

LINDGREN RUNS TO INSPIRE (PART TWO)

By DON SIKORSKI
Special to the Bulletin

Gerry Lindgren will be inducted into the Distance Running Hall of Fame in Utica, New York later this summer. The scrawniest, uncoordinated and most unathletic kid in school went on to become one of the greatest runners in history. "When I was running, I never wanted to be inducted into a Hall of Fame", says Lindgren of the honor. "But I'm kind of a ham, and I like the attention too," he joked. "I want to be an inspiration to other people." When asked what advice he would offer a young runner today, Lindgren's message is different than other standard responses. "I would tell them that you shouldn't run to win," said Lindgren. "I would set them free to be themselves. I wasn't smart as a runner; I just went out and did it," recalls Lindgren of his competitive days. "Most runners are so smart that they know what they *can't* do."

Gerry Lindgren's glory years as a runner were during a time before professional running was in existence. Runners battled their governing federations in an effort to be compensated for their athletic efforts. Lindgren claims that because he stood up to the A.A.U. (Amateur Athletic Union), the sport turned its back on him. "In the 70's, I sacrificed my running career to break the A.A.U. hold on amateur track. I joined the professional track league to force the A.A.U. to allow amateurs to earn some money for their efforts. Other amateur sports had done that, but the A.A.U. insisted on using runners to make money for themselves only. Giving back to track was not possible back then. Somebody had to change things and that was what my running career was all about. So when the pro track league folded, as it was destined to do from the very beginning, I was left out. The A.A.U. flat refused to reinstate my amateur status as they had done to the other pro track runners because I had caused them so much trouble in the past."

Still, Lindgren had many classic battles on the track during his prime. Some specific competitors stand out in his mind. "I respected Ron Clarke of Australia most of all," recalls Lindgren of the former 10,000 meter world record holder. "Every time I raced him, I had a tough race. He liked to lead the race and pull everyone along until they broke. My running style was similar, so we bantered for the lead often". Lindgren also respected some of the other great American distance runners from his era. "Billy Mills (1964 Olympic 10,000 meter gold medalist) was another great runner with incredible strength of character and a good heart." He wasn't going to let you get away from him in a race. And Pre (the late Steve Prefontaine); he was incredibly focused". As far as the current crop of American runners, Lindgren admires an aggressive running style, similar to his own. "I watched Alan Webb run at Pre Classic last year when he set a new American Record at 2 miles," said Lindgren. "I was disappointed by his "wait behind" running style and after the meet, I met him and told him that he was a better runner than that. Run to make the race, not to win it. I told him, you are the most gifted courageous person I have seen run in many years. Go out and do it. Don't ever let anyone run away from you. He responded with some of the most courageous runs during the summer. He bolted out in the middle of a mile run. He made some of the best runners in the world race their best races. I think Alan Webb is a great example to all American runners. Be like him. Train courageously and race the same." When asked what he would have done differently in terms of his own training and racing, Lindgren feels that he wouldn't change a thing. "If I could go back and train differently, I would not train differently at all," said Lindgren. "I would run as many miles as I could, and I would dedicate my running to some unknown good that I could do to the world by working hard. I would suffer all the setbacks I did. I think my training was perfect."

Today, Gerry Lindgren is the head coach of the University of Hawaii's Girls Track team. His coaching methods differ than his training because he has to consider the running background of each of the athletes he coaches individually. "I cannot simply say that more miles is the only answer," said Lindgren of his philosophy. "I have to coach up to their level. I try to give them the encouragement my coach gave me and so far every one of my athletes has run at least one personal best time. Every athlete is different. But I know more miles makes them all do better. As I got my girls over 70 miles a week this spring, their marks improved drastically."

Now at age 60, Lindgren runs about 50 miles per week and claims he can still churn out a 5K in about 18 minutes. "I have aches and pains all over," said Lindgren of the affects of many miles. "Knees, hip, you name it. When one goes away, another one comes," he joked. Still, he truly believes that an activity is superior to a sedentary lifestyle. "The harder you use your body, the more it holds up," he claimed. He still follows the resurgence of American distance running and is optimistic about the future. When Oregon's Galen Rupp recently surpassed Lindgren's 5,000 meter high school record, it showed just how impressive Lindgren's track times were, especially considering the inferior track surfaces and running shoes at the time. Instead of being disappointed that his record had been broken, Lindgren was proud of Rupp for leading the charge of the future of American distance running. "When I set that mark 40 years ago, I set it knowing it would be a high mark for every high school kid to shoot for," said Lindgren of his 13:44 clocking. "It was a goal; not a barrier. I was sad that it lasted for 40 years and that it had become a barrier all those years. When Galen Rupp broke that mark, I was happy because high school runners were finally on the move again." Lindgren recalls Jim Ryun's mile run as a classic example. "In high school I was a miler. My mile record of 4:01.5 I set with the same thinking. The next year, Jim Ryun was inspired to break the 4 minute barrier for high school for the first time. I feel that I played a small part in that victory by giving Jim a big goal to shoot for. Records are meant to inspire others to greatness. I am happy that I can do that for high school track." Lindgren also believes there will be faster times in the future. "As for that 5000m mark, when I ran 13:44, the world record for the 5000 was 13:38. Now that the world mark is 12:38, high school runners should be running 12:44".

After many years of avoiding any publicity associated with his running career, Gerry Lindgren now reflects openly on what he has contributed to the distance running world. "As a distance runner, I would like to be remembered as just the wimp I was and still am," said Lindgren. "I have no special talent or ability. I couldn't run a 660 yard dash in under 2 minutes in the beginning. I was the last guy on the cross country team." But Gerry Lindgren changed all that, and changed history, with his amazing work ethic. "I want to be remembered for the hard work I had to do to get so I could run with my teammates. I want to be remembered for the changes that have happened that I may have helped to start because I suffered through 25-35 mile days all those years. I want to be remembered for the many times I have been arrested for running in the days before running was acceptable human behavior. I want to be remembered for the track wars I was in the middle of, for the changes that came in running because I stood up to the established order, and I want to be remembered for the personal sacrifices that I have made so that others coming in my footsteps might have it a lot better than I did. I want people to think that if a wimp like Gerry Lindgren can do it, so can they."

Lindgren's book, "Gerry Lindgren's Book On Running", is self-published and available through his web site. Go to www.gerrylindgren.com to order and learn more about Gerry Lindgren and his take on running.

Don Sikorski writes a twice-monthly running column for the Norwich Bulletin. His "Coach's Corner" column can be accessed at www.moheganstriders.org. He can also be reached by e-mail at kdcsikorski@netzero.net.