

# Cross-Country Contentions: Parallels of Push, Pull, and Proximity

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As one who came from the neighborhood, saw what was in the water, and had a coach that pushed, I can speak with authority to the national rise and fall of boys' cross-country running in Spokane, Washington. Spokane was once a Rift Valley (likened to Kenya's area of running success) of American Distance Running. Perennially this town sent teams with different athletes and coaches to compete more than most at nationals. How? After interviewing the coaches and athletes that first set this community apart, as well as those that took up their torch, the answers become clear. It is not the workouts they ran, it is not the topography of the town, it is not something elusive like an elixir. It's closer than you think. Despite varied coaches, teams, and approaches, the singularly unifying element common to all is found in: mentoring, legacies, dream casting, and proximity. There are over 239,000 male high school distance runners comprising over 20,500 teams in America. Spokane's Greater Spokane League (GSL) comprised only 10 teams (Hawkins, 2018). Half their league competed at Nike Cross Nationals since the inaugural race in 2004. Most teams have a 1 and 20,500 chance to compete at the highest level; in Spokane, for a time, your chances were closer to 50%. This conference paper is meant to spur further insight and research opportunities into the use of legacy creating, thinking, and sustaining practices in both coaching and mentoring (Wade-Benzoi 2019). The same can be said of the powers and pitfalls of shared vision creating and proximity to greatness (Hamming 1986). Such ideas, although contextualized through boys' distance running, share broad application to other areas of research.

*Keywords:* Role modeling, commitment, connection, communication

## Introduction

### Mentoring Legacies: The Push

Gerry Lindgren and Rick Riley were some of the nation's preeminent boys high school distance runners in the mid-1960s; and they came from the same town but attended different high schools. One grew up in a household with both parents in an idyllic setting of support and relative affluence, while the other grew up in the poverty and obscurity of a broken home. Despite these differences, they shared success that few ever attain. Why?

They had coaches who cared and knew of the craft they put their athletes through. Tracy Walters coached Gerry Lindgren. Herm Caviness alongside Tony Dolphin coached Rick Riley. Neither of these coaches were afraid to challenge their athletes to run far beyond what their contemporaries did at the time. Gerry's boast of running anywhere between 150-200 miles in a week was equaled by Rick Riley's ability to average, for an entire calendar year, 92 miles a week of running (Hawkins, 2018). What each had really inherited, besides a tremendous capacity to train, was a legacy of work provided to them by coaches who could build capacities within their athletes.

Results followed such efforts. Gerry Lindgren won state individual and team championships in

cross-country. Gerry smashed all the high school records. Shortly after graduating high school, Gerry competed and was a favorite to medal in the 1964 Olympics in the longest track event, the 10,000m. But for a twisted ankle in the days leading up to the race, it may have been Gerry Lindgren and not Billy Mills that ended up winning gold in that event. Still, a ninth-place finish for a freshly graduated high school student, on one good ankle was still something to remember. Gerry's success as a five-foot five-inch 115 pound fleet of foot runner earned him the name The Spokane Sparrow. What stood out to Rick who would be nicknamed The Ferris Flyer as he observed Gerry running from the stands, who himself was five foot six inches and 120 pounds, was the similarity in their size and likewise their drive.

Rick Riley's senior season in 1966 showcased a national 2-mile record of 8:48.3, which was likewise a feat made mention across the country. Cheering from the infield of Rick's race was Gerry Lindgren, who would end up being roommates with Rick when he graduated high school and went on to attend Washington State University in Pullman, Washington. These two national caliber athletes from competing schools made something truly spectacular occur: the pairing of greatness.

Something of a special psychology occurred

from those that were pushed to excellence; it was that proximity to one another. Their schools competed against each other in local competitions. Their coaches were varied and different in their approach. There was no singular workout, some secret sauce, silver bullet, or something special in the water they drank; but their coaches knew how to make them feel special. Likewise, they also enjoyed the opportunity to push each other because they did not have to travel some great distance to find competition, they simply needed to get on the school bus and head to the local competition.

As happens when greatness comes, it likewise passes in a flash. The initial burst on the national scene with Tracy and Herm was something that came and went. The myth of their work ethic and the paper clippings of their accomplishments started to fade with time. With Tony Dolphin's untimely death, then Tracy Walters and Herm Caviness' retirement, showcased that these systems and pairings of greatness can simultaneously turn the start of a dawn into its own sunset before it has scanned the sky.

What started in the 60s with Gerry and Rick was a legacy that was built upon and sustained really in the 1980s, as another set of coaches came and took their athletes and teams back to national prominence. Using that same mentality to push those that wanted to be pushed, this new generation of athletes brought in championships and national prominence once more. This time it was Pat Tyson, Bob Barbero, Mike Hadway, and Jon Knight who spanned championship banners and national prominence from 1988-2014; 26 years of wins. Each of these coaches were at different high schools, each had their own coaching philosophy and training methods that were similar but markedly different from one another, and yet each of them were able to stand atop the podium with their teams and athletes.

Each of these coaches were committed to their athletes as much as the craft of coaching. These coaches communicated with clarity their brand of distance running; their styles differed but the results did not. Each coach connected with their athletes and had the advantage of competing against each other year in and year out.

### **Dream Casting: The Pull**

Jon Knight called it, "Dream Casting" when he spoke of talking with athletes about what could be (Hawkins 2018). It was something he had experienced himself as a young man who had been coached by Herm Caviness in the early 1980s. It was that ability to believe in the possibilities before him despite all odds stacked against him. Jon had a hairline fracture, broken foot, near the end of his senior year in 1982 and yet, despite this reality he won the state championship in track in not one, but two events: 1600m and 3200m. What is outlined as possible by a coach is fulfilled by a desire found in the athlete; both push and pull are needed.

Pat Tyson mentored thousands of distance runners. He too knew what it was like to pass through the process of being on the outside looking in. Drawing upon his own experiences as an athlete under the tutelage of Dan Watson at Lincoln High School in Tacoma, Washington, Pat had known nothing of distance running and its regiments prior to his interaction with this man and mentor who would change his life. Dan's easy flow of access to knowledge about training concepts and techniques came from his study of Track & Field News which was regarded at the Bible of the Sport (Hawkins 2018). Indoctrinated by this coach, Pat was told to try and walk on to the University of Oregon's team under coaches Bill Bowerman and Bill Dellinger. Pat walked on to the team, helped them win their first national team cross-country championship and became roommates with Steve Prefontaine. Such experiences and ties towards legacy allowed Pat to make winners of those who knew little about the sport.

If the first two examples are witnesses to what mentors you draw from can make for you, Mike Hadway, is a testament to what one can accomplish on their own. Drawn to the sport because he could win in the 800m races in junior high school, Mike decided he'd participate in cross-country and track in high school. However, he had no legacy to draw from as he attended Rogers High School in Puyallup, Washington. There was no legacy of excellence, no coach with access to the knowledge he needed to attain. Essentially Mike coached himself and his teammates as he neared his high school graduation. Trial, error, and what Mike could teach himself made it so he became one of the best runners in the state. He eventually competed at Spokane Community College before transferring to Eastern Washington University. Mike's approach, and he was my high school coach who led my team to state championships and national cross-country appearances, was one in which he would expect a great deal to come from inner motivation. Yes, he would push, but the real expectation was for all his athletes to know how to motivate themselves and push; his experience was transferred on to his own athletes.

Bob Barbero grew up going to local fun runs where Gerry Lindgren ran away and then was there to greet everyone at the finish line by holding the stopwatch and telling their time. Bob stayed nearby and did workouts with Rick Riley at Spokane Falls Community College. And so, he had access to the legacy and tried to start one at University High School which had not won any team state championship of any kind until his boys team started winning cross-country championships. It was a long wait for a school that started in the 60s to have to wait, but just as the new millennium started, so too did the winning ways. Buying into belief despite coming so close for nearly 20 years of coaching was what Barbero endured. Starting legacies is tough, especially when competing in a league where others are at nationals but that was Bob's lot. It is that proximity to greatness that everyone wants and needs in order to have

sustained success.

Each of these men knew how to pull their athletes through a training cycle. They did such while bringing through the most novice, as well as the most advanced athlete. Each championship endeavor started in the offseason where team camps brought team-building and camaraderie to the forefront, while simultaneously showcasing the peer-mentoring process by upperclassmen. In these places, storytelling of the success of the league, as well as the coaches exploits, became common knowledge of all involved. The story of the offseason was a narrative that pulled athletes through every endeavor and workout as they then went through their own in-season competition.

### **So Close: Proximity**

It is the proximity to greatness that allowed the Spokane running scene to flourish for a season. However, that running legacy has lost a step as of late. Those coaches that mentored the athletes that followed came in pairs multiple times: Tracy Walters and Herm Caviness in the 1960s, followed by Pat Tyson, Bob Barbero, Mike Hadway, and Jon Knight from 1988-2014. The dip that followed after the first initial success is a testament that this legacy can be lost. Since 2014 there has only been 1 boys' team from Spokane that qualified to compete at Nationals. Those coaches outlined above have retired and their replacements, like the replacements of the 1960s, are not their predecessors. Who was that coach that most recently led his team to compete at nationals? Mike Lee, who was an athlete of Pat Tyson. Once more legacies matter.

### **Discussion**

The proximity to greatness and the proximity to that pitfall of mediocrity are not so far from one another. Both have a pull to them. There are structures that are in place that can aid or detract from such legacies. An athletic director who does not understand the world of distance running

could hire someone who is their friend or our of convenience instead of what is best for the team. And quickly that which was built can fall.

That contention or tension between coaches and athletes, mentors and mentees, is made stronger by their close proximity to excellence. The coaches that made distance running in the Northwest matter were not envious of each other's success, they were grateful for it. Each athlete's and coach's best was a gift to everyone. The rising tide that lifts all ships was found in those coaches who showed up in the offseason to prepare their athletes for their futures.

### **Conclusion**

The distance between high schools worked psychologically on the athletes who competed against one another. The expectation messaged to athletes was there was nothing unique, special, or significant about their competitors. There was no secret elixir to success. It was simply that each team had just as much of an opportunity to succeed if only they would hold on long enough. Another advantage to the close proximity was the frequent opportunity to interact and compete against one another. The tension of relevance, of the headline, kept every interaction worthy of note for both athlete and coach.

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