

LINDGREN RUNS TO INSPIRE (PART ONE)

By DON SIKORSKI
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He was the scrawniest kid in school, uncoordinated and unathletic. Certainly the least likely person to ever become an Olympic athlete. But from his early beginnings at Rogers High School in Spokane, Washington, a young boy by the name of Gerry Lindgren would go on to change the sport of distance running by breaking down barriers and pushing the human body to new limits.

The truth is that Gerry Lindgren's ultimate goal as a person is to change people's lives through running. As a youngster, Gerry looked to find a place for himself in life. Sports would become his outlet, his escape, but finding something he could do would be a challenge. His football tryout lasted less than one full practice. He tried basketball next, but his inferior size and complete lack of coordination dismissed him after only one practice as well. Gerry tried baseball in the spring, but his lack of ability to throw or catch led the baseball coach to point him in the direction of the track team. "Nobody gets cut from track," young Gerry was told. But Gerry Lindgren was so weak and uncoordinated that track didn't look promising either. However, Gerry was determined that he was going to make something of himself, and no matter how much it hurt or how much he struggled at the sport, he was going to be a runner.

That next fall, Gerry Lindgren would go out for the cross-country team. When he started, he was the worst runner on his high school team and was pushed around and elbowed during races due to his inferior size. But when Coach Tracy Walters recognized that young Gerry had the potential to influence the outcome of the race simply because nobody wanted to lose to that very same scrawny, uncoordinated, and unathletic kid, Lindgren found his true purpose in life. And he would soon bring the worth ethic of the long distance runner to an entirely new level.

"I was the weakest, slowest, scrawniest kid in school, recalled Lindgren of his early beginnings. "That made me need to prove myself; made me work hard just to become normal." Lindgren also attributes his lack of common sense for his long-term success in the sport. "I was stupid to a fault," said Lindgren. "So stupid that I took the coaches' words as biblical. He told us that we could never serve God until we proved to God that we are worthy. He said you prove yourself worthy by hard work and dedication. The smarter runners on the team knew better. They understood that they were only as a small grain of sand on a large beach. They knew they could never change the world. Me, I was stupid. I ran when the others slept. I ran when the others went to the movies. I had to prove myself worthy." And prove himself worthy Gerry Lindgren did. Running became an obsession for Gerry, who during the late summer of 1967 ran six straight weeks of 350 miles per week just to prove the school psychologist wrong. During his high school years, 50 mile days and triple workouts; morning, noon, and night, became standard practice. Lindgren ran while other people slept, while other people ate dinner, and while other people watched television. He would rise from bed after midnight and go out for a run. All of these miles took place in a generation where long distance running was viewed as abnormal behavior. Lindgren's training regiment took that notion to a whole new level as well.

Two contributing factors provided the necessary incentive for Gerry Lindgren to tackle such an amazing workload. First, his home life was not good. The youngest of three children, young Gerry would go out and run literally all day on weekends, often venturing from his home to the top of Mount Spokane and back, measured to be approximately an 88 mile trek. He would head out the door early in the morning, with the goal of returning home by dinnertime. All to avoid the confrontations of an alcoholic Father and a dysfunctional family. Secondly, young Gerry learned work ethic from simple chores that were assigned to him at an early age. Lindgren recalls having to move piles of wood from the driveway into the garage as an example. "You learn things about life by doing those hard jobs," recalls Lindgren of the chores of his youth. "If you take one step at a time, you can accomplish anything in life".

All of the miles and all of the hard work paid great dividends to Gerry as a runner. In the spring of 1964 during his senior year of high school, Gerry Lindgren ran a 5,000 race in 13 minutes and 44 seconds, a national high school record. The mark would stand for over 40 years (Oregon's Galen Rupp, coached by the legendary Alberto Salazar, would run 13:37.91 in July 2004 to break Lindgren's long-standing record). Lindgren still owns the second fastest two mile time ever run by an American high schooler. He ran that race on a 160 yard Indoor Track. Just out of high school, Lindgren would place 9th in the 10,000 meter final at the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo while running on an injured ankle. But probably his best known race was his win in the U.S.-U.S.S.R. dual meet on July 25th, 1964, as a young Lindgren, fresh out of high school, would outrun two seasoned veteran Russian runners, Leonid Ivanov and Anatoly Dutov, to win the 10,000 meter event in Los Angeles. Lindgren would go on to compete at the University of Washington, where he claimed a total of 11 NCAA Championships. He is also the only runner to defeat Steve Prefontaine in an NCAA Championship race. How did he measure up against the countries' best runners? Gerry Lindgren would go on to break an American record over 50 times in his career, an amazing accomplishment.

Gerry Lindgren has recently published a book, "Gerry Lindgren's Book On Running", with the author being credited as "The Shadow of Gerry Lindgren". It is subtitled as "a runner's guide to courage and strength", which pinpoints the theme of the content. "Just as in running, no matter what I write, it is never exactly what I would like to say," explained Lindgren when asked if his book adequately portrays who Gerry Lindgren is. Hear more from the shadow of Gerry Lindgren and more about the book in the next column.

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