

The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

All You Have to Do is Go Out and Do Some Four- and Five-Hour Runs: Understanding  
Wisconsin's Elite Long Distance Runners, 1975-2011

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Eau Claire, Wisconsin

December, 2011

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## **Abstract**

The state of Wisconsin has been the home to numerous national and Olympic level track and field athletes during the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. National champions of the high school, collegiate and professional ranks hailed from and trained in Wisconsin. In particular, the state has been well represented by long distance runners in national and international competition, especially since the running boom of the 1970s. This paper aims to understand these individuals, their training, and the impacts that the state of Wisconsin, its climate, its training facilities, its culture, and its people, have had on elite level distance runners.

## **Introduction: Why Examine Wisconsin's Elite Distance Runners?**

It's a cold and snowy winter afternoon in Madison, WI. Over the rolling hills and snow covered roads, a group of lean, young men cover ground at a clip. Mile after mile at 6:00 per mile pace slips by; a rate of speed that would astonish most of the population to run once does little to quicken the breathing or disrupt the conversation of these runners. That's because this group represents some of the finest cross country and long distance track runners in the United States. Most of these men have run at National Championships and earned All-American honors time and again. They have won innumerable titles as a team and individuals. A handful of them have run under 4 minutes for the mile. And a very special few will represent the United States at the Olympic Games.

This scene could accurately describe a group of runners from the 1983, 1996, 2007, and almost every year in between. Wisconsin, land of freezing temperatures and snow-covered training grounds, has for more than 30 years, been home to many of America's greatest long-distance runners. High school and collegiate national champions have called this state home, performing thousands of miles near their homes and universities to prepare for the most elite of endurance competitions.

Recently, a statistical analysis of the past 50 years of NCAA men's cross country championship results proclaimed the most successful distance running programs of the past half century. The resounding result was that the University of Wisconsin ran a step ahead of the rest of the nation on the cross country course, as the number one program. The Badger men's team has qualified for the past 39 championship meets, including 32 top ten finishes.<sup>1</sup> The consistent

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<sup>1</sup>Rick Miller, "The Fairest of All Time: Historical NCAA Cross Country Rankings," *Faster Than Forty*, 14 October 2011, accessed 16 October 2011, <http://www.fasterthanforty.com/the-fairest-of-all-time-historical-ncaa-cross-country-rankings/>.

performances of the UW cross country team are just one component of the rich tradition of distance running and track and field in the state of Wisconsin.

Collegiate cross country and distance running in the state is one of the most competitive in the country. UW-Madison leads five scholarship schools in NCAA competition. In Division III competition, the Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (WIAC), representing nine public universities in medium-sized towns throughout the state, is a constant force to be reckoned with in non-scholarship competition, with WIAC men's and women's teams capturing a total of thirty-five trophies (awarded for a top four finish at the National meet) in the past twenty years.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of division, Wisconsin has been historically well represented at national meets on the cross country course and the track.

At the high school level, running has been a mainstay for athletic competition for the better part of a century. The Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association (WIAA) has sponsored a state championship for track and field since 1895 and cross country starting in 1913.<sup>3</sup> The national movement of women's organized sport spurred by the 1972 Title IX Act saw the origins of track in Wisconsin in 1971 and cross country in 1975.<sup>4</sup> Both sports continue to have consistently strong participation levels from both genders.

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<sup>2</sup>"WIAC Women's Cross Country NCAA Championship History," accessed 28 October 2011, <http://wiacsports.com/documents/2010/6/18/WomenNCAAHHistory.pdf?id=65>.; "WIAC Men's Cross Country NCAA Championship History," accessed 28 October 2011, <http://wiacsports.com/documents/2010/6/17/MenNCAAHHistory.pdf?id=59>.

<sup>3</sup>"Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association: State Boys Track and Field Team Champions (1895-2011)," accessed 27 October 2011, <http://wiaawi.org/track/bteamchamps.pdf>.; "Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association: State Boys Cross Country Team Champions (1913-2011)," accessed 27 October 2011, <http://wiaawi.org/crosscountry/bteamchamps.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup>"Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association: State Girls Track and Field Team Champions (1971-2011)," accessed 27 October 2011, <http://wiaawi.org/track/gteamchamps.pdf>.; "Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association: State Girls Cross Country Team Champions (1975-2011)," accessed 27 October 2011, <http://wiaawi.org/crosscountry/gteamchamps.pdf>.

With the solid scholastic and collegiate foundation, the state has seen a number of home grown athletes rise to the level of Olympians. At the second Olympic Games of the modern era in 1900, Wisconsin's Alvin Kraenzlein won four gold medals and is recognized as "the father of modern hurdling".<sup>5</sup> Since then, over a half dozen Wisconsin natives have represented the US in track and field at the Olympic Games in a variety of events, with many others qualifying for the Olympic Trials, Pan American and University games, as well as numerous world championships.

Over the past thirty years, several Olympic level sprinters and field event athletes have come through the state of Wisconsin, including gold medalists Andrew Rock and Kenny Harrison. However, the consistency with which elite sprinters develop from Wisconsin natives is rarer than the steady stable of national class distance runners fostered in Wisconsin high schools and public universities. Since the 1970s, Wisconsin has been a training ground for some of the finest distance runners in the nation. What overarching factors have allowed otherwise regular people from the state to become some the elite of American distance running? The state of Wisconsin, particularly the city of Madison, features the necessary facilities—trail and road running routes, indoor training facilities, medical support for distance runners to thrive. In addition, some of the best coaches and athletes have called the state home, and in the process, attracted and developed even more successful runners. To understand how Wisconsinites came to represent some of the top talent in the country, one must first understand the state of American distance running, as well as the training necessary to reach Olympic levels.

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<sup>5</sup> "Wisconsin High School Track Athlete Bios," accessed 22 October 2011, <http://web.archive.org/web/20101224175415/http://wisconsintrackandfield.com/bios/index.html>.

## **The Development of Distance Training and American Distance Running**

It seems perhaps self-explanatory that training for long distance runners requires significant amounts of running. However, there are a number of factors that affect how the human body responds to distance training: how fast should the run be? How long? How many times during the week should one run? What about things outside running—weight lifting, stretching, yoga, etc.? The recipe that every coach uses is slightly different, but overall, most of the world's distance runners train based on the evolution of theory over the past 60 years.

Post-Cold War training for distance running was championed by Czech runner Emil Zatopek, who won 5,000m, 10,000m, and marathon at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics; he is the only man to compete the triple crown of long distance races at the highest level of competition. Zatopek's unmatched fitness was driven by interval work—the use of repeated short efforts at the fast pace/intensity of the race with periods of recovery between fast work bouts. Previously, runners used to perform primarily comfortable, easy pace runs that developed fitness very slowly. What Zatopek's training did for his body was to prepare it for the specific demands of what a race would bring. For example, if a 10,000m (6.2 mile) race would be run at around 5:00 pace per mile, running 6 repetitions of 1 mile each at 5-minute pace would simulate much of what the body would go through during a race. Certainly doing this type of workout would make a body more ready to run a fast 6-mile race compared to running 3 to 4 miles continuous at a pace of 7 minutes per mile. The introduction of interval training made the body and mind more ready for the demands of racing, and as a result, faster times were produced.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Neal Bascomb, *The Perfect Mile: Three Athletes, One Goal, and Less Than Four Minutes to Achieve It* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 51-52.

Two Olympics later in 1960, a group of New Zealand athletes and their pioneering coach Arthur Lydiard added a new dimension to the development of the world's fastest distance runners. Earning gold medals in the 800m and 5,000m and a bronze in the marathon, the world was intrigued by what had made the small island nation the most dominant group of middle and long distance runners on the planet. The answer: miles upon miles. The Lydiard group, even half mile champion Peter Snell, would run 100 miles per week and more—up to 200 miles according to some sources—for several months of “base” training at a time. These weeks of long, steady paced (not nearly as fast as racing pace but harder than easy jogging) running built up the basic endurance to previously unattained levels. Lydiard postulated that it was not speed that held back distance runners from achieving fast times, it was the ability to sustain that speed for the entire race. In 1960, the 5,000m (3.1 miles) world record was 13:35, a pace of 4:22 per mile. That is over 65 seconds per quarter mile, or broken down further just under 16 seconds per 100 meters. Nearly every runner can manage world record pace for some amount of time, even if it is 100 meters or less; thus, it's not about how fast you can run, but how long you can run fast.<sup>7</sup>

The best way to build the endurance needed to race long distances at fast paces was lots of steady mileage. This process made the body more efficient at running at all paces through a number of ways. The body's ability to run with oxygen “can be increased by proper exercise,” while the anaerobic component, how the body functions without enough oxygen “is always limited.”<sup>8</sup> If a race uses, for example, 50% aerobic and 50% anaerobic energy, there is a much more potential to be gained in the form of getting better at using the oxygen a runner has as opposed to learning to deal with the discomfort of anaerobic running.

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<sup>7</sup> Arthur Lydiard and Garth Gilmour, *Running the Lydiard Way*, (Mountain View, CA: World Publications, 1978), 16-19.

<sup>8</sup> Lydiard, *Running*, 3-4.

The manifestations of training that improve the body's efficiency take place in the lungs, heart, blood, veins, and muscles of a runner. The volume of oxygen the lungs can take in grows with training, providing a greater source of oxygen to the body. The heart becomes larger and capable of pumping out greater volumes of blood per minute, delivering more oxygen to the muscles that need it. The blood itself adapts to the stresses of training and can carry more oxygen per unit to the muscles that need it. The channels that blood travels through get more efficient as well; network of veins is a highway-like system that is the infrastructure for delivering oxygen to the muscles. Through long training runs, new connections are made deeper into the muscles so that more oxygen-rich blood can be readily delivered to the source that needs it most. The muscles themselves also fine tune their ability to utilize oxygen through training. They can draw out more oxygen from the blood, use it more economically, and propel the body forward in a much more efficient manner after a period of serious training. The best way to achieve this is through steady, continuous long runs over the course of weeks, months and years.<sup>9</sup> Over the course of miles, the many systems involved with distance running work in closer harmony.

Mileage was the revolution, but in the pursuit of fast times, the lessons of the past were not abandoned. On top of the heavy mileage base was a period of intense interval workouts to get the body ready for racing. The enhanced aerobic capacity of Lydiard-trained athletes allowed them to perform more challenging interval workouts and get themselves better in tune with the intensity of racing than their less fit counterparts. In fact, the Lydiard methodology incorporated a year and multiyear planning system known as periodization, placing emphasis on the development of one part of running at different times.

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<sup>9</sup> Lydiard, *Running*, 5-8.

Typically, a year's running cycle begins with training of basic endurance (base training) through gradual increases in the amount of weekly mileage run; the majority of this running is done at an easy pace. This enhanced a runner's aerobic endurance. This mileage may be done in part on cross country terrain to build a runner's strength, but the roads are a primary training surface in the Lydiard mindset. Next to develop is usually strength. This may be implemented through the use of hill running at a variety of paces, as well as fartlek workouts—runs with faster spurts mixed in to easy pace running with recoveries, similar to a less intense interval workout, but based on time instead of distance covered. This was the introduction of faster paced running to transition into intervals to making the body race ready. Finally, speedy interval workouts became the focus of the training cycle. Their race-pace intensity put the finishing touches on the fitness gradually developed by base training and bridged to fast running through the strength phase. Each type of fitness supports the others, particularly those at paces slightly slower and slightly faster. The end result was stronger, fitter runners capable of running fast for a long time. This school of thought spread throughout the world and those that applied it saw remarkable results, notably Finland's dominance in the 1970s.<sup>10</sup>

By 1970, two new additions saw better training yielding faster times. In the 1968 Olympics, familiar faces were finishing outside of the top medal spots in the distance events, bumped down by the emerging East Africans runners from nations like Kenya and Ethiopia. The new faces had a natural training advantage: altitude running. The 1968 Games were held in Mexico City, over a mile above sea level, and the changing of the guard atop the podium showed the importance of altitude training for racing at altitude, and the dominance of East Africans continued at sea level races with reductions in world records. Soon, even athletes based at sea

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<sup>10</sup> Lydiard, *Running*, 15-55, 127-139.

level began spending a portion of their training year running in the mountains. The benefits of training at altitude basically expedite and further enhance the adaptations of steady mileage training that Lydiard discovered. Because of lesser usable oxygen, the body gets more efficient at using the little oxygen that it has. Running out of oxygen is the primary reason for fatigue and slowing in races from the half mile to the half marathon. Thus, when an altitude-trained runner returns to race at sea level's normal oxygen levels, they are able to get more out of the air, and can run at the same pace for longer than a sea level-trained runner whose body uses a smaller percentage of the available oxygen.<sup>11</sup>

During the 1970s, the runners setting records and winning medals came from across the world. Americans and Europeans still contributed greatly to top performances, as did the island nations of Japan, New Zealand, and Australia. For example, in the 1972 Munich Olympics, Western runners took 10 of the 15 medals in the men's middle- and long-distance, including all 5 golds; European women swept the 6 available women's medals in the limited distance program then offered to women at the Olympics (only the 800 and 1500 were contested). By the end of the decade, East Africans were sweeping Olympic podiums in distance events and redefining championship racing with their unmatched finishing sprints. In the longer track race such as the 5,000 and 10,000 meters, African runners like Miruts Yifter of Ethiopia were finishing fast races with a last quarter mile in 55 seconds or less, well under 4:00 mile pace. The ability to finish fast in addition to being able to run steadily faster from the gun than their American and European counterparts began the association that most people have now with East African dominion over the distance races.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Jim Denison, *The Greatest: The Haile Gebrselassie Story*, (Halcottsville, NY: Breakaway Books, 2004), 24-28.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 24-28, 42-46

American distance competitors stagnated while their East African counterparts blossomed. The US men's last Olympic medal on the track was in 1984. In the marathon, Eritrean-born Mebrathom Keflezghi's 2004 run was the only time an American stood on the Olympic podium in the event since Frank Shorter's 1972 and 1976 gold and silver runs. On the women's side, Shalane Flanagan in 2008 broke a decades' long dry spell on the track with a bronze medal in the Beijing Olympics. These occasional moments of glory, for most of the late 1980s until the early 2000s, were the most American distance fans and competitors could hope for, and the distinction of being the "top American" or the "first non-African" was often bandied about as a replacement badge of honor. American records fell to 5-10 seconds per mile slower than the world marks, typically held by West Africans.

In the 1980 and 1984 Olympics, some of the best middle distance performances were turned in by a trio of British runners, Steve Cram, Sebastian Coe, and Steve Ovett. Their success, particularly Coe's four Olympic medals and numerous world records, strongly influenced the training of other Western runners wishing to compete on the world stage. Seb Coe, coached by his father Peter, performed well at the middle distances (800m through the mile run), training primarily with high intensity, anaerobic interval work. Athletes and coaches emulated the speed-oriented approach to distance running, with mixed results.

In addition, an effort to scientifically study and quantify distance running during from the mid-1970s through the 1990s was well intentioned and did reveal new information about training, but often oversimplified what it took to maximize potential. Pseudo-magical paces, such as VO<sub>2</sub> max—an intense pace where oxygen delivery was maximized—and anaerobic threshold—the pace at which lactic acid, part of the reason for that burn when you run hard, is safely buffered from the bloodstream—were advertised as sure-fire methods for running fast.

Between the supposed support of scientific studies and the pockets of British success with higher intensity running, low-mileage, interval-based training became the staple of American and European distance runners.

Meanwhile, Kenyans and Ethiopians accumulated thousands of miles over their lifetime, starting at an early age and building, in the process shattering world records from the 800m to the marathon. A number of factors can be attributed to the performance gap between Americans and East Africans. A primary one is the accumulation of significantly more mileage before reaching prime racing age by East African runners; living in rural areas without cars to get to schools, the majority of East African children walk or run to and from school each day. Double Olympic gold medalist and 27-time world record breaker Haile Gebrselassie estimates that he ran 10 km (6.2 miles) each way to and from school during his childhood, totaling at least 60 miles per week at a relaxed pace for years and years. This is an incredibly effective way to build basic endurance; add in the fact that this is done at elevation, and by age 18, East Africans have a better aerobic capacity than their American counterparts, even if they have not engaged in formal training.<sup>13</sup>

Into adulthood, East African distance runners train entirely differently than most Western runners did during the 1980s and 90s. Kenyan and Ethiopian elites amass steady and significant mileage, week in and week out, year after year; during most of their training cycle, they are performing two runs a day, at times even three training sessions. Upon this foundation of aerobic strength, African runners are able to perform more challenging interval workouts than their American and European competition when the time comes to prepare to race.<sup>14</sup> The aerobic foundation determines how much race pace intensity interval training an athlete can perform

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<sup>13</sup> Denison, *Greatest*, 35-36, 43-47.

<sup>14</sup> Jurg Wirz, *Paul Tergat: Running to the Limit*, (Oxford: Meyer & Meyer Sport, 2005), 59-65.

before becoming overly fatigued. For example, a runner not as aerobically fit may be able to perform three one mile repeats at their 5,000m pace with a two minute recovery in between; a more aerobically developed runner may be able to run five or six repetitions. Thus, the later athlete is able to get their body more acclimated to the challenging demands of racing, and so handle the race fatigue better and run faster. In sum, this form of training creates a more efficient runner.

Beyond the factors of training differences, cultural and societal variances help explain the East African juggernaut in distance running over the past 50 years. Distance running is the biggest sport in Kenya and Ethiopia, and their top athletes are celebrities throughout the country. Children aspire to be like their favorite distance runner. Like American youths envision themselves throwing the winning touchdown in the Super Bowl, Ethiopian and Kenyan kids dream of blazing the last lap of the Olympic 10,000m to take the gold medal. In addition, the low standard of living in poor East African nations can provide a powerful motivator to aspiring distance runners. Being able to race fast may mean being able to lift themselves and their family out of poverty. Running can provide a better quality of life and if it takes running 20 miles a day to do that, they are willing.<sup>15</sup> Compared this to the economically stable life enjoyed by many, but not all, of young American runners, the ability to pursue their absolute best in distance running is a higher priority because it's about more than just sport and happiness. It's their best opportunity for a better life.

In the latter half of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Americans began closing the gap with a return to high mileage and stints at altitude. While rarely if ever surpassing Africans for

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<sup>15</sup> Denison, *Greatest*, 45-47.

championship victories, American men and women contribute top 10 in the world times and high finishes at world championship meets.

Wisconsin has been home to competitive collegiate athletes and national class track athletes from a host of events. For the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on Wisconsin natives who reached a national or Olympic level in long distance races—5,000 meters (3.1 miles) to the marathon (26.2 miles). Middle distance runners hailing from Wisconsin have made a significant impact on the American track and field landscape, including Olympians Gabe Jennings, Tim Hacker, and Suzy-Favor Hamilton. Examination of these runners as well would surely make for a significant contribution, but in the interests of time and the unique qualities associated with longer distance racing, the following pages will be devoted to four exceptional athletes: John Easker, Cathy Branta, Dan Held, and Chris Solinsky.

### **John Easker: Farm, Run, Sleep, Repeat**

When told the story of John Easker and his rise to distance running prominence, it may seem to confirm stereotypes of Wisconsinites held by the rest of the country. Easker was born in 1963 and raised on a dairy farm in a small town around 30 miles east of Wausau, WI. From an early age, he worked the farm with his father and brother, establishing the quintessential, strong Midwestern work ethic.

Easker began running his freshman year at Wittenberg-Birnamwood High School, competing in the middle-sized school division in the state of Wisconsin. His first track campaign yielded fair results for a young runner, with times of 4:36 in the 1600 meters (just under a mile) and 10:10 for 3200 meters.<sup>16</sup> After modest improvements in his sophomore season, Easker became more serious about his training. Year round running quickly brought remarkable results to the small town sensation.

Running six to eight miles a day in training during the summer, Easker built a base for his junior year that would see him earn three runner-up finishes at State Championship meets. The running Easker did was on top of his rigorous summer duties on the farm, which had him working from 5 AM until after 7 at night. The post-work runs were done at a steady but pretty quick pace because, as Easker put it, “the sooner I got done [running], the sooner I could eat and go to bed.”<sup>17</sup> Easker’s times on the track the following spring were 4:18 and 9:18, among the fastest in the state.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Mulrooney, *Training Profiles of Great Wisconsin Runners: A Book on CD*, (Self-published, 2009), 10-11.

<sup>17</sup> John Easker, Responses to History of Elite Wisconsin Distance Runners Survey, undated, in possession of author (see appendix for questionnaire).

<sup>18</sup> Mulrooney, *Training*, 10-11.

After seeing the benefits that his off-season training yielded, Easker further ramped up his mileage to prepare for his final year of high school competition. Now after each day's work on the farm was done, Easker performed 8-12 miles on the lonely country roads before retiring for the night.<sup>19</sup> Not only did Easker take his training to the next level, he also took control of his workouts, out of necessity.

Once the cross country season started during his senior year, Easker wasn't able to join his teammates for formal practice. Instead, Easker continued to work on the farm after school and train himself. Reading about the training of elite runners, Easker adapted what the best in the country were doing under the eyes of coaches on manicured golf courses and tracks inside stadiums and took them to the rural roads of northern Wisconsin. In addition to steady running, he included a long run, a more intense interval workout, and a tempo run—which he believed was the most important and beneficial component of his training. A tempo run is a hard but not all out training run that teaches the body to run fast without straining. It's a mostly aerobic type of workout that further increases how quickly an athlete can race without going over the edge. During high school, Easker performed tempo runs consisting of 5-6 miles of hard running. As usual, the hard farm work provided all the strength work that Easker needed; he developed a strong, powerful frame that suited him well particularly in cross country for the rest of his career.<sup>20</sup> Even with this time crunch and unconventional training environment, Easker thrived and the results showed on the cross country courses and tracks during the 1980-81 school year.

Easker dominated the Division 2 (medium school) Wisconsin State Cross Country Championships that fall, running 15:38 for the 5 kilometer (3.1 miles) race over hills, roughly

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<sup>19</sup> Easker, Responses

<sup>20</sup> Easker, Responses; Mulrooney, *Training*, 10-11

5:00 per mile pace.<sup>21</sup> His hard training and accumulated mileage over the years had built his endurance so that he could carry the pace he could run for two miles on a faster surface as a sophomore over a longer, more physically challenging race course 18 months later.

After a winter of 60-70 miles per week, Easker's final high school track season was one for the record books. During the regular season, he would frequently race with the team at two meets a week, often running three events in each meet. That's quite a workload, on top of which he performed his usual daily mileage and a weekly tempo run to build his strength and endurance. These frequent races took the place of interval running. Both would accomplish the goal of putting his body through the paces required for his most important races, but races did it in a more challenging, time-efficient manner. During the post-season, Easker recorded a remarkable 8:59 for 3200m. At the State Track Championships in Madison that June, Easker established Division 2 records in the 1600 and 3200 meter races, including a personal best time of 4:11.93 in the former. These records remain standing over thirty years later at the time of this writing.<sup>22</sup> John Easker left his mark on the state of Wisconsin distance running that season and that weekend in Madison. The following fall, he'd return to Madison to begin his legacy on the collegiate scene at the University of Wisconsin.

The transition to collegiate distance running is often a humbling one; it's not uncommon for even very successful high school athletes to take more than a year to get acclimated to their new training and living environment and begin to see success on the university level. This was not the case for John Easker. After his high school years of training by himself, the opportunities

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<sup>21</sup> "All-Time Individuals at State Meets", WisconsinRunner, accessed 1 Dec 2011, [http://www.wisconsinrunner.com/wccca/history/alltime\\_state\\_individuals.htm](http://www.wisconsinrunner.com/wccca/history/alltime_state_individuals.htm).

<sup>22</sup> "Boys All-Time Best Performance List: 1600 Meter Run," accessed 1 Dec 2011, <http://web.archive.org/web/20101224215112/http://wisconsintrackandfield.com/listsrecords/boystop1600M.html>.; "WIAA Boys Track and Field Records," accessed 1 Dec 2011, <http://www.wiaawi.org/track/brecords.pdf>.

opened to him at University of Wisconsin unlocked even more of Easker's remarkable potential as a distance runner. Madison presented him with the things he'd lack while training himself after working on the farm on the solemn roads of northern Wisconsin. With adequate time to run, top-notch coaching, teammates to train with, Madison's great training facilities, roads, and trails, Easker's incredible work ethic was supported and the runner thrived.

During his first semester, Easker made an immediate impression. On his first tempo run with the team, Easker pushed 1980 Olympian Steve Lacy to his limits. During the fall, Easker performed more speed-type training than he'd been used to and flatly admits he "didn't work near[ly] as hard as I used to and actually got out of shape." Still, "out of shape" for Easker was good enough for 27<sup>th</sup> place and All-American honors at the NCAA Cross Country Championships that fall, a remarkable achievement for a freshman. It wasn't enough, and he got hungrier. Returning to his roots of tough daily training, he trained himself over the winter break with more of his usual tempo and strength style on top of his daily mileage. The results were immediate: at the team's first meet of the indoor track season, Easker broke the UW record for 3 miles.<sup>23</sup> In March of 1982, Easker was the top American finisher, finishing 11<sup>th</sup> at the World Junior Cross Country Championships, leading the US team to a bronze medal.<sup>24</sup>

Easker continued to climb the ladder of success. During his sophomore cross country season, he earned another All-American at the 1982 NCAA championships, this time finishing 16<sup>th</sup> overall as part of a Badger team that won the national title. The following track season, the UW cross country and distance coach died tragically in a plane crash. The silver lining came in

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<sup>23</sup> Easker, Responses; "Wisconsin Men's Cross Country 2010 Record Book," accessed 3 Dec 2011, [http://www.uwbadgers.com/auto\\_pdf/p\\_hotos/s\\_chools/wis/sports/m-xc/auto\\_pdf/2010\\_Record\\_Book](http://www.uwbadgers.com/auto_pdf/p_hotos/s_chools/wis/sports/m-xc/auto_pdf/2010_Record_Book).

<sup>24</sup> "IAAF World Cross Country Championships 1982," accessed 5 Dec 2011, [http://web.archive.org/web/20071016110017/http://mypage.bluewin.ch/tomtytom/iccu/wxc\\_iaaf/wxc\\_JM1982S.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20071016110017/http://mypage.bluewin.ch/tomtytom/iccu/wxc_iaaf/wxc_JM1982S.html).

the form of the new hire, Martin Smith, who would guide Easker and the Badger men on a path of continued success.<sup>25</sup>

Compared to his predecessor, Smith favored more tempo running in his training plan as opposed to speedy intervals all the time. In Easker's eyes, this "training suited me much better." Between the added strength from Smith's workouts and having full confidence in the training he was doing, Easker blossomed into one of the finest American distance runners on the collegiate stage.<sup>26</sup>

In his first cross country season under Smith, Easker won the Big 10 title and finished 3<sup>rd</sup> at the NCAA Championship. The Wisconsin team finished 2<sup>nd</sup> to the University of Texas-El Paso, who later were "disqualified for NCAA violations." During that cross country season Easker "never lost to an American collegiate cross country runner."<sup>27</sup> That spring at the World Cross Country Championships, Easker took 28<sup>th</sup> overall, and was the 4<sup>th</sup> American on a team that took 2<sup>nd</sup> place.<sup>28</sup> Later that spring, Easker won the Big Ten title in both the 5,000 and 10,000 meter races, leading the Badger men to a one point team victory. Easker earned his first track and field All-American in Eugene that spring with a 5<sup>th</sup> place finish in the 10,000m at the NCAA Championships.<sup>29</sup>

In his final year in a Badger uniform, Easker would add three more All-American finishes. His 4<sup>th</sup> place finish at the NCAA Cross Country Championships put Easker in exclusive

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<sup>25</sup> Easker, Responses; "Cross Country 2010 Record Book."

<sup>26</sup> Easker, Responses

<sup>27</sup> "Cross Country Record Book"; Miller, "Fairest."

<sup>28</sup> "IAAF World Cross Country Championships 1984," accessed 5 Dec 2011, [http://web.archive.org/web/20071016110502/http://mypage.bluewin.ch/tomtytom/iccu/wxc\\_iaaf/wxc\\_SM1984S.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20071016110502/http://mypage.bluewin.ch/tomtytom/iccu/wxc_iaaf/wxc_SM1984S.html).

<sup>29</sup> "Wisconsin Men's Track and Field: 2011 Record Book," accessed 3 Dec 2011, [http://grfx.cstv.com/photos/schools/wis/sports/m-track/auto\\_pdf/2011\\_MTRK\\_Record\\_Book.pdf](http://grfx.cstv.com/photos/schools/wis/sports/m-track/auto_pdf/2011_MTRK_Record_Book.pdf).

company to earn four All-American certificates in his collegiate career; the UW team finished 4<sup>th</sup> that year, their fourth top 4 performance during Easker's tenure. For his accomplishments in the classroom as well as on the track, Easker was named to the Big Ten All-Academic Team and given the Big Ten Medal of Honor.<sup>30</sup>

Easker forwent the National and International Cross Country championships in 1985 to focus on the track. Indoors, he teamed up with three other runners to win the Distance Medley Relay (1,200m, 400m, 800m, 1,600m legs respectively) at the 1985 NCAA Indoor Championships. He repeated as double conference champion, earning him Big Ten Athlete of the Championship honors. At the NCAA meet, Easker, a team captain, took 5<sup>th</sup> in the 5,000m for his final of 7 career All-American performances. When he graduated, Easker had established the second-fastest time in school history of 10,000m with a 28:29 and his 13:37 5,000m time stood as the school record for 19 years.<sup>31</sup>

After graduating from Madison, Easker returned home to the family farm to work with his father and brother. His running career also took off following his outstanding collegiate campaign. The elite Nike team, Athletics West, signed Easker to represent and compete for the company. However, his training situation, much like it had been in high school, would be very different from those he was competing against. Work on the farm was "very hard" and the move away from Madison saw Easker lose his training partners and teammates, as well as Madison's facilities. But as he had pursuing state high school titles, he adapted to the conditions and competed with a vengeance.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> "Cross Country Record Book."

<sup>31</sup> "Track and Field Record Book."

<sup>32</sup> Easker, Responses.

Easker moved his workouts from the track to the roads surrounding his family farm, as well as utilizing some of the unique but unconventional training grounds in northern Wisconsin. He continued to incorporate tempo runs, his favorite and most beneficial type of workout. Over the years, as he improved as a runner, he increased the length of these hard tempo runs, up to 5 or 6 miles during high school and college, and eventually to 8-10 miles as a professional. He also incorporated interval style workouts performed on the surrounding roads instead of the track, as they had been done in college. All the conventional pieces of his past successful training were there, now in a less than conventional venue.

While Easker was an accomplished track runner, he continued the trends of his college days as a world class cross country competitor. During his first year as a professional, Easker finished a remarkable 10<sup>th</sup> at the 1986 World Cross Country Championships, just one second behind the 1984 Olympic champion at 10,000m, and beating a host of world class athletes. It was this performance that made Easker feel “it was possible to be a world champion.” The training leading up to the spring race featured a lot of training in cold winter conditions. A particularly important and innovative workout that Easker performed was running “a hilly snowmobile trail as hard as I could.” It helped up Easker’s already legendary pain tolerance and prepared him for the demands of a hilly, fast-paced race against the best runners in the world. Performing the workouts in the bitter cold, alone, hardened Easker’s resolve and helped him be able to tolerate more than his fellow competitors.<sup>33</sup> But being the toughest guy around was not a new thing for him.

During his college days, coaches and teammates took note of Easker’s unmatched drive and determination. The UW head coach nicknamed him “the manimal” for his relentless ferocity

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<sup>33</sup> Easker, Responses.

in training and racing; the dedication Easker held to “work harder than anybody else” enabled him “to beat a lot of more talented guys” on the race course. Training alone after college would be challenge enough to most elite runners. Doing so on top of tremendously demanding work on the farm was unheralded and Easker recognized the challenge and his unique ability to cope with his situation: “I honestly don’t know if anyone else could have done what I did.” Easker wouldn’t even consider giving up his farming way of life to improve his chances as a runner. Though his training situation was less than ideal and his opportunities to race were limited by commitments to the farm, he persevered, staying focused on his training. Miles and miles of lonely training without top notch facilities and a demanding work schedule was not enough to hold back Easker and his work ethic from trying to become the best runner possible.<sup>34</sup>

After running a personal best time for 5,000m in Europe during the summer of 1986, Easker again prepared to compete at the World Cross Country Championships with the intention of improving on his 10<sup>th</sup> place finish. His rigorous training in Wisconsin winters had him ready to race hard at the US Championships for cross country in 1987, but a recent medical development appeared to be an obstacle. Easker developed asthma, possibly, as he says, from “breathing in the bitter cold air, especially on my hard workouts in the winter.” He regularly performed hard runs in temperatures below zero and “never thought anything about it at the time.” What made him a ferocious competitor had now made his job tougher. But, just like adapting his running to his unconventional training environment, Easker wouldn’t let an obstacle stop him from trying his hardest. At the US Championships, Easker had to use an inhaler on multiple occasions during the race to stave off an asthma attack; it worked, as he ran away from

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid; Mark Sabljak, “Farm Team: The Easkers Mix Running With Life Down on the Farm,” *The Milwaukee Journal*, 5 June 1986, accessed 1 Dec 2011. <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1499&dat=19860605&id=A2MaAAAAIbAJ&sjid=byoEAAAAIbAJ&pg=5548,4537710>.

the finest distance runners in the country, including multiple time World Cross Country top ten finisher Pat Porter, to earn his first ever national title. At the World Championships in Europe, Easker broke away with two Kenyans, well clear of the rest of the field. His asthma flared up, and he had been unable to prepare his inhaler as he had for the US Championships and was frustratingly forced to drop out.<sup>35</sup>

The challenges kept coming for John Easker. The demands of working on the farm after his brother left restricted Easker's already sparse racing schedule. Nike had arranged accommodations for him to run at the prestigious Penn Relays and Easker planned on returning to the venue where he'd won the 5,000m in 1985. His father informed him that he "couldn't go because we had field work to do." Dutifully, he remained behind, sacrificing another racing opportunity to help his father. As Easker recalls, "it rained the whole weekend and we did no fieldwork." With the burdens on the farm coupled with continuing troubles with asthma, he ultimately decided to retire from competitive distance running at 24 years old.<sup>36</sup> He focused his attention on farming and raising his family with his wife, also an accomplished runner with quite a story of her own.

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<sup>35</sup> Easker, Responses; Personal discussion with John Easker, 12 November 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Easker, Responses; Don Pierson, "Wisconsin Pair Stars at Drake," *Chicago Tribune*, 28 April 1985, accessed 9 Dec 2011, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1985-04-28/sports/8501250934\\_1\\_drake-relays-cindy-bremser-relays-hall](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1985-04-28/sports/8501250934_1_drake-relays-cindy-bremser-relays-hall).

### **Cathy Branta: Breaking Women's Sports Barriers and Records**

In a small town north of Milwaukee, a teenaged girl named Cathy Branta took advantage of the opportunities created with the passage of Title IX and competed in track and cross country. By the time she graduated in 1981, she had etched her name into the state record books and catapulted herself into the highest levels of the sport. Her beginnings in the sport only gave subtle indicators to the astonishing talent lying within. Choosing running because she “wasn't any good at volleyball”, one of the few other sports offered at the time, Branta ran to a 9<sup>th</sup> place finish at the State cross country meet, and sported a personal best mile time of 5:22 in a track season limited due to injuries.<sup>37</sup>

After her freshman year, Branta became a force to be reckoned with. Competing in the medium-sized Division 2 section of the Wisconsin State track and cross country meets, Branta won three consecutive titles in cross country, as well as in the 1,600 and 3,200 meter races on the track. The training that took her to those numerous state championships consisted of interval days alternated with “long distance runs” which, in the humble beginnings of women's track and field were typically just 3-5 miles. The results of relatively low mileage running were superb and indicative of potential for even greater successes in running.<sup>38</sup>

During her final track season as a high school, Branta established records that stood for decades. Regardless of school size, her high school mile best of 4:51 still stands one of the top times in the history of Wisconsin.<sup>39</sup> Her 3200 meter personal best of 10:39 meant she had effectively doubled her endurance from her freshman year, when running 5:22 for a mile was an

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<sup>37</sup> Cathy Branta, Responses to History of Elite Wisconsin Distance Runners Survey, 2 Nov 2011, in possession of author (see appendix for questionnaire); & Mulrooney, *Training*, 44-45.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> “Girls All-Time Best Performances List: 1600 Meter Run,” accessed 29 Oct 2011, <http://web.archive.org/web/20101224175549/http://wisconsintrackandfield.com/listsrecords/girlstop1600M.html>.

all-out effort, instead of the midway point of a state championship race. A “steady progression of increasing mileage” over the years had obviously paid off.<sup>40</sup>

After graduating high school as one of the first great Wisconsin distance running females, Branta enrolled in the University of Wisconsin. Training in Madison under the tutelage of Coach Peter Tegen, Branta and the Badger women’s team became one of the most dominant forces in the NCAA. The combination of a group of very fast women to train with fused with Tegen’s steady mileage and challenging interval workouts developed Branta into an eleven-time All American in cross country and track, and by her senior year, the finest female distance runner in the NCAA. During her senior campaign, Branta won the Big Ten Conference and NCAA cross country national titles individually, leading the Badger women to the team titles in both competitions.<sup>41</sup> On the track that year, Cathy repeated as national champion in the 3,000m and added the 1,500m crown to her collection. Branta’s University of Wisconsin school record in the 5,000m of 15:07 represented a collegiate record that stood for over two decades.<sup>42</sup>

Branta stacked up against collegiate competition incredibly well, and her success continued against professionals. In national and international competitions, Branta scored four national championships between track and cross country. As a junior in college, she helped the American women to a team title at the World Cross Country Championships with a 10<sup>th</sup> place finish against the best distance runners in the world. Later that year, she finished 4<sup>th</sup> at the US Olympic Trials in the 3,000m, earning a spot as an alternate on the Olympic team; of the three women ahead of her, one was former teammate Cindy Bremser who went on to take 4<sup>th</sup> at the

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<sup>40</sup> Mulrooney, *Training*, 44-45.

<sup>41</sup> Frank Murphy, *The Silence of Great Distance: Women Running Long*, (Kansas City, MO: Wind Sprints, 2000), 225.

<sup>42</sup> Mulrooney, *Training*, 44-45.

Olympic Games, and another was gold medal favorite Mary Decker, who was tripped in final in Los Angeles.

The launch from small school Wisconsin state champion to national distance running stardom had been facilitated by the increasing workloads performed under the training of her coach, Peter Tegen. Tegen blended speed with mileage to develop well-rounded athletes that dominated the NCAA in the 1980s. In Branta's case, she felt the speed was the key component that enabled her to compete on an elite level, but, like in her high school days, "a steady increase in mileage" built her aerobic engine. With weekly long runs of 90 minutes or more, Branta was able to race faster, and over the course of her years in Madison, handle the day to day training better.<sup>43</sup>

Their frequency and type of intense interval workouts were also moderated with a specific plan. One day of fast running was typically devoted to longer intervals, while later in the week, Branta and the Badger women would perform faster, shorter repeats. Training with some of the fastest women in the country was a powerful training tool and enabled the runners to perform harder workouts by pushing each other. Ultimately, Branta felt Tegen's greatest gift was utilizing proper workout schedules to run their best races "at the right time."<sup>44</sup>

After college, Branta earned spots on American teams and performed incredibly well at international competitions. She won the 3,000m at the World University Games in Japan in 1985. That same year, she again helped carry the women's cross country team a world victory, this time placing second individually.<sup>45</sup> Unlike track races that break up runners based on their specialty event, World Cross Country combines the finest distance runners on the planet from the

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<sup>43</sup> Branta, Responses.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid; Mulrooney, *Training*, 44-45.

<sup>45</sup> Mulrooney, *Training*, 44-45.

mile to the marathon, and is generally considered to be one of the most competitive races in the world.

Training after college was a bit of a change of scenery with a similar training plan. In October of 1985, she wed fellow Wisconsin runner John Easker and the couple moved to his family farm near Birnamwood, WI. While her husband ran daily on the roads surrounding the farm, Branta split time between the farm and Madison. She would drive down, spend three days in Madison, performing two of her week's interval workouts under the eyes of Tegen, then return home. She also benefitted from the mental training of dealing with Wisconsin winters; as she recalls, the challenges of winter training made "the rest of the year seem easy." Like her husband, being the only elite runners for 100 miles and lacking some training facilities was less than ideal, but in her eyes that wasn't an excuse, "you just adjust your workouts around it."<sup>46</sup>

Branta had incredible mental perseverance, but it was her body that would ultimately limit her future as a professional distance runner. In the spring of 1986, after a string of successful races, doctors discovered that Branta had done serious damage to her knee, wearing away much of the connective tissue and incurring five stress fractures.<sup>47</sup> She made an effort to return to training, but the damage was too much and, like her husband, was forced to retire. Though not competing herself, Branta remained in the distance running community as a high school coach, including guiding her three children through their early running careers.

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<sup>46</sup> Branta, Responses

<sup>47</sup> Murphy, *Silence*, 284.

### **Dan Held: You'll Get There, In the Long Run**

While athletes like John Easker and Cathy Branta experienced success very early on, some runners close to a decade of development to realize their national-class potential. Homestead High's Dan Held didn't set division or State records during his high school career, and the track world was hardly set on fire when he transferred from his Minnesota junior college to the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire after a semester<sup>48</sup>. Even during his first campaign at his new school, Held was not even a varsity contributor at a non-scholarship Division III school.

Under the tutelage of Sean Hartnett, Held quickly blossomed at UWEC. During his sophomore season, he broke to the top of the team and amongst the finest in the country. During the fall of 1986, Held earned his first of three top five finishes in the conference meet; at the culmination of the season, he was just seconds away from earning All-American honors at Nationals.<sup>49</sup> A year earlier, Hartnett believed Held "wasn't ready to run" and he "told him to take his time." In a matter of 12 months of training the duo had brought out a remarkable running ability.

From there, Held continued to progress and develop into one of the top Division III runners in the country. Held earned All-American honors during the 1987 and 1988 cross country seasons, including a top 10 finish as a junior. Held also excelled on the track, both indoors and out. He recorded All-American finishes in the 5,000m at both national championships, set a still-standing Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference mark in becoming conference champion, and established numerous school records from the 3,000m to

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<sup>48</sup>Gary Johnson, "Held on pace to make team, marathon watchers believe," *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, 1 Oct 1995, accessed 2 Dec 2011, Leader-Telegram Online Archive, 52.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

the 10,000m. Held retains the indoor 5,000m record, and his 10,000m mark from 1988 stood until the spring of 2011.<sup>50</sup>

As successful and unheralded as Held's collegiate accomplishments were, they were but a prelude for more unexpected and remarkable performances. Held began running for Nike after a courageous final national championship race that saw him finish 2<sup>nd</sup> in the country in the 5,000m. Held, after graduating from UWEC, continued training and competing seriously, adding more and more mileage to his weekly totals and turned his attention to the roads, as well as continuing his ferocity on the track.

At the 1992 US Olympic Trials in the marathon, which determine the country's representatives for the Olympic Games and feature all of the finest marathoners in the US, Held came from obscurity to finish 13<sup>th</sup>. It was just his 2<sup>nd</sup> competitive marathon. The performance, and subsequent others, established him as one of the major players in American long distance running.

Over the next four years, Dan Held represented the United States at World Championships and ran alongside the finest runners in the country. Held was a part of the World Half-Marathon championships in 1993, 1994, and 1995; during the '94 race, Held was the top American, finishing with a remarkable 1:02:46, and finishing 30<sup>th</sup> in the world.<sup>51</sup> His standing in American distance running elevated him in the eyes of the public and his competitors; men who had been and would go on to make Olympic teams saw Held as a major "factor" in major

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<sup>50</sup> "Blugold Hall of Fame: Dan Held," accessed 28 Nov 2011, <http://www.uwecblugolds.com/?view=hof&inductee=121&person=5358&type=A>.

<sup>51</sup> Johnson, "On pace," 52.

championship and selection races, “a threat” to earn one of the three spots on the US Olympic roster.<sup>52</sup>

Held steadily elevated his training volumes as the years progressed to try and get more and more out of himself as a runner. After his breakout at the 1992 Olympic Trials, Held shifted his focus more to training and with less frequent races. During the 1994 season, Held’s training was typically 120-150 miles per week.<sup>53</sup> By choosing to race less, Held was able to prioritize the biggest races and focus his energy to running well when it mattered the most. Perhaps most dramatically emphasizing this point was his 2:13:50 at the Boston Marathon, slashing over five minutes from his previous personal best time. He was the 4<sup>th</sup> American and 24<sup>th</sup> place overall at the country’s old marathon.<sup>54</sup>

The 1996 Olympic Marathon Trials were a remarkable opportunity for Held to accomplish his loftiest goals. Since graduating, Held had worked full time as an insurance adjuster.<sup>55</sup> On top of his work commitments, Held trained as hard as professional runners who can devote their entire time to training. Held’s day job was one of necessity. With a wife, and after 1995, children to support, Held’s prizes from road racing weren’t enough to pay all the bills. In 1995, he earned \$23,000 in his race efforts. The real work offered financial security, when injuries kept Held from racing, and offered a higher quality of life for his family.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid

<sup>53</sup> “Rising Star,” *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, 30 Sept 1994, accessed 2 Dec 2011, Leader-Telegram Online Archive, 28.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

<sup>55</sup> Johnson, “On pace,” 52.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

That's not to say that Held didn't envy his full-time athletic counterparts. Said Held in 1995, "If I could make \$50,000 on the roads, I'd quit (the insurance job) and [run] full time."<sup>57</sup> During the meager days of 1990s American distance runner, lucrative prize money was not readily available, and the other support mechanisms for athletes were very limited.

Even with full-time work obligations, Held poured on the training for the 1996 Olympic Trials. He upped his training, with his buildup to the Trials "averaging 150 miles of training per week and reaching a peak of 170." The time commitment of 24 miles of training a day, in addition to a full-time work schedule, are a remarkable constraint on free time; then, a few months before the February race, Held's wife gave birth to their first child.<sup>58</sup>

Held's wife understood the obligations and dedication necessary to her husband reaching his full potential as a distance runner. Saying that she was "not naïve" enough to believe she was Held's top priority during his most rigorous training years, Janell Held knew he'd be there for her down that road, and when they had a family, she didn't "want him to look back and have any regrets because I didn't let him do something."<sup>59</sup> Unflinching dedication and support from loved ones invariably eases the difficult task of pursuing distance running excellence.

With support and dedication to his training, Held's mindset going into a race that could change his life was, as his long-time adviser Sean Hartnett put it, the final phase before a major race. Chiefly, he was confident in his preparation for the Olympic Trials, saying "I'm prepared the best I have been for any marathon. I don't know anything more I can do." Both Held and Hartnett echoed the idea that, for the marathon, the focus was on preparing the best you could,

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid

<sup>58</sup> Ron Buckli, "Dan Held's Six Marathon Times" *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, 11 Feb 1996, accessed 2 Dec 2011, Leader-Telegram Online Archive, 13.

<sup>59</sup> Johnson, "On pace," 52.

and the competitive aspect comes almost as a byproduct. In such an “unpredictable” race with numerous accomplished runners vying for just three spots, the marathon is more a race of attrition than direct competition.<sup>60</sup>

Not that the competitive drive was lacking within Held in the slightest. At the previous year’s national championships in the marathon, Held aggressively led for the 19 miles, eventually taking home third place and \$10,000 for his efforts.<sup>61</sup> Held acknowledged the courage shown by leading, but also the implications for his racing future by being more relaxed. Just before the Olympic Trials, Held respectfully said that his competitors may run more relaxed races, but he was learning to marshal his eagerness and be more patient in these over two hour race.<sup>62</sup>

Expectations from Held and Harnett before the Trials reflected both the importance of the event, as well as realistic perceptions of Held’s racing ability. Held himself felt he would “be disappointed if I don't make it, but it's not the end of the world.” Held, with a personal best of 2:13:50 at the 1994 Boston Marathon, felt that it would take a 2:12 finishing time to make the team. Held felt there were “10 others as fit” as he was going into the Trials, but all he could do was take care of himself. Hartnett said he believed there were at maximum “five or six guys who can beat [Held].”<sup>63</sup>

On the day of the race, it was another runner out front with fast early miles, while Held remained relaxed and comfortable in the pack. However, Olympic destiny wasn’t meant to be on this day for Held, finishing outside of the top 3. The winner, Bob Kempainen, was an occasional

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<sup>60</sup> Buckli, “Held’s” 13.

<sup>61</sup> Johnson, “On pace,” 52.

<sup>62</sup> Buckli, “Held’s,” 13.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid

training partner of Held's from the Twin Cities area, who also balanced a rigorous non-running schedule with high mileage training, namely, finishing rounds during medical school.<sup>64</sup>

While the race results may not have been exactly what Held and Harnett were aiming for, the solid performance and their knowledge of elite level race shown through. As Hartnett predicted, several prominent racers were unable to finish the challenging race. An even more startling show of foresight, Hartnett's belief that just "five or six guys" were capable of beating Held was proved chillingly accurate with Held's 7<sup>th</sup> place finish. The result netted Held \$9,000 and was a six place improvement over the 1992 Olympic Trials Marathon.<sup>65</sup>

As Held predicted, not making the team was disappointing but neither the world, nor his racing career, ended that February day. Later in 1996, Held made the finals of the Olympic Trials for the 5,000m, after qualifying the previous year with a time of 13:41, finishing 13<sup>th</sup> and beating, among others, future Olympian Adam Goucher.<sup>66</sup> Held knew, even a year before the race, that his best shot at making the team was in the marathon, and was even quoted saying he had "no visions of making the team" over 5,000m.<sup>67</sup> Held's future success would be over truly long distances, some very familiar to him, while a remarkable outcome awaited a surprise event change.

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<sup>64</sup> Jere Longman, "MARATHON: Kempainen Shows Will in Winning Trials", *The New York Times*, 18 Feb 1996, accessed 8 Dec 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/02/18/sports/marathon-kempainen-shows-will-in-winning-trials.html?src=pm>.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid; Buckli, "Held's," 13; "USA Men's Olympic Marathon Trials Complete History: 1968-2008," accessed 8 Dec 2011, [http://www.marathonguide.com/news/exclusives/USAMenOlympicTrials\\_2007/USAOlympicMarathonTrialsHistory.cfm](http://www.marathonguide.com/news/exclusives/USAMenOlympicTrials_2007/USAOlympicMarathonTrialsHistory.cfm).

<sup>66</sup> Good One, 3 May 2010 (7:56 PM), comment on "Maybe Bob Kennedy Wasn't So Great Afterall," *LetsRun Forum*, accessed 8 Dec 2011, [http://www.letsrun.com/forum/flat\\_read.php?thread=3524733&page=1](http://www.letsrun.com/forum/flat_read.php?thread=3524733&page=1).

<sup>67</sup> Johnson, "On pace," 52.

Held represented the United States at the 1997 World Championships—track and field’s odd year equivalent to the Olympic Games—in the marathon after placing 3<sup>rd</sup> at the US Championships that year. In the World Championships at Athens, covering the original marathon course, Held finished 57<sup>th</sup>, the 2<sup>nd</sup> American finisher in very warm conditions. The performance capped off a year that also saw him finish 15<sup>th</sup> in the US 15km championships, and a remarkable 2<sup>nd</sup> place at the US 10k road national championships. With 3 years until the next Olympic Trials, Held and Hartnett were optimistic about the 31 year old reaching the next level. Hartnett noted that “he more or less has to will himself” to maximizing his potential. The previous years of training represented to the duo a tremendous amount of work and money in the bank, and the build up to 2000 was the “time to cash in his chips on that experience.”<sup>68</sup>

However, the ascent up the ladder of finishes at the American Marathon Olympic Trials was not to be. Held was forced to drop out of the Pittsburg Marathon in 1999, attempting to hit the qualifying standard for the Trials; later that week while playing with his kids, he broke several bones in his toes. After fulfilling a race obligation that fall, Held said he was hanging up his racing shoes for good.<sup>69</sup> His retirement did not last long.

In 2000, Held wanted to return to running, on his own terms, and on his home turf. Eager to escape the constant “expectations” of competitive marathoning, Held jumped in the 50 mile trail US Championships, held that year near his Waukesha home. Neither Held nor the ultra-

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<sup>68</sup> Ron Buckli, “Polnasek head coach at Colorado College,” *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, 16 April 1997, accessed 3 Dec 2011, Leader-Telegram Online Archive, 148.

<sup>69</sup> Lori Shontz, “Pittsburgh Marathon: Held returns to give race his ultra-best effort,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 6 May 2001, accessed 27 Nov 2011, <http://www.post-gazette.com/sports/other/20010506marathon4.asp>.

marathoning community knew what to expect, so when Held won by more than 10 minutes over a very competitive field, a whole new racing experience had begun.<sup>70</sup>

The training suited Held as well as the racing did. Instead of performing higher-intensity runs more frequently, the less intense, higher mileage training fit much better into Held's busy schedule. Not to say the training was comparatively easy, but just a different kind of hard work. Held believed for training for ultra-races, "All you have to do is go out and do some four- and five-hour runs."<sup>71</sup> At 34, Held still had the strong desire to train and race competitively, and the mental toughness to do so for hours on end.

That propensity to train and race lead Held to the top of the ultra marathoning world. After his performance at the US Championships, Held was selected to represent the United States at the World 100k Trail Championships. There, he lead the American men's team to a 2<sup>nd</sup> place finish, and individually turned in an astonishing 4<sup>th</sup> place overall. His time, in his first ever effort at the distance, was the 2<sup>nd</sup> fastest time ever run by an American over 100k. His whirlwind year culminated in him being named UltraRunning Magazine's Runner of the Year, and his race at the World Championships was unanimously chosen as the top performance.<sup>72</sup>

Despite his rapid rise to the top of the US ultra marathoning world, his reign was a short one. The allure of beyond marathon distance racing did not stay long with Held, and he stepped away from ultra-running. Held was not as enamored with the sport as he was with shorter long distance races such as the marathon, and pursuing ultra-running was even less lucrative than marathoning. Obviously, with his day job, distance running had never been about financial gains for Held. But with a growing family, it was a factor. Held recalled in 2001, "I was 4<sup>th</sup> in the

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid; "Held Wins in Ultra Marathon Debut," *American Ultrarunning Association*, 13 May 2000, accessed 8 December 2011, [http://www.americanultra.org/iat\\_2000/index.html](http://www.americanultra.org/iat_2000/index.html).

<sup>71</sup> Shontz, "Pittsburgh."

<sup>72</sup> Ibid; Ryan Lamppa, "Dan Held, Deb Bollig Named UltraRunning Magazine's Runners of the Year", *RunningUSA*, accessed 8 Dec 2011 <http://www.runningusa.org/media/wire2001/wire2001-09.html>.

world at the 100k, and that earned me \$350. I'm not in this for the money, but if I were the fourth best marathoner in the world, then I could be a professional runner." In addition, the enjoyment of a 50 or 62 mile race wasn't present for Held. After finishing 4<sup>th</sup> at the World Championships, Held recalls thinking "I'm never going to do this again. It is too long. It's insanity." And as much as the prominent figures in the ultra-marathon community vied to get Held into the game, he was fine stepping away.<sup>73</sup>

Held ran a few more competitive races after his time running ultras, and eventually retired from professional racing in 2001. He remained plugged into the Wisconsin distance running community, and still does to the time of this writing, including competing in local road races. Held used his experience and expertise to be an adviser, much as Hartnett had been to him, guiding emerging Wisconsin marathoners, many of them driven and inspired by his tremendous accomplishments.

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<sup>73</sup> Shontz, "Pittsburgh."

### **Chris Solinsky: Wisconsin's Home Grown National Champion**

Pancake-flat Stevens Point, Wisconsin seems like a strange place for one of the strongest runners in American history to develop. But the mold of the farm boy runner cast by John Easker a generation before was incarnated fifty miles from Easker's home town in the form of Chris Solinsky. After an unremarkable freshman year of high school, Solinsky went on to become the most dominant force in high school distance running, first in Wisconsin, and eventually nationwide.

Solinsky went on to win three consecutive Wisconsin Division 1 (large school) state titles in cross country. In his senior campaign, Solinsky broke his own state record of 15:07 with a final time of 14:54; the time remains over 30 seconds faster than any other runner has finished the 5k course in a quarter century of racing at The Ridges course in Wisconsin Rapids. In addition to the overall state record, Solinsky also holds the sophomore and junior class records for state meet performances.<sup>74</sup>

On the national stage, Solinsky's rise to prominence was no less visible. As a junior, he qualified for Foot Locker Nationals, the unofficial high school cross country national championships, with his 2<sup>nd</sup> place performance at the Midwest Regional. He followed that up with a 3<sup>rd</sup> place showing at the national meet, just 2 seconds outside the victory; Solinsky was the top underclassmen by 22 seconds.<sup>75</sup>

Solinsky dominated the regional qualifying meet, recording a 14:49 time that remains one of the five fastest run on the UW-Parkside course. The Solinsky juggernaut rolled into San Diego for Foot Locker Nationals in 2002, and steamrolled past the competition. After passing through 2

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<sup>74</sup> "Boys Cross Country State Champions."

<sup>75</sup> "2001 National Cross Country Championships," accessed 28 Oct 2011, <http://www.footlockercc.com/2001/>.

miles of the 3.1 mile race in the lead pack, Solinsky proceeded put over 20 seconds on the national runner up with a winning time of 14:41 that tied the largest margin of victory in the event's long history.<sup>76</sup>

Solinsky posted record setting times on the track as well as the grass. Within Wisconsin, Solinsky won five state titles on the track, taking the 3,200m, the longest race contested on the track, his sophomore, junior, and senior years. He added the 1,600m, just short of a mile, to his resume in his junior and senior campaigns. During his senior year, Solinsky also attempted to win the distance triple crown at the State meet, but fell short in the 800m.

Solinsky, also known at the time as "the Rocket," developed a cult following within the state and gradually spread to the nation. At Solinsky's major competitions, fans of the SPASH harrier sported shirts and body paint proclaiming "Stop the Rocket." The shirts were an homage to similar shirts sported by fans of 1970s era American record holder Steve Prefontaine, saying "Stop Pre!" At his championship run at Foot Locker his senior year, over forty Rocket supporters were seen on the course in San Diego.<sup>77</sup>

Solinsky's times marked as the tops in the nation as well as the history of Wisconsin. His 4:03 1600m run makes Solinsky the second-fastest miler in the state's history. At 3200m, Solinsky broke the WIAA State meet record and holds the fastest time ever by a Wisconsin prep runner. At the Arcadia Invite in 2003, Solinsky impressively stormed away from what arguably titled the "Best 3200 ever". Solinsky's time of 8:43 stands as the Wisconsin record, as well as the fastest time in the nation that year and one of the twenty fastest of all time. The manner in which the time was run may be even more impressive. Solinsky's second mile (4:16) was significantly

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<sup>76</sup> "2002 Nike Athlete of the Year: Chris Solinsky," accessed 28 Oct 2011, <http://www.dyestat.com/3us/aoy/solinsky-chris.htm>.

<sup>77</sup> "Boys 3200," accessed 29 Oct 2011, <http://www.dyestat.com/3us/3out/Arcadia/32.htm>.

faster than his first (4:27), a tactic known as negative splitting, which requires both tremendous strength and endurance. To put in perspective, after already running a mile at a national-caliber pace for two miles, Solinsky's last mile was faster than all but two runners at the Wisconsin State meet ran that year for one mile, flat out. One of those runners was named Chris Solinsky.<sup>78</sup>

After his high school days were done, Solinsky took up running a few hours down I-39 at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. He joined one of the finest distance programs in the nation, under the direction of Coach Jerry Schumacher, himself a UW alumnus. The cross country team finished as national champions or runner-up in each of Solinsky's four years of competition. The 2005 team captured the national title, in commanding fashion. Solinsky was an All-American his first three years, placing in the top 20 each race, including a third-place finish as part of the '05 title team. During his final race at the NCAA Cross Country Championships, Solinsky ran with the lead pack for the first half of the race, before fading to 73<sup>rd</sup> place. The heavily-favored Badger men's team also fell short of repeating their team title. Solinsky was later diagnosed with Lyme disease, which was attributed to the poor showing to end his collegiate cross country campaign.<sup>79</sup>

Solinsky rebounded from the disappointment of NCAA Cross Country 2006 with a stellar track campaign. In his first three years, Solinsky brought home four individual Big Ten championships, as well as three individual national titles on the track (2005 and 2006 indoor 3,000m and 2006 outdoor 5,000m). He also was part of the first race in the history of the state in which a 4:00 mile was broken in the spring of 2006; Solinsky ran 3:57.8 and finished second behind former teammate Matt Tegenkamp, earning the distinction of being the first UW athlete

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> "Cross Country Record Book."

to break four minutes on the team's home turf. During his senior campaign on the oval, Chris was twice national champion—in the indoor and outdoor 5,000m—and finished runner-up in the 3,000m indoors. His 18 total points at the Indoor National Championships helped propel UW to the team national title, the first in university history.<sup>80</sup> In total, Solinsky amassed 14 All-American finishes on the track and cross country course combined, the most in Badger history. He also holds the school's indoor 5,000m, outdoor mile, outdoor 3,000m, and outdoor 5,000m races.

After graduating completing his eligibility at Madison, Solinsky signed with Nike to run professionally. His six figure contract was one of the more lucrative for a post-collegiate in US distance running history.<sup>81</sup> The summer after his senior year, Solinsky lowered his personal best times over 3,000m and 5,000m. At the US National Championships that summer, Solinsky finished 7<sup>th</sup> in the 5,000m. The following year was an Olympic year, and his main aim was to make the US team in the 5,000. To do so, he needed to run under 13:21 and finish in the top 3 at the US Olympic Trials/Championships. However, Solinsky's drive wasn't just aiming to make the roster.

At a Nike event in the fall of 2007, Solinsky was asked his goals for the following year's Olympic Trials. For a 23 year old who'd never made a US senior national team in his career, most would expect aiming to finish in the top 3 and make the Olympic team would be ambitious enough. Solinsky however, was aiming higher: "I'm going in and winning it." While he knew and respected the fact that some of the best runners in the world would be in the race—Bernard Lagat, double World Champion in 2007, teammate Matt Tegenkamp who was 4<sup>th</sup> in the World

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<sup>80</sup> "Track and Field Record Book."

<sup>81</sup> Matt Taylor, "Riding the Red Line: How Matt Tegenkamp and The Madison Project are making an impact," *Running Times*, May 2008, accessed 16 Nov 2011, <http://runningtimes.com/Article.aspx?ArticleID=13810>, 3.

over 5,000m—Solinsky’s aim was lofty because “if you don’t consider yourself one of the favorites, you’re foolish.” Such a mindset fit in with his ambitious mindset, even if his coach didn’t appreciate him vocalizing that psychology publicly.<sup>82</sup>

During his senior track campaign and the impressive summer of 2007 that followed, his goals were intentionally “just beyond reach.” In his view, having formidable ambitions enables an athlete to work harder to achieve them. Goals that are seen as relatively attainable do not require total dedication and a single-minded pursuit of excellence, without which, no runner can achieve their absolute best possible performance.<sup>83</sup> Even when competing against Kenyans at NCAA Championships, Solinsky did not approach racing them any differently. Being the best American would be great, but what he truly wanted was to be the best, flat out.

After meeting the qualifying time, Solinsky was running in the top 5 at the Olympic Trials final with 1,000m to go. He often lead during the last three minutes of the race, but ultimately finished 5<sup>th</sup>, missing the team. He was 2.5 seconds from the much coveted 3<sup>rd</sup> place and an Olympic berth. With the priority Solinsky had placed on making the Olympic team, it was the biggest disappointment of his career.

Major changes came after his disappointing finish of the 2008 Olympic Trials. Geographically, Solinsky, his coach Jerry Schumacher, and his training group—including former UW teammates Matt Tegenkamp, Tim Nelson, Simon Bairu, and Evan Jager—relocated from Madison to Portland, OR. The move hinged on Schumacher leaving his head coaching job at Wisconsin to focus on his professional athletes full time. With their coach on board, the athletes

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 2

<sup>83</sup> Ibid; “Chris Solinsky,” 2 Dec 2010, accessed 19 Sept 2011, [http://www.roadsmillslaps.com/RML/blog/Entries/2010/12/2\\_Chris\\_Solinsky.html](http://www.roadsmillslaps.com/RML/blog/Entries/2010/12/2_Chris_Solinsky.html).

were more than willing to change scenery. The full faith they had in Schumacher was powerful and well deserved.

The man behind Solinsky and his teammates' success during the collegiate days at Madison and their professional careers was a coach who knew what running well for Wisconsin was like. Jerry Schumacher ran for a private high school in Wisconsin before his own All-American career at UW under Martin Smith. After Smith's departure, Schumacher became the cross country coach at Wisconsin and began making a name for himself as one of the finest young coaches in the nation.<sup>84</sup>

He took an already stellar Wisconsin distance squad and turned it into one of the elites in NCAA competition. The cross country team produced numerous trophy finishes and scores of All American performances over the cross country course and track. With his record of success, Schumacher was able to draw national class recruits from all over the country to run collegiately in Madison. Such a feat is a testament to the draw of Schumacher and his system to young runners. Given choices such as picturesque Boulder, CO and Stanford University in California, the nation's finest runners would come to Madison because they believed the training they received there would let them realize their potential. Matt Tegenkamp, three years Solinsky's senior, said of Schumacher that "he's blue collar, he's tough. That's why we all chose Wisconsin."<sup>85</sup> Schumacher worked hard for his athletes, and his runners, in turn, worked to get themselves better, validating their coach's work in the process.

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<sup>84</sup> Doug Binder, "Q & A: Part 2 of Jerry Schumacher: Talking about the new goals of his training group," *The Oregonian*, 9 April 2009, accessed 8 Dec 2011, [http://www.oregonlive.com/trackandfield/index.ssf/2009/04/qa\\_part\\_2\\_of\\_jerry\\_schumacher.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/trackandfield/index.ssf/2009/04/qa_part_2_of_jerry_schumacher.html).

<sup>85</sup> Taylor, "Riding," 2-3.

What set Schumacher apart from other successful coaches was his big picture planning and willingness to delay gratification for greater future accomplishments. Tegenkamp, one of Schumacher's first stud runners, was won over when "Schumacher had a long-term plan for me the day I arrived at the University of Wisconsin. We've made some adjustments along the way, but he's never wavered from it...Olympic medalist—that's what we've been aiming for since day one." Schumacher prioritized major meets like US and NCAA Championships over minor meet and even conference accolades, and the training plan was designed for each individual to build from year to year, constantly improving the most important components of their running. While it may cost a few conference points in the short-term, the upside of building the sport and being competitive on a world stage is a worthwhile decision in his eyes. As a result, Schumacher built a training group of national class runners right in Madison; his runners believed in him unequivocally and their success showed his methods to be consistent and effective.<sup>86</sup>

A somewhat reclusive public figure, Schumacher has preferred the spotlight to be on his athletes instead of himself, and let the results of their training speak for themselves. "I love coaching, not talking about coaching" Schumacher said in a rare 2008 interview. The behind-the-scenes image combined with the remarkable results of his runners in college and after has cultivated for Schumacher, among the running public and his own runners alike, an aura of mystery and genius to his workings. He was regarded as "the best coach you've never heard of" by a prominent running magazine following Tegenkamp's breakout 2007 campaign. Indeed, coupled with Nike's resources, Schumacher's coaching prowess began attracting other elite runners to Oregon to train with his group.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid; Binder, "Q & A Part 2."

<sup>87</sup> Ibid

Picking up and moving from their long time home and training facilities wasn't easy. Even years after the move, Solinsky and his teammates had quite a bit about Madison that they missed, notably the close proximity to trails without having to drive to their training location. One of the primary advantages of moving west included access to Nike's world class facilities and resources. Additionally, a change of climates was a bright spot of the move, as the Wisconsin winters provided a mixed blessing.<sup>88</sup>

During their time training at Madison, Solinsky and the rest of the Schumacher gang dealt with the cold and snow of winters in the Midwest. Coach Schumacher in particular highlighted the positive attributes of training through the winter months in cooler conditions than their competition. The snow-covered roads and cool temperatures in Madison limited how hard the training group could run on a day to day basis, as Schumacher says, preventing the likelihood of overtraining, trying to run too hard on a regular basis and breaking the body down.<sup>89</sup>

One of the pillars of the training philosophy that has created success in Schumacher's group is a patient building of intensity; by physically being able to not do as much fast-paced running as training groups in warm climates from November until February, Solinsky and company are able to focus on fundamental aerobic development—lots of easy- to steady-paced running—that allows them to continue to do build from year to year. Additionally, working out in tough conditions provides some mental hardening for the athletes.

Even though Solinsky had grown up and trained for years in harsh Wisconsin winters, doesn't mean he enjoyed the adaptations the group had to make. From time to time, whether to limit slipping on ice or to allow the group to run fast workouts, they would run inside. Solinsky

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<sup>88</sup> "Live Chat with Chris Solinsky and Simon Bairu Today," 4 May 2010. Accessed 5 Dec 2011, <http://www.letsrun.com/2010/solinskychat0504.php>.

<sup>89</sup> Taylor, "Riding," 3.

“hate[s] treadmills” and during his post-collegiate years, was envious of not being able to train in warmer climates. However, Schumacher told his runners the downside of ideal temperatures 12 months a year was increased risks of burnout, injury, and running too well too soon. And despite some skepticism, Solinsky respected his coach’s approach: “maybe he’s right... look how well we’re running. He’s doing something right.”<sup>90</sup>

The downside to running upwards of 100 miles per week is not so much the cool temperatures but the potential for injury from slipping. Tegenkamp and Solinsky both sustained injuries on icy roads during winter in Wisconsin that caused them to miss training during their final two winters in the Midwest. Solinsky’s injury, a torn posterior cruciate ligament in his knee, cost him 6 weeks of base training. The risk of missing time to a professional athlete proved to be too great a risk, and the draw out to Oregon saw the Badger alumni crew moving west.<sup>91</sup>

Coach Schumacher’s views on the pros and cons of training in Wisconsin’s winters had a significant impact on his runners’ thinking, and were always with a positive spin. Of his time coaching in Madison, Schumacher believed he on no occasions “limited as a collegiate coach.” However, for more developed, Olympic level athletes, he feels that less harsh winters and more available resources benefit his runners. The reason for the college vs. professional disparity: “most collegiate don’t train” at such a high level in the fall and winter “because they can’t [physically].” Again, the big picture and long term development of his athletes came into play for Schumacher.<sup>92</sup> After more and more years of running, they were capable of doing even more

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid

<sup>91</sup> Doug Binder, “Q & A: Jerry Schumacher talks about the members of his training group in Part 1 of interview,” *The Oregonian*, 8 April 2009, accessed 8 Dec 2011, [http://www.oregonlive.com/trackandfield/index.ssf/2009/04/q\\_a\\_jerry\\_schumacher\\_talks\\_abo.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/trackandfield/index.ssf/2009/04/q_a_jerry_schumacher_talks_abo.html).

<sup>92</sup> Duncan Larkin, “The Man Behind the Magic,” *Competitor*, 17 May 2010, accessed 7 Dec 2011, [http://running.competitor.com/2010/05/features/the-man-behind-the-magic\\_10006](http://running.competitor.com/2010/05/features/the-man-behind-the-magic_10006).

training to get themselves even better. To accomplish their goals, every advantage needed to be sought out. And in 2008, that best advantage was found in Oregon.

The move to Portland, like most things Solinsky, Schumacher, and the rest of their group do, was about the big picture. Picking up and moving from a happy and comfortable life in Madison wasn't an easy decision, but it was done to try and do something extraordinary. On a group level, Schumacher believed it was time to take a chance and "help my athletes become the best they can be." More auspiciously, the group hoped to "be a catalyst...eventually lead[ing] to a better thing for American distance running."<sup>93</sup> The move was about finding out, if they did everything in their power, how good could a bunch of distance runners from the Midwest get. Hopefully, their model and experience would set up and inspire future successes in the American running community.

In this way, Schumacher's mindset resembled Lydiard's in the building of championship distance runners. In 1978, Lydiard wrote that "anywhere in the world, there are talented athletes waiting to be brought out...it's just a question of motivating them, and giving them the right conditioning program for this potential to develop." Just like Lydiard had fostered Olympic talent in New Zealand where there had been little history before, the Schumacher group's effort to bring themselves to an elite level could in turn make the rest of the country more competitive on the international stage. In distance running, Lydiard believed, no country "ha[s] supermen any more than" another.<sup>94</sup> More than four decades apart, two groups used high mileage to develop aerobically and sought in the process to build or resurrect the state their national distance running by any means possible.

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<sup>93</sup> Binder, "Q & A Part 2."

<sup>94</sup> Lydiard and Gilmour, *Running*, 135-136

In addition to a change of scenery, Solinsky committed to a change of lifestyle as well after missing the US Olympic team. His focus on training became a 24/7 commitment, not just the few hours spent running in the past. Of particular importance was his change in diet. Solinsky, always big framed for a distance running, was able to eat quite a bit of anything thanks to burning an extra 1,500 calories a day. In college and his first professional years in Madison, this usually meant a good quantity of food, but not always high quality nutrition. As he described it, typical meals consisted of “frozen pizzas three times a week and PB&J (peanut butter and jelly) sandwiches to fill in the gaps.”<sup>95</sup>

Getting married, often to fellow athletes, also seemed like a sure fire way to improve the times of runners in the training group. Matt Tegenkamp married a fellow elite distance runner in the fall of 2006; his next track season saw him break the American record over 2 miles and record his agonizing 4<sup>th</sup> place finish at the World Championships. Solinsky’s marriage to a former Badger track and field athlete would come three years later; it was also followed by a record-setting season on the track. The transition from college life and a bachelor’s existence to a more domestic setting yielded positive results for the runners. Tegenkamp felt “being married has definitely contributed to my success. I eat better. I sleep more. I have a routine.”<sup>96</sup>

For Solinsky, having the loving support of someone who understood him and his pursuit of excellence proved invaluable. Like Tegenkamp, he benefitted from a more nutritious diet, helping Solinsky lean out a bit and have more positive energy for his increased mileage. In addition, the changes—moving to Portland, getting married—allowed Solinsky to form positive habits and concentrate fully on training. He and the entire team now operated with the focus that

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<sup>95</sup> “Where are they now: Chris Solinsky,” 5 Aug 2009, accessed 21 Oct 2011, <http://www.uwbadgers.com/sports/m-xc/spec-rel/080509aaa.html>.

<sup>96</sup> Taylor, “Riding,” 2-4; “Chris Solinsky,” accessed 7 Dec 2011, <http://kimbia.net/athletes/solinsky/>.

“running is 100% our job,” and giving it all of his energy meant even things outside of daily runs and strength work impacted his job performance.<sup>97</sup>

The new training location and lifestyle changes yielded positive results very quickly for the relocated Badger crew. At the 2009 US Championships in the 5,000m, their training group swept the top three spots as Matt Tegenkamp, Chris Solinsky, and 20 year old Evan Jager earned trips to the World Championships that summer in Berlin. It was an unprecedented showing of dominance and the enthusiasm of the athletes, particularly for their youngest teammate to be making the trip as well, showed in post-race interviews. Teammates Tim Nelson, also a former Badger athlete, and Shalane Flanagan also qualified in the 10,000m, meaning a very significant portion of the long distance runners represented the United States had a common coach in Jerry Schumacher.<sup>98</sup>

The track world was light ablaze with excitement of the young 5,000m teammates. Significant interest came, and what followed was a thirteen-part chronicling of the athletes and their journey to the championships. The series followed the group through the US Championships, altitude training in St. Moritz, Switzerland, as well as providing individual profiles of the three runners and their hometowns.<sup>99</sup> The unprecedented insight into the training group’s workouts, lifestyles, and group dynamics drew quite a following.

At the Berlin World Championships, Tegenkamp and Solinsky qualified for the final in the 5,000m. 2 years before, Tegenkamp had finished a heart-breaking .03 from a bronze medal in

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<sup>97</sup> Peter Gambaccini, “A Brief Chat with Chris Solinsky,” 26 April 2011, accessed 7 Dec 2011, <http://racingnews.runnersworld.com/2011/04/a-brief-chat-with-chris-solinsky-4.html>.

<sup>98</sup> “The Week that was: June 22-June 28, 2009,” 1 July 2009, accessed 5 Dec 2011, <http://www.letsrun.com/2009/weekthatwas0701.php>.

<sup>99</sup> “From Wisconsin to Worlds’ Launches at Runnersworld.com,” 16 July 2009, accessed 5 Dec 2011, <http://www.kimbia.net/2009/07/16/from-wisconsin-to-worlds-launches-today/>.

the 5,000m; his fourth place was the highest finish by an American born runner over 5k ever. Berlin was Solinsky's first ever championship final. In the field were reigning 5,000m champion Bernard Lagat, a Kenyan-born runner now representing the US and the 2008 Olympic champion at 5,000m and 10,000m Kenenisa Bekele of Ethiopia. In typical fashion, the race was slow and tactical with a gradual acceleration after the halfway point. In the end, Tegenkamp was 8<sup>th</sup> and Solinsky 12<sup>th</sup> as Bekele and Lagat's sprints carried them away from the field.

The most important results in American 5,000m running in over a decade came in the weeks after the World Championships concluded. Solinsky's teammate Matt Tegenkamp ran an astonishing 12:58, making him one of just four Americans to ever break 13 minutes. However, a week before that Dathan Ritzenhein surprised the distance running world by breaking Bob Kennedy's 13 year old American Record with a time of 12:56.27. The time was almost a 20 second personal best for Ritzenhein, almost unheard of on the elite level. Adding to the shock value was the fact that Ritzenhein since 2007 had been training primarily for the marathon. Conventional training wisdom had always believed that marathon training got a runner in shape, but drastically limited their speed. Ritzenhein's performance proved that not to be the case and it was a lesson for the whole of American distance running.<sup>100</sup>

For the second consecutive season, Solinsky had seen marked improvements but still not performances living up to his expectations. While disappointed, Solinsky continued to aim high and hold himself to high standards. Just a few days after the Berlin final, Solinsky said that in 2010, he felt every race he and Tegenkamp entered had "the potential for us to get American records." His aim was to make himself known to the entire world of distance running. In the

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<sup>100</sup> Dick Patrick, "Ritzenhein breaks 13-year-old US 5k mark at Swiss meet," *USA Today*, 28 Aug 2009, accessed 9 Dec 2011, [http://www.usatoday.com/sports/olympics/2009-08-28-ritzenhein-record\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/sports/olympics/2009-08-28-ritzenhein-record_N.htm).

same interview after Berlin, Solinsky said “By next year, I want people to know who I am. To know my name.”<sup>101</sup>

With his ever-present drive and focus, as well as lessons learned from Dathan Ritzenhein’s rise to the top, Solinsky’s 2010 campaign would set the track and field world ablaze. In the spring, the best distance races in the country take place in California. Stanford University’s early May track meet had often played host to world leading times and American records. One of those was Meb Keflezghi’s 2001 10,000m record of 27:13.98. It was at this same track that the American 10,000m heir-apparent, Galen Rupp, decided to attack the long standing record. Rupp, a rival of Solinsky’s in their college days, had made three consecutive US teams in the 10,000m and had been heralded as the golden child of American long distance running. His race that weekend would either be at Stanford or in his hometown of Eugene, Oregon. The race location was not decided until the last minute, based on weather forecasts and pollen counts. Even after deciding on Stanford, there was some concerns from Rupp and his coach Alberto Salazar about conditions being acceptable.

Solinsky and company had been training with a focus on higher mileage and aerobic strength during the past fall and winter. As a result, Solinsky was stronger and fitter than he ever had been. Schumacher, never one to commit before absolutely necessary, tentatively planned to run Solinsky in the 10,000m at Stanford; it would be his first ever race at that distance on the track.<sup>102</sup> By the time the May 1<sup>st</sup> race arrived, his participation in the race had been confirmed.

Solinsky’s entry into the race was noted by many followers of track and field, but all the buzz in the distance community was the seeming inevitability of Rupp’s assault on the American

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<sup>101</sup> “Wisconsin To Worlds Episode 13: Moving Forward, Looking Back,” *RunnersWorldTV*, 18 Sept 2009, accessed 6 Dec 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SjtrpHBc-i4>.

<sup>102</sup> Maybe the RML interview thingy

record. Nike, the sponsor of both Rupp and Solinsky, had put a tremendous amount of PR effort into Rupp's race, handing out "Go Galen" posters, and arranging a press conference with Rupp for the day after the race, with the plan of discussing his record. Solinsky was just focused on getting in a race, trying to compete and run as fast as he could.<sup>103</sup>

Pacers had been arranged by Rupp's coach for the 10,000m race at Stanford on May 1, 2010. After a slow start, they led the runners through the half-way point on American record pace. After following the pacers through four miles, Rupp took over the lead and looked smooth and steady. Even the commentators for the cult running website Flotrack alluded to the almost inevitability of Rupp's breaking of the record. Rupp lead a gradually accelerating last two miles of the race. Three runners tailed Rupp into the last mile: two Kenyans and the 6'1" frame of Chris Solinsky.

With less than a thousand meters remaining in the race, Solinsky swung wide around Rupp on the turn, got the signal from Schumacher, and unleashed a remarkable finish that would have the track world buzzing. Solinsky sped to 4:00 mile pace with a half mile remaining, steadily pulling away from Rupp and the Kenyans. Still, the commentators didn't think Rupp should be counted out yet. As the bell rang signaling one lap to go, Solinsky continued ratcheting down the pace. In the last 200 meters, he continued to blow the doors off his competitors and every other 10,000m performance in American history. He crossed the finish line in 26:59.6, having run his last mile in 4:08 and his last 800 in 1:56. The time took over 14 seconds off

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<sup>103</sup> "Trying to get Jerry and Chris Solinsky signing autographs after American record Payton Jordan 2010," Flotrack, 2 May 2010, accessed 6 Dec 2011, <http://www.flotrack.org/coverage/236854-2010-Stanford-Payton-Jordan-Cardinal-Invitational/video/331219-Trying-to-get-Jerry-and-Chris-Solinsky-signing-autographs-after-American-Record-2010-Payton-Jordan>.

Keflezghi's American record and made Chris Solinsky the first non-African in history to break 27:00.

The onslaught of press and attention in the wake of this incredibly surprising record run earned Solinsky the world wide renown he'd dreamt of following his disappointing conclusion to his 2009 season. Swept up in immediate post-race interviews, Solinsky seemed as surprised as everyone watching. His race plan and his mission during the race were clear, and matched his mindset throughout his entire racing career: "I came here to win. I knew the time would take care of itself." In the online distance running community, on fan websites like Flotrack and LetsRun, everyone was talking about the race. The following day, track and field's international governing body, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), featured a headlining story about the incredible run of the "barrel-chested Wisconsin native."<sup>104</sup> Chris Solinsky had arrived.

In the glow of attention from the media and running world in the ensuing weeks, numerous components of Solinsky's remarkable effort were the focus of major running publications. He was put on the cover of *Track and Field News*, the self-proclaimed "Bible of the Sport" of distance running, in July of 2010.<sup>105</sup> Much was made of his frame, as Solinsky and his teammates after the race described the run as a "fatty world record"; in fact, not only was Solinsky the first non-African sub-27:00 man in history, he was also fifteen pounds heavier than any other man to break the barrier.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Ed Gordon, "In debut, Solinsky stuns with 26:59.60 US 10,000m record in Palo Alto," *IAAF*, 2 May 2010, accessed 7 Dec 2011, <http://www.iaaf.org/news/kind=100/newsid=56614.html>.

<sup>105</sup> "2010 Covers," *Track and Field News*, accessed 7 Dec 2011, <http://www.trackandfieldnews.com/index.php/special-articles/129>.

<sup>106</sup> "The Week that was in running – the 26:59.60 that shocked the world," Letsrun, 4 May 2010, accessed 7 Dec 2011, <http://www.letsrun.com/2010/weekthatwas0504.php>.

When asked about how his bigger than typical distance runner frame affected his performance, an issue that he'd dealt with in the past, Solinsky had a unique perspective. Instead of seeing his muscular build as extra weight he'd have to carry across the race distance, Solinsky saw his strength as a training advantage that let him race better as a result. His superior musculature proved an advantage that enabled him to handle more training and avoid injuries compared to other runners. At the end of the day, if he can accumulate more mileage over the course of years and grow more aerobically efficient, performing more challenging workouts would be easier and faster times would come.<sup>107</sup>

Solinsky continued to tear up track throughout the summer of 2010. With no Olympics or World Championships, most of the top runners in the world chased very fast times at meets in Europe. Solinsky broke the 13:00 barrier in the 5,000m on several occasions in highly competitive European meets, by summer's end finishing as the #2 American all-time with a 12:55.53. At year's end, *Track and Field News* named Solinsky the top American of the year at 10,000m and #3 in the world.<sup>108</sup>

The whirlwind 2010 brought American distance running's attention back to Solinsky, Schumacher and company. The constant question asked to breakout sensations was echoed to them as well: what sort of training are you doing? The oft-interviewed Solinsky reported training weeks of 120 miles per week during the fall base phase. When queried about it, Schumacher said that while 120 mile weeks were sprinkled into the training, "most of his training is 90-100 miles" per week. He also hinted at further development and progression of mileage as Solinsky and the rest of his runners developed.

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<sup>107</sup> "Chris Solinsky," Roads.

<sup>108</sup> "Chris Solinsky," USATF, accessed 17 Sept 2011, [http://www.usatf.org/athletes/bios/Solinsky\\_Chris.asp](http://www.usatf.org/athletes/bios/Solinsky_Chris.asp).

An unknown about Schumacher's 90-100 figure is whether that is counted in actual miles or, as they're called, "Badger miles." A UW staple dating back to Martin Smith, runners count their mileage more based on time than how much actual ground they covered. For example, if Solinsky actually runs 10 miles in 60 minutes, he actually records the run's length based on 7 minute miles. So, this 10 mile run would be logged as 8.5 miles. Given the pace the group often trains at, in 100 "Badger" miles per week, that figure may be as high as 120 miles. The process reduces the mental strain associated with thinking all at once about the volumes of training the runners are putting in. By writing down a little less, it's easier to stay relaxed about how they're training.<sup>109</sup>

Badger miles, in a way, are a microcosm of the Schumacher group's training style and philosophy. They're doing the work, but not hammering all the time. It's more about the process, the big picture of work rather than a few magical workouts to produce big results. When asked about goal setting and the type of training that yielded fruits in his 2010 season, Solinsky responded:

It's more than piling on a lot of miles, breaking down, and getting tired. Find that level that you can handle for a long time and consistently put in a lot of hard work. Whatever that level is, will pay off over time. You will see improvements. As you get older and stronger you will be able to increase that workload. You start to see results. You have to constantly stay motivated and constantly reach for that bigger goal that you have set for yourself.<sup>110</sup>

What Solinsky came to understand through his years of quality training under Schumacher was exactly that; it takes years of quality training to truly unveil the potential of a distance runner.

Working really hard for three months will get an athlete better, but it takes years, often a decade or more, of consistent aerobic training to maximize the systems necessary to compete with the

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<sup>109</sup> "Badger Miles (sort of ) Explained," Kimbia Athletics, 19 June 2008, accessed 8 Dec 2011, <http://www.kimbiam.net/2008/06/19/badger-miles-sort-of-explained/>.

<sup>110</sup> "Solinsky," Roads.

finest runners in the world. The thousands of miles Africans accumulate running to school and in early training are a testament to just that. The more you run, the better you get at it; this continues to be true for a very long time.

Over the course of years, a relentless pursuit of excellence eventually paid off for Solinsky. He was very good for a long time, on a number of different levels, but to reach towards the maximum of his personal potential took well over a decade of consistent training. Solinsky in particular is very goal-driven, and the hard work he put in was dedicated at giving him the best shot to do what his race plan has been for over a decade: compete and try to win every race he enters.

### **Final Analysis: What the Best Have in Common**

John Easker, Cathy Branta, Dan Held, and Chris Solinsky found many things on their unique paths to success in distance running. Foremost was a genuine and powerful passion for distance running and an unmatched sense of satisfaction found in pursuing and achieving their goals. They each had an appreciation for the physical and psychological training that goes into becoming a great runner, and the role that the climate they grew up in helped them get there. They all believed that being able to run lots of mileage in the cruel Wisconsin winters made them tougher than their opponents and that gave them an advantage on race day. They genuinely believed that their surroundings were preparing them as well as possible to run their best when it mattered most.

The total belief in the training they were performing came from themselves and their coaches. Jerry Schumacher got his training group to buy in fully to the fact that Madison's inclement weather was an advantage when they trained there year round; when they moved away, they believed that being elsewhere in the winter was helping them the most. When John Easker was working long, hard hours on a farm, he didn't see it as a detriment. The lifting he had to do made him a stronger runner and the tremendous efforts he put into his training by himself on lonely trails in cold winter days made him one of the strongest cross country runners in the world. Being able to push himself to his limits in those situations made the pain of races pale in comparison. Making the most of one's environment is a crucial component to achieving goals in distance running, and in that regard, Wisconsin has quite a bit to take advantage of.

Part of the environment that feeds success in distance running is the people surrounding the athletes. Teammates, coaches, family members—all provide invaluable support and make the

struggles and challenges of pursuing fast times more manageable. Dan Held's incredible 170 mile weeks on top of a full-time schedule would have been almost impossible without an understand spouse and the advice of his longtime coach. Chris Solinsky broke out following a tremendous lifestyle change, including getting married, that zoned his focus entirely onto his running. Even though Cathy Branta never ran with John Easker—asked why this was never the case in a 1985 interview, Easker replied “she runs too fast”—having someone who understands and supports each other's ambitions symbiotically improves the lives and performances of both parties.<sup>111</sup> A community of likeminded individuals is one of the most valuable assets of a training group, and this, as much as the mental toughening effects of cold, snowy winters and ready access to training routes and facilities, is what the state of Wisconsin has offered to elite distance runners for over 30 years.

Training meccas throughout the United States have come and gone since the 1960s. Gainesville, Florida was once the home to many of the country's elite runners, including Olympic gold medalist Frank Shorter. The hot Florida summers prepared Olympians like Jack Bachelier for the demanding conditions of Mexico City for the 1968 Olympics.<sup>112</sup> Now, few if any top runners call Florida their permanent training home. Another place Shorter spent a great deal of time during his career was Boulder, Colorado. With the added benefit of altitude training, Boulder has been a constant to some of the world's best endurance athletes. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, it was home to a bulk of the top American distance running prospects, as well as a number of Kenyan transplants training in the United States. With miles of dirt roads, fitness

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<sup>111</sup> Don Pierson, “They found love among the cinders,” *Chicago Tribune*, 17 May 1985, accessed 1 Dec 2011, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1985-05-17/sports/8501310331\\_1\\_john-easker-cathy-branta-track](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1985-05-17/sports/8501310331_1_john-easker-cathy-branta-track).

<sup>112</sup> “Florida Track Club History,” Florida Track Club, accessed 12 Dec 2011, <http://www.floridatrackclub.org/about-ftc/history/>.

gains from the thin mountain air, a successful collegiate distance crew, and one of the fittest populations in the country, Boulder is an ever-welcoming home to runners.<sup>113</sup>

Oregon as well has been an epicenter of American distance running over the decades. During the 1970s, Steve Prefontaine and a host of Oregon teammates represented the US over long distances at the Olympic Games. Now again, in the form of Schumacher's group, as well as Alberto Salazar's Oregon Project, make the state home to American record holders and medalists. In addition to taking advantage of miles of soft trails that allow athletes to rack up mileage with less pounding on their legs, the vast resources and technological savvy of Nike give the American groups training their a leg up on the competition.

While each of these training locales has quite a bit to offer in terms of running routes, supportive communities and training facilities, there are many more places like this in the United States that don't always blossom into training centers. What sets apart places like Madison is having the fundamental environment that allows for quality distance training, but perhaps more importantly, the group of people guiding and engaging in that training. As Lydiard said, there are no secret pockets of "supermen" in one part of the world or another that will dominate unquestionably. In New Zealand, Finland, Kenya, Boulder, and Stevens Point, the potential for world class runners awaits. The best runners in the world are those that are best trained and prepared. Those that receive the encouragement to train, intelligent coaching, and support from loved ones will discover how fast they are truly capable of running, regardless of if they have to deal snowy winters or humid summer days. As long as a training location meets the basic requirements, which Madison and most of Wisconsin does, it's about believing that place, the

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<sup>113</sup> Chris Lear, *Running with the Buffaloes: A Season Inside with Mark Wetmore, Adam Goucher, and the University of Colorado Men's Cross Country Team*, (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2003), 102-104.

unique qualities of it, the training they're performing, and the people around will give them every advantage they need to accomplish their goals. True, some training locations have advantages over others, but at the end of the day, hard workouts and lots of mileage can be done in Stevens Point, Waukesha, around farms near Wausau, and almost anywhere else in the state where the runners are motivated to do so.

Wisconsin as a whole and Madison in particular, have done this over the past 30 years. At a certain point, it becomes almost a self-fulfilling prophecy once established. The best runners seek out the coaches and training groups that will make them better, they train hard, believing it is the best way to improve, and see the improvements they seek. Jerry Schumacher puts training environments into perspective by saying that for the vast majority of runners seeking to improve, that there's not "some Utopian...training place." Every one of the hubs of distance running in the US has advantages and things that hold it back. But overall, he feels the biggest factor is "really all about fit for the individual." For the super elite, doing everything within their power to run even a second faster often means changing environment whenever necessary. Even now, Schumacher's team spends the majority of their time in Portland, but for months at a time, will relocate for altitude training, race acclimatization, or the travel and race on the European track circuit. The location where training is done can help athletes get the most out of their running, but the most important factor is the training that they're doing.

Even though the athletes profiled in this paper have retired or moved to another state to train, the culture of success in Wisconsin distance running remains strong. Solinsky earned again earned of representing the US team in the 5,000m at the 2011 World Championships, but an injured hamstring prevented him from competing. His sights are now set on the 2012 London

Olympic Games where his goal, not surprisingly, is victory.<sup>114</sup> In November of 2011, the University of Wisconsin men's cross country team, under Mick Byrne who replaced Schumacher after he and the group relocated to Oregon, won their fifth national championship; two runners on the team, including All-American Elliot Krause, were Wisconsin natives.<sup>115</sup> Less than a month later, Wisconsin high schooler Molly Seidel won the Foot Locker Cross Country national title.<sup>116</sup> For the foreseeable future, runners in Wisconsin will remain at the top of nation, both in spite of, and because of their environment.

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<sup>114</sup> Mario Fraioli "I'm a Competitor: Chris Solinsky Going for Gold," *Competitor*, March 2011, accessed 12 Dec 2011, [http://running.competitor.com/2011/06/features/im-a-competitor-chris-solinsky-going-for-gold\\_30244](http://running.competitor.com/2011/06/features/im-a-competitor-chris-solinsky-going-for-gold_30244).

<sup>115</sup> "Give em five: Badgers lay claim to program's fifth national title," UW Badgers, 21 Nov 2011, accessed 11 Dec 2011, <http://www.uwbadgers.com/sports/m-xc/recaps/112111aaa.html>.

<sup>116</sup> Tom Held, "Wisconsin's Molly Seidel Wins the Foot Locker National Championship," *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, 10 Dec 2011, accessed 12 Dec 2011, <http://www.jsonline.com/blogs/lifestyle/135386728.html>.

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## Appendix

### History of Elite Wisconsin Distance Runners Survey

For the senior thesis of UWEC student Thomas Breitbach

What is your proudest running achievement? Why?

Please describe your training in high school.

Please describe your training during college.

Please describe your training and coaching after college.

What do you think allowed you to continue improving throughout the years?

What do you think, if anything, made you different from contemporaries?

What was the most satisfying part of being a competitive post-collegiate distance runner?

What role did living/training in Wisconsin play in advancing your training (climate, race opportunities, training partners, coaches, training facilities, etc.)?

Were there any runners from Wisconsin that inspired you when you were competing?

Why did you first become involved with running?

Why did you ultimately decide to retire from competitive distance running?