

What It's Like to Go to the Line and Compete
'It's A Race You Never Forget'

(Photo Courtesy Frank Hanes, Chicago Tribune)

(Editor's Note: More than 600 high school cross country runners compete in the three state championship races—Class AA boys, Class A boys and girls—every November at Detweiller Park in Peoria. Mike Bailey, a Peoria Journal Star reporter, ran in the AA race four times as a member of the Springfield (Lanphier) team—from a freshman year when he found it hard to finish, through his senior year when he could dream anything might happen. He relives an unforgettable competitive experience in this story.)

By MIKE BAILEY
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An almost tangible magic will hang over the crowd when some 600 high school runners in three classes nervously toe the starting line Saturday at Detweiller Park, beginning for many the most important race of their young lives.

For much of the free world, it will be a wholly unremarkable event; the Earth will continue to rotate on its axis, and many people will go about their comparably boring business. Few recognize such Hiroshima-like happenings for the history they are.

But for those privileged teenagers who participate in the Illinois High School Association State Cross Country Meet, the world around them will cease to exist for the 14 to 17 minutes it takes them to cover the relatively flat three-mile course.

Just one quarter of one hour over the span of a lifetime, this race will echo in their minds long after they close their athletic lockers for the last time.

Eleven years ago this week (1975), I ran in the first of what was to become four consecutive state meets for the Springfield (Lanphier) cross country team. For such a feat, one might entertain an asterisk perched deservedly alongside one's name in the record books, but one fears that time, fire, loss by theft or simple indifference has erased such punctuation. No matter.

In 1975, I was a 15-year-old, towering 5-foot tall displaced basketball player who was about to finish third from last—231st—in what had been billed as one of the best high school cross country meets in the nation.

Nightmares still remind me of the rain, mud and cold that year. Sick at the start and even more so upon finding myself dead last at the quarter-mile mark, I had approached the race with all the pale-faced enthusiasm of a Marine about to hit the beachhead at Iwo Jima, not altogether certain that I would emerge alive.

I vividly remember spending half the race trying to pass a runner from Chicago (Harlan) who was dragging one heavily taped leg, and sprinting like there was no tomorrow because I feared the eventual winner—Ron Craker of Elmhurst (York)—would lap me.

My mom also occupies a corner of that memory. She alone cheered each time I ran by; I recall thinking how brave she was to admit to the world that the pathetic creature running to save himself from everlasting humiliation was her own (the outcome of the race naturally left me psychologically wheelchair-dependent, though I have recovered sufficiently to pen this historically accurate account. I remain relieved, by the way, that the immortality which accompanies finishing last somehow eluded me).

Ron Craker seemed bigger than life at the awards ceremony following the race. He walked to the podium to receive his gold medal amid a flurry of popping flashbulbs and the deafening roar of the York cheering section, waving to the crowd like Moses must have shortly after parting the Red Sea.

It was then I decided I wanted to be Ron Craker someday. For the next three years, I dreamed I would be.

The next two state meets saw steady improvement and less trauma.

In 1976, the gun sounded as we were still pulling off our sweats, resulting in a poor 24th place finish, even though we were probably a better top seven than the 20th place team of the year before.

I ran 155th, and there was breathing room not only in front, but in back of me that year. Coach Lee Halberg, as I recall, was not pleased with our performance.

The Race . . . Continued

In 1977, we lost three runners from our top seven to transfer, but still managed to finish 13th. Caught between strep throat and death the Wednesday before the meet, I experienced the miracle of antibiotics by race time and came back to finish 82nd. Coach Halberg, as I recall, was pleased.

In the late '70s, Deerfield had become what many considered to be the best collection of high school distance runners on the globe. York, its dynasty intact but being challenged, was uncustomarily coming up second or third best.

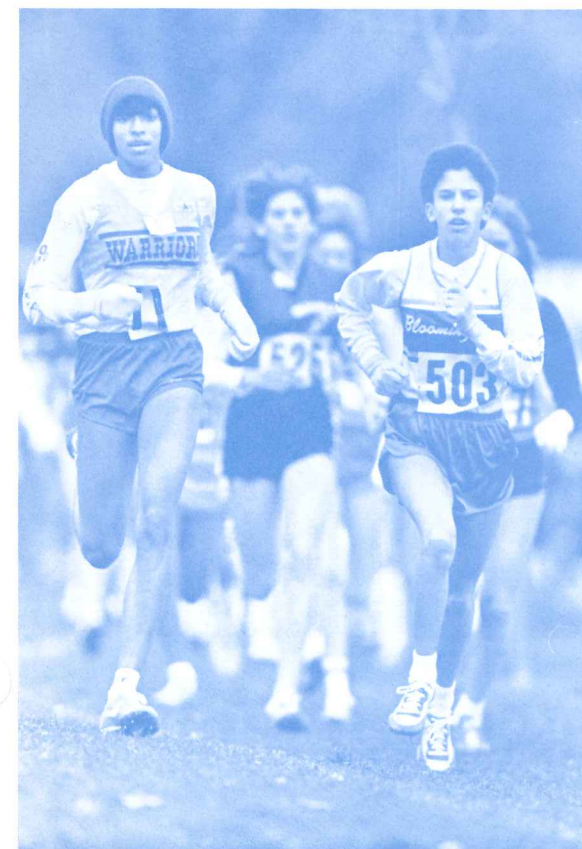
Tom Graves of Orland Park (Sandburg) was battling Bensenville Fenton's Jim Spivey for the individual title, both threatening but not surpassing Craig Virgin's course record. Spivey would become an Olympian in 1984, as Virgin had before him.

But 1978, in my mind, was to be My Year, the culmination of those four dedicated years without a date, the 1,000 mile summers, the trip to the podium, the flashbulbs popping, the waving to the crowd. The team would be in the top three, myself in the top 25, both Lanphier firsts. I'd run well all season; the state meet would be My Race.

Frustrated early, however, I never emerged from the pack into open running room and finished a disappointing 50th. The team was eighth, still the highest in the school's history up to that time.

The dream I had spent four years building lie in the 49 breathless pieces, all of them in front of me. I felt pretty empty.

But my running career was not over. I would go to Illinois State University, break a knee my freshman year (it saved me from being cut), finally start shaving and rack up a few good times. I improved radically, but essentially graduated from one level of mediocrity to another. College competition was better, harder, more a test of survival than accomplishment.



(Photo Courtesy Paul E. Gero, Chicago Tribune)

(Photo Courtesy Peoria Journal Star)



The kids who compete Saturday probably don't remember those days or those athletes, nor should they. After all, they have a race of their own to run.

This year's AA meet, like previous races, will be both predictable and exciting. York's Long Green Line, which has monopolized high school cross country in this state for two decades, will intimidate many teams before the race begins.

Coach Joe Newton will scowl and pull down his dirty green stocking cap, practically willing his athletes to run faster. The Dukes will finish in the top five, though not a soul will be surprised if they figure higher. The faces change, but the results remain much the same.

High school coaches will bark last minute instructions, though their athletes are as prepared as they're going to be. College coaches will take notes. When the gun sounds, the pack of 200 and some odd AA runners will converge to a point at the front, thicken in the middle and thin out again with the stragglers.

The York marching band may play "As the Saints Come Marching In" as the runners pass. A courageous mom may even yell encouragement to her struggling freshman son.

Some will succeed beyond their expectations, and life, briefly will be too good for words. Others will be crushed at what seems life's worst possible catastrophe.

Fortunately, there will be very little bloodshed.

For some, as it was for me, there will be little solace in their performance. Hopefully, they may take pride in their effort.

I too will be a spectator at Detweiller Saturday.

It's November, and I recognize its chill, its aroma. The young, nervous faces are new. But one can still sense, and certainly appreciate, the enthusiasm of young people who believe in setting goals and striving to achieve them. The working and the dreaming were worth it.

Reflection tells me that one mustn't exaggerate the importance of anything so ultimately trivial as a sporting event.

But when I was 18, running in the state meet at Detweiller Park was easily the most important thing in my life, and a significant springboard for the race which has followed.