers Marathon eight consecutive years from 1956 to 1963, setting an American record of 2:24:53 in his first attempt. But personal responsibilities of family, teaching, coaching, and running soon became more time consuming, and Kelley struggled to train at the same volume he had during his prime years. "The racing demons began to disperse over a 20 year period," says Kelley of his decision to walk away from competitive road racing. "The actions were lagging behind the self-image. A sense of reward at any level is OK, but when the sense is gone, that's it." Although he attempted one serious racing comeback when he turned 60, Kelley remains sure about one thing in his life. At 75, he has no plans for another competitive comeback. "Absolutely not," says Kelly of the idea. "The demons are gone."

Kelley still runs faithfully these days, but now for the sheer enjoyment of the activity rather than for competitive purposes. "I enjoy talking with runners and being with runners," reflects Kelley. "But I really enjoy running by myself alone in the woods now." Another positive in John Kelley's life was his wife Jessie. Although she never ran one step, Jessie managed the couple's running store, "Kelley's Pace", in Mystic for years. She was well known throughout the running community as one of the friendliest people you would ever want to meet. Sadly, "Mrs. Kelly" as she was affectionately known, passed away in 2003. "My wife was a remarkable person, said Kelley. "She (Jessie) was the inspiration and heart of the store. I was very lucky; she loved the game," recalls Kelley of Jessie's support of his time-consuming hobby.

For years, Kelley also penned a weekly running column for the Sunday paper. Currently, he contributes a monthly column titled "Retro Running" for New England Runner magazine. "I enjoy it (writing the column). It keeps me semi-literate," joked Kelley of his journalism task. "Writing a column on running has always kept me opening my eyes in different ways". Since his wife's passing, Kelley also spends six days per week working in the store. It's another way he remains close to the sport. "Running simplifies life, reducing it to elements of struggle simply and purely," says Kelly of his chosen activity for over 60 years now. "Running has enabled me to participate with the natural world. I really enjoy that I was able to do it. Runners are driven, but they are good people. Most are honest, open, and have a good sense of humor. They use running as their escape, and it's been wonderful dealing with runners."

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