

Greatness Remembered: 40 Years since 1976

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By Eric Hofmann



Their lives have taken them to different parts of the country and through varying career paths. Jeff Small is head track coach at Marshall University in West Virginia; Pat McPherron is an economist in Florida; also in Florida, Steve Iberra works for an airline; Bob Nicholls of Colorado owns apartment buildings and a ski resort; Bill Moran practices law in Springfield, Ill.; Dave Franson is a retired school

principal and George Coffey a fireman in Chicago's west suburbs; and Don White, a roofer, lives in the south suburbs. Just over seven and a half minutes in the spring of 1976 bind them forever in history.

This weekend marks the 40th anniversary of what is widely considered the greatest high school relay race of all time. On May 29, 1976, Thornton Township High School set a national federation record in the 2 mile relay, running 7:38.0. Lyons Township, Rockford East, Bloom Township, Evanston Township, and Thornwood followed - all besting the previous national record. Those six remain to this day the top six times ever run at the Illinois State Meet (when converted to the current distance of 3200m). Of Illinois teams, only York has run faster at any time during the year. And all still rank highly on the national all time list.

Wherever their lives have since taken them, that race remains a milestone for its participants. "I remember it vividly and always will," says Franson, who anchored second place Lyons.

1976 was the first year the two mile relay was contested at the IHSA state meet. For many coaches and teams, it carried elevated importance. A number of schools decided to focus on that event, thinking they could win. Franson said the event "drew on a lot of teams' creativity," as they weighed the options of loading the relay or spreading top athletes out across other events. His teammate Bob Schafer remarked that six or seven teams thought "we're going to win it," and that everyone thought they should be in the lead. Nicholls, also of Lyons, remarks it was "no mystery why that two mile relay, being the very first one, would have been highly sought after by coaches and runners." Their team decided at a December pre-season meeting that they were all in for the relay. Beyond the allure of a first time event, Rockford East was motivated by the recent state championship of their school's football team.

Thornton's motivation to win the two mile relay was strong. The summer before, performing well at the state cross country meet was the sole focus. It was a senior heavy team, and they put in a large volume of training. The Wildcats entered the 1975 state meet as one of the favorites, along with archrival Bloom, whom they had beaten several times that fall. But it was not their day - one runner lost a shoe and another finished well back of expectations. The Trojans took their second consecutive team title with Thornton not even earning a trophy. Following the disappointment, the attention turned to track and the two mile relay. Don White and Mitch Johnston had spent the summer on an athletic tour of Europe, running 1:55 and 1:53, respectively, in the half mile. Bolstered by Mike Clark and Steve Iberra, Thornton was so strong, they considered going for the two mile relay without White to save him for other events.

The race was tightly packed from start to finish, somewhat unusual for a relay of that distance. Evanston surprisingly led most of the first seven laps, dragging along Lyons, Rockford, Bloom, Thornwood, and Thornton. Moran, the second leg of Thornton's championship team, who himself ran a quarter mile personal record en route to a 1:58 leg, remembers on the final lap, the field "collapsed like

an accordion.” White took the baton in sixth place, got through a quarter mile in 51.7 and shut down the rest of the leaders with an 880 yard split of 1:49.5, a time that would contend for the individual half mile win in any year. White knew he had the race won, raising his arms in triumph five yards before the finish line. Moran’s take is that White would have done whatever was necessary to get that victory. He says White appeared energized even after the finish and could talk comfortably. Perhaps it was adrenaline kicking in, or maybe memories have been embellished over forty years, but White assures he was, indeed, spent, and felt drained all the way up until it was time for him to race the 440 yard dash, in which he earned his second state championship of the meet. That quarter mile event had been White’s preferred distance throughout much of high school, and the Thornton coaches had worked to make him a half miler like state champion brother Charlie. White remembers his 2 mile relay leg well. While the third runners made their way around the track with the Wildcats in sixth, his thought drifted to 1975 cross country. “We’re choking again. I can’t believe it,” he remembers. The emotion contributed to his supremely fast start. “I was so mad,” says White, “I ripped the baton out of Mike Clark’s hand. In the lead on the homestretch, “I swear I heard the announcer say Bloom was trying to pass the Thornton guy.” White remembers praying to God to get him through to the end, and held off a fast finishing Franson, who himself ran 1:51.0.

If not for an unfortunate circumstance, Moran, a long distance runner moving down, might not have even taken part. However, Johnston missed the main part of the season with injury. Speculation on how good Thornton’s team could have been with him is one of several interesting speculative scenarios. Bloom came into state as one of the favorites, and finished fourth, despite one of their best 880 yard runners from 1975 not competing for the school team in ‘76. The injury prone Steve Luzzi had decided it would better for his career long term to run independently that year. As anchor runner Jeff Small said, coach Steve Miller “didn’t believe in rest or recovery.” Though the heavy load took its toll on some, those who survived were conditioned to produce a performance that is remembered four decades later. Bob Nicholls of Lyons, who had their best lineup intact, sees a scenario where even they could have run faster. Their leadoff man, George Coffey, was a quarter miler moved up in distance. He followed the coach’s instruction to stick with the leaders for 660 yards and sprinted in to hand off in the lead. Nicholls speculates that if Coffey could have run even faster employing the same strategy against stiffer competition from someone like Johnston or Luzzi in the first leg.

Perhaps the biggest “what if” story is that of Rockford East. Mark Trojniar was the only senior on that third place team and was set to be replaced by a good sophomore the following season. Coming off of their great finish in 1976, Rockford was sure to contend in ‘77. But, due to budget restrictions, the school cut all sports. The athletes continued to run independently and were trained by their high school coach, but never had another chance to represent Rockford East in a relay.

Despite the speculation as to what could have been, the fact remains that almost everything came together on a single day to create the perfect race. At the time, Track and Field News deemed it the greatest high school race since Jim Ryun’s mile record. Most of the teams had not run a fully loaded lineup before state and thought a time around 7:44 would win. Why were so many great times run that

first year, and yet no state meet since has seen a comparable display? The boys of '76 offer their opinions. Nicholls notes the variety of other sports from which kids have the opportunity to choose these days, as well as the numerous other social options. "Back then we had TVs you had to walk up to and turn the knob on." He elaborates, those were "the neanderthal days" when it came to training; masses of high school kids put in 1000 mile summers. Bob Schafer says their typical in-season cycle was two hard days followed by one easy. A high school coach himself now, Schafer notes the consensus in modern times of greater emphasis on easy days. Nicholls also became a coach when his sons were high school runners in Colorado. Illinois legend Craig Virgin introduced him to Frank Shorter, and he learned about sophisticated training Shorter had done that was ahead of its time. The runners from Bloom and Thornton interviewed for this article expressed similar sentiment regarding the lack of sophisticated training. Don White commented in particular that they knew little about nutrition. They improved as runners simply by running.

The historic race became a point of connection between the athletes who competed - "a lynchpin for conversation," as Franson called it. Often, they ran into each other at college meets, competitors once again. Fans of the sport are intrigued to hear of their experiences. Moran regularly runs into people who ask him about it. As a spectator at about thirty state meets since his high school day, people ask him "remember that great two mile relay in '76?" and are delighted to discover they are speaking to one of its key players.

The runners from different teams consistently credit their coaches for creating an environment for success. Don White spoke highly of Thornton coaches Ed Fredette and Steve Toth for developing him individually and producing the team that took fourth place in the overall meet, narrowly missing a trophy. Dave Franson spent the first two autumns of high school on the soccer field before Lyons coach Jim Kilbreath encouraged him to switch to cross country, joining his buddy Schafer, whom he had known since age seven. In fact, Franson attributes the strength of much of the two mile relay field to base training on roads and cross country. Kilbreath "provided the consistency and vision necessary to run that time. He planned the workouts, he pushed us, he knew where to move the bar for everyone," says Franson. "Very patient coach, would hang in there with you, understood the work that would go into making incremental improvements. He cared more about us as people first before track athletes." Each of the four Lyons relay runners just last week received a handwritten letter from his old coach, retired after a long and successful career that included numerous state championships in South Carolina (on May 14, 2015, Kilbreath coached his Spartanburg girls to a team state title on the final day of his career).. Kilbreath himself says of his 1976 quartet: "they're all very successful adults and family people. That's what we're trying to teach first." Kilbreath's concern for his pupils should not be mistaken for lack of demand. Bob Schafer reminisces of workouts such as eight quarter mile repeats in 56-57 seconds with exactly (Kilbreath allowed no wiggle room) one minute rest and afterwards having to pull a chair into the shower.

For some, the 1976 state meet two mile relay was the pinnacle of their athletic careers. Others went on to bigger things. The runners interviewed for this article followed different paths in that regard.

Jeff Small competed at a high level for California Polytechnic University alongside several of his Bloom teammates. He is now the head coach at Marshall University.

Bob Nicholls finished his competitive career at Lyons, but became a state championship coach of his sons' team in Colorado. His teammate Bob Schafer continued on at Indiana University, moved to Florida, and has also done some coaching part time. Schafer's lifelong friend (and former band mate) Dave Fransen ran at University of Kentucky, and capped a career in education as principal of his alma mater, Lyons Township.

Bill Moran was only a sophomore when he ran on the legendary national record relay team. He completed a successful high school career at Thornton specializing in longer distances. As a senior in fall 1977, Moran ran a cross country invitational on a Saturday, jumped in the inaugural Chicago Marathon (originally called Mayor Daley's Marathon) the next day, finished in 2:51, and followed it up by running 14:45 in a three mile cross country meet on Tuesday. Competing at Southern Illinois University, he ran in four NCAA cross country national meets. In his freshman race, he beat Henry Rono and Samson Kimobwa, the current and former 10,000m world record holders at the time.

Don White joined brother Charlie at University of Illinois. He was part of a team that qualified for the NCAA national meet in the 2 mile relay as a freshman, but most of the team came down with the flu and they were unable to compete. White remains in the south suburbs and, although he may miss this year due to work commitments, attends the state track meet most years, always sitting with Bill Moran and Mitch Johnston. In recent years, Moran and Johnston have made it tradition to get in eighteen holes of golf on Saturday morning. They tee off at 7:00 a.m. and rip through to ensure arrival at O'Brien Stadium in time to watch the finals kick off with the 3200m relay, the modern version of the old 2 mile event.

Dave Franson may have summed things up best, echoing the sentiments of many of the others in being "very appreciative of the whole experience" and emphasizing "how impactful the memories of a state meet can be."

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