

AN INTERVIEW WITH BILL KROHN (PART I)

By DON SIKORSKI
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Standing curbside on the corner in Norwich's Mohegan Park in the summer of 1985, I was a spectator for the Norwich Free Academy alumni cross-country race. Kevin Crowley, the Wildcats new coach, had pulled out all the stops to put together a competitive gathering of former NFA runners. I had heard stories that Bill Krohn, Norwich Free Academy Class of '76 and now a national class distance runner, would be making an appearance. My only question as I stood at the one mile mark watching Krohn move past briskly was, where was everyone else?

Krohn's time of 14:14 over the hilly, 3 mile layout would win comfortably that night against some of the area's best road racers. It appeared effortless for Krohn. I would have the pleasure of seeing Bill Krohn race again in the future, the next time competing head-to-head against a world class field over 3,000 meters at the Millrose Games in New York's Madison Square Garden. It was impressive to witness someone our group had a personal connection to competing on that stage. Krohn would also return to his former hometown to compete in the 1992 Rose Arts Road Race. Tomasz Gnabel, a marathon runner and native of Poland training in Alamosa, Colorado, would spoil Krohn's homecoming that day, breaking away at the six mile mark for the win. As Mohegan Striders Club President at the time, Krohn spoke with me after his runner-up finish over the challenging 10.4 mile course and graciously donated his \$100 cash winnings to the club. We have considered him an honorary member every since.

Bill Krohn had blossomed from a talented high school runner at Norwich Free Academy to a national class competitor who had attained the opportunity to travel all over the world to compete in Track & Field meets. At the time a school teacher living in White Plains, New York, Krohn now resides in Stockholm, Sweden with his wife Gunnel and children Kevin, 8, and Kajsa, 3. Now at age 50, Krohn continues to run and race at a national class level, and has posted some of the fastest times in the world for his age group. I recently caught up with Bill Krohn to discuss his early years at NFA, his progression to a national class athlete, and a reflection back on what the sport of running has meant to him.

NORWICH BULLETIN: How did you begin running?

BILL KROHN: I became interested in running around 1970 as a 12 year old while watching the Rose Arts Festival race, which always finished just before the parade. In those days, running 10 miles was considered crazy as running wasn't mainstream yet. Watching Billy Shea, Tim Smith, and other local runners and reading about Amby Burfoot, John Vitale, and Ray Crothers gave me the motivation to try and run myself. I can't remember my exact finish that first year but it was around 100th place and I knew that I could improve on this with a little training.

NB: Tell me about your early days running at Norwich Free Academy. When did you realize that you had a talent for running?

BK: I joined the cross country team my freshman year at NFA and realized that I had talent at shorter distances and decided to run track as well. Gene McGrath and Dick McCarthy were great inspirations as well as all my teammates during that time. I also have memories of the summer rec runs and meeting John and Don Pirie, who were also great motivators. I was obsessed with bettering Amby Burfoot's course record and finally did it in one of the last years the race was run on the old course.

NB: How did you do on a local and state level in high school? Did you realize at that time that you could excel running at the collegiate level?

BK: At NFA, I steadily improved in cross country and eventually broke Jim Euell's school record on the old course (Hartford Public's Jody Weatherwax also broke the course record in that same race). On the track, I eventually ran 4:16 for the mile and 9:20 for two miles, which was good enough for colleges to start taking notice.

NB: Tell me about your college decision.

BK: At the State "LL" Championships in my senior year, I was racing against my biggest rival, Jody Weatherwax, in the mile. (Coach) Fred Dwyer of Manhattan College was there recruiting and was eager to sign Weatherwax, who was debating between Manhattan and a few other colleges. I had college offers as well but nothing that I wanted to jump at. I ended up beating Weatherwax that night (Krohn would run 4:17 to win the mile) and Dwyer, who had one scholarship left, offered it to me instead and I accepted.

NB: What was the adjustment to racing against collegiate competition like for you?

BK: Manhattan College, along with Villanova, was one of the most respected running colleges on the East Coast. Fred Dwyer coached Marty Liquori in high school, who was the second high schooler to break 4 minutes for the mile after Jim Ryun. Dwyer broke four minutes himself in 1958 shortly after (Roger) Bannister and was quite respected also. I was recruited with a group of top ranked high school milers and 800 runners and my 4:16 ranked last in the group. I was not used to training higher mileage like the other guys and it took a while before I started to develop and get results. During my sophomore and junior years, I started to rival my teammates and during my senior year, I ran PR's (personal records) of 4:06 for the mile and 8:48 for two miles. I felt that my college years were successful but I still had a way to go before I fully developed as a runner.

NB: Did you make a formal decision to continue running and racing after college?

BK: I graduated in 1980 and decided to continue running for a local club called the Westchester Track Club, coached by Mike Barnow. Mike was a great inspiration and I felt fortunate that there was a serious club in the area with good athletes who wanted to continue after college. I began to train and race with a new schedule and plan that was more tailored to my needs instead of the hectic college schedule and occasional overtraining I experience during the previous four years.

NB: Tell me about your experience in national class competition.

BK: I immediately experienced improvements and during 1980-81, I ran PR's of 4:00.6 for the mile and 8:29 for two miles. I started to get more and more invitations to big meets and started running the 5,000 (meters) as well. I won the Penn Relays Olympic Invitational 5,000m in 13:48 in 1983 and started to ease my way into the top 10 in the U.S. rankings. I finished 3rd in the 1984 U.S. Championships 5,000m outdoors and 4th indoors at three miles 4 times (Krohn still owns the 6th fastest American time for three mile indoors at 13:06). As a result, I made several American national teams and started competing in Europe as well. I still remember my first unofficial payday after winning a 3,000 meter race in Milan, Italy. A guy in a raincoat came up to me in the stadium tunnel and handed me \$500 dollars in an envelope and said "nice race". I was completely surprised, but that was the way things were done in the 80's.

NB: Were you a full-time runner in those days? Did you have a coach?

BK: In 1984, I began working with an agent Tom Sturak, who got me into races I couldn't have gotten into otherwise. I also signed contracts with Adidas, Nike, and Puma during different periods, which gave me flexibility with travel and expenses which was a necessity when all the big meets were so spread out. After the racing season in the United States, I began going to Europe during the summer and over six or seven years, have probably raced in all of the big grand prix meets like Zurich, Brussels, Oslo, Stockholm, London, etc. I also have really great memories of many smaller meets as well, where many of the good runners sacrificed big paydays just to enjoy the scenery like the fjörd's of Norway or the Swiss Alps or the beaches near Barcelona.

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