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UA94/6/2/15 Athletes, Beggars & Rock Stars (or) Forget About the Olympics Tony

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ATHLETES, BEGGARS, AND ROCK STARS (or) FORGET ABOUT THE OLYMPICS, TONY

In 1973, Erwin Benedict Hartel took a hiatus from his life as a competitive student-athlete at Western Kentucky University. No one referred to Hartel by his given names, to this day he is 'Swag' (or 'The Swagman') and if you want good running gear in Louisville, Kentucky, then Swag's Sport Shoes is for you. Anyway, Swag went to Boston, where he earned his daily bread as a professional beggar. Swag was perfect for this avocation - in some ways he was like a latter day character from a Charles Dickens novel. An orphan from London, England, Swag was raised by an aunt. He had the gift of the gab and could charm the pants off a hedgehog. Swag amused himself and his mates by 'goofing on the world'. Pretending to be a member of the English band 'Yes' or becoming a beggar was, for the Swagman, a bit of performance art. Swag's finest day of begging netted him \$315.

The United Church of Volunteers was a scam operated by a woman and her man. They hired young foreigners (the 'Volunteers') to collect donations in shopping centre parking lots in and around Boston. The Volunteers wore imitation Salvation Army uniforms and took a 50% cut of the haul. The masters of this scheme had a house that was full of pennies, dimes, nickels, and quarters; it was a counting house. Swag speculates that they gave the pennies to charity and pocketed the rest of the dough. Thus did Swag play David Copperfield to his Fagins.

Swag had been recruited to Western Kentucky University on the strength of stellar performances in the junior age class 800 meters run. His recruitment began a 'pipeline' from England to WKU, through which flowed a number of world class athletes, including Nick Rose, Chris Ridler, and Tony Staynings. By the end of 1973, the 'British Brigade' led the WKU distance racing team to national prominence in U.S. collegiate athletics. Although our living and education expenses were covered by scholarship, we were usually skint and always on the lookout for a few extra bucks. I was fortunate because I had a relatively well paying summer job cleaning the kill floor in a slaughterhouse. But the English lads spent their summers racing on the European circuit, which was mostly ruled by the Olympic ideal of amateurism. Lacking funds to fly home for Christmas, they were pleased when Swag lined them up a month long stint as Boston beggars. A Merry Christmas was on the horizon until Tony was crushed under a vehicle while asleep in his bed, and Nick was injured by flying glass. But, I'm getting ahead of the story.

Swag helped the boys find a motel in the slums of Roxbury, a suburb of Boston that was founded as a colony in 1630. Roxbury had made some strides in the intervening centuries - now there was electricity and a lifting of Puritan prohibitions on the use of alcohol. Swag told the managers of the Park Road Motel that he and his friends were an English rock band, in Boston to record an album. Swag, Nick, Tony, and Chris looked and played the part of English musicians coming to America. I wonder if the 'rock stars' aroused curiosity as every morning they ran five miles, then filed out of the motel in Salvation Army type duds. Perhaps the managers thought they were doing a concept album ala 'Sergeant Pepper'. Just before Christmas Eve, after 'a hard day's night' of begging, the boys were asleep in bed. Parked near their unit was a 1970's station wagon and the owner was getting drunk in the motel lounge. Sometime after midnight, the bartender refused to further lubricate the soon to be arrested drunk driver. In a fury, he oozed into the station wagon, ignited the engine and put the transmission in reverse. Correction: he thought he was in reverse, but when he floored the gas pedal the 2,040 kilogram (4497 pounds) road boat slammed into Tony, Nick, and Chris' room, ending up on Tony's bed. Ending up on top of Tony. Nick ('I wake up at the slightest sound')

jumped up in bed to headlights, the roar of an engine and the surreal horror of glass imploding upon him, followed by the station wagon. He was badly cut for seventy stitches. Chris was the least injured, but a shard of glass embedded near his eye. Tony, in the bed closest to the window, was pinned under the station wagon.

Imagine the scene as a nightmare: a darkened room, glowing headlights, gas fumes and settling debris. The engine still running. Sounds of shock, horror and pain. The driver was about to back his vehicle out of the room, but Swag and Chris pulled him out. The man did not resist. Other than preventing the man from backing out of the room and driving off, Swag and Chris did not lay hands on him. They swore, calling him a 'F*****g Wanker and 'F*****g Tosser'. (Whatever that means.)

Tony: 'I was sleeping closest to the outside wall, which was a good 75 meters from the road. I heard a terrific crash, and woke up to see Nick jump out of his bed, like a rabbit. He had no clothes on and he started to run. Then, the frame of the window fell on me and the glass shattered. The station wagon came toward me slow, pushing me, and pressing on my hip - it was slowing up, but gave one final push. That's when I felt terrific pain. I was screaming to get the weight off of me. The station wagon must have been on my chest, too, because I was having a hard time breathing. So, I stopped screaming.

'The police came, but they didn't dare back the vehicle off of me, because the side of the room was hanging over my head - all of the glass and everything.'

Chris: 'One of the policemen took off his cap to shield Tony's face from loose glass that was hanging above his head. The glass did fall, but the hat protected him. It took firefighters about half of an hour to get him out.'

In hospital, Tony became distraught - he told an attending physician of Olympic aspirations and was told that he might not walk normally, so forget about running. He had sustained fractures to both aspects of the superior pubis and muscle damage. A lawyer appeared at Tony's bedside and was retained, but the ambulance chaser was conflicted in that he was defending the drunk driver. In the end, worn down by delays, our boys settled for a pittance.

The motel wreck was reported in several Boston area newspapers. The Marlboro Enterprise Sun detailed the lads running achievements and also noted their promising future as rock and roll musicians.

Back in Bowling Green, Tony hobbled on crutches. Depressed, he hung out in bars. Coach Bean brought Tony in and sternly told him to quit feeling sorry for himself and to get his ass in gear. Tony's crutches and barfly habit disappeared and he jogged, then ran again. On February 15, 1974, I was chatting with Coach Bean in his office. Rumour had it that Tony had not been taking his rehabilitation seriously; he was partying like hell and not running much. Coach asked me what I was doing for my workout. I said that I planned to run eleven miles with Tony. Jerry Bean looked at me and said: 'Ross, take Tony for A RUN'. That was the end of our conversation, but the message was clear. I was to hammer on Tony, not to break him but rather to prick his pride and kick start his formidable ability. Midway through the hour long effort, I knew that he must be hurting and I kept the pressure on. Tony was a little bulldog that day and I was impressed.

The Kentucky winter rains eased and we commenced the outdoor track season. We were training at high weekly mileages and our racing performances showed it. Our times were not especially impressive because we had 'a lot of miles in our legs'. We expected peak performances by the end of May. Tony became fitter as the weeks passed. We competed in the Memphis Invitational, then at home against Northwestern (Illinois) University. The third meet of the season would be against Murray State and Memphis State. A few days before the competition, I was in class with Tony. I noticed that the notes he was making didn't align with

the lecture. 'Psst - Tony, what are you doing?' 'Look Ross, these are the lap times I'm gonna run on Saturday.' 'Tony, no way you're ready to run that fast!' 'Ross, I can run this fast and so can you.' The three miles race would come only fifteen weeks after Tony's near tragedy.

Over the next few days Tony insisted that he was going to lead the race and that I was to stay with him. And that's what happened as Tony ran the fastest collegiate three miles in the USA. I hung on before fading at the two mile mark, but still took over a minute off my best time, which qualified me to compete in the National Collegiate Track and Field Championships and earned me a place on Canada's National Team. Coach Bean picked me up and swung in circles. Tony accomplished an incredible comeback while kick starting me!

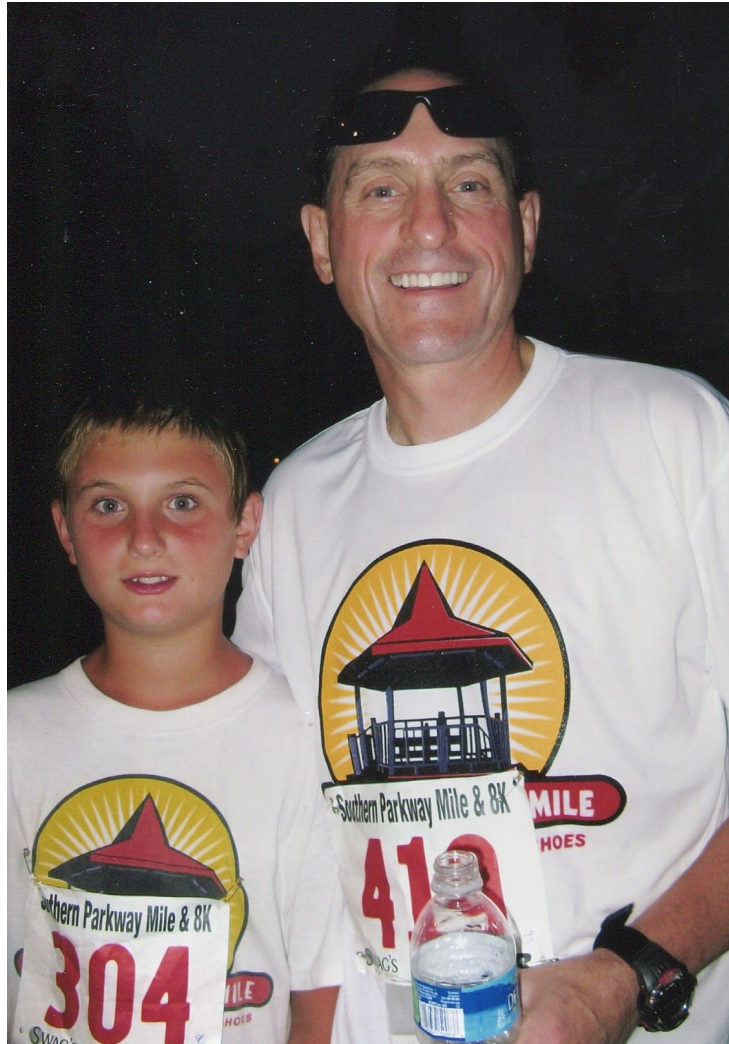
Ross Munro (2018)



Tony leads Ross Munro and Commonwealth Games bronze medallist Paul Bannon (Scotland and Memphis State) in our break out three miles race.



Nick Rose and Tony Staynings at the Crystal Palace, London



Swag Hartel with a young runner in 2009



Chris Ridler (number 375) runs in the 1973 Ohio Valley Conference Championship