2018

UA94/6/2/15 Incident at Hangman Valley

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INCIDENT AT HANGMAN VALLEY

In 1973, the distance runners of Western Kentucky University attained national attention. We were an eclectic, international gang of seven. ‘When the starting gun goes off, I just hope you guys all run in the same direction’, said Coach Jerry Bean. He assembled a team of four Englishmen, one Canadian and two Americans. Nick Rose, Tony Staynings, Chris Ridler and Erwin (‘Swag’) Hartel were world class junior athletes from England. Ross Munro won four Canadian Junior Championship races. Steve Smith was a stylish and solid racer from Hodgenville, Kentucky. Joe Tinius, a ‘Hoosier’ out of Indiana, ran the mile. Coach Bean was raised in Red Cloud, Nebraska (population 300). At every level of coaching, from high school to Division One of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), Jerry’s teams improved dramatically. A sports psychologist and a skilled recruiter of talented athletes, Jerry smoked constantly. Once, driving to a race over the backroads of Kentucky, he lamented that he had forgotten his cigarettes. ‘Coach,’ sez me, ‘It’s only a couple of hours.’ ‘Roscoe, me forgetting my smokes is like you forgetting your spikes!’

A controversy raged within the NCAA, which is the governing body for American university athletics. Universities offered scholarships to foreign student athletes and every scholarship awarded to a foreigner deprived an American of subsidized education and enhanced athletic development. An influx of ‘overage’ offshore athletes made the situation worse because, while most Americans commenced their university education after high school, the NCAA was being flooded with older, more physically mature ‘Transplants’. Some Americans cried foul. Sports Illustrated magazine examined the issue and Coach Bean was quoted: ‘The coach at University of California Los Angeles could recruit athletes from a taxi cab, but schools like Western Kentucky University have to look offshore in order to compete against the bigger, richer schools’. Finally, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that individual universities had the right to award scholarships to anyone who met entrance requirements. In the era before professional racing and national athlete development programs, distance runners from Britain, Ireland, Australia, Canada, Kenya, et al viewed the NCAA as their best opportunity for education and top flight competition. The result - the NCAA Championship was an international championship.

The 1973 National Collegiate Cross Country Championship was contested over six miles at Hangman Valley Golf Course in Spokane, Washington. This would be Western Kentucky’s NCAA debut - we were not expected to show well against the power house teams. The University of Oregon, led by brilliant and tragic Steve Prefontaine, was favoured to win the individual and team titles - all U of O’s runners were Americans. East Tennessee State University was defending it’s Championship title. Led by Boston Marathon winner and Olympian Neil Cusack, ETSU fielded seven Irishmen. Texas El Paso University had a great miler in Kenya’s Wilson Waigwa - he was joined by two Canadians and three Americans. Washington State University had a ‘pipeline’ to Kenya through which flowed the superb John Ngeno and many other fabulous men of the Great Rift Valley. In addition, a tough fight could be expected from College of William and Mary, Oklahoma State, Colorado, Wisconsin, Penn State, Indiana, and Tennessee.

The Western Kentucky ‘Hilltoppers’ boarded a plane bound for Spokane. We were loose and happy, flying above the country to race cross country. Glory! This day our relatively meager team budget bought us wings and we ditched the fifteen passenger van - it produced sore loins and smelled like a running shoe. It was the 1970’s, and the airline plied passengers with with free champagne. Cheap wine gulped at 30 000 feet percolated through us, enhancing high
spirits. We dressed al a mode in denim with long hair and our London orphan Swag Hartel masqueraded us as the English rock group ‘Yes’ to some young soldiers in a boarding lounge. (Track and Field News magazine ‘The Bible of the Sport’ has archived a photo of us juxtaposed with Led Zeppelin. They were slim like us, but for a different reason. Also, they had their own jet.)

We stayed at the Davenport Hotel. Once the finest lodging in the Pacific Northwest, the Davenport was a fading beauty with a stuffed polar bear in the lobby. Today, the hotel has been restored to its original grandeur. At the Davenport, one might dine with the ghosts of Charles Lindbergh, Clark Gable, John Kennedy, and Babe Ruth. Hell, even Cheech and Chong loitered at the Davenport. Coach Bean called a pre-race meeting in his room. Did I mention that we were loose? Finally, Coach lost it: ‘Dammit you guys, this is my job on the line!’

Race morning dawned glorious, a perfect sunny frosty fall day. Hangman Valley was a palette for 230 finalists who had qualified in eight regional championships. Our best, Nick Rose, was the World Junior Cross Country Champion, but he was relatively unknown in America. Today he would properly join the world class. Steve Prefontaine, fresh off a gutsy performance at the Munich Olympics, had said: ‘Someone might beat me, but they are going to have to bleed to do it’. Unbeknownst to Steve, his sentiment embodied Nick’s racing style. From the gun, Nick pounded his competition. Mid-race at three miles, he was 60 meters up on Prefontaine. Finally, Pre beat Nick - but to do that he had to bleed.

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Excerpt From: PRE The Story Of America’s Greatest Running Legend, Steve Prefontaine
(Tom Jordan 1977)

‘I had been running the way I run best,’ Rose says. ‘Just hammering for about four miles and then hanging on, and I thought that was what I was going to do’.

‘I thought it was all over,’ exclaims Doug Brown, an Olympian in the steeplechase at Munich. ‘At three miles, Rose had a good 50 or 60 yards on him, and I thought, Wow, the race is over. Pre’s gonna get beat.’

With less than a mile to go, Pre pulled even, and once level, knew the race was in hand. Rose clung, then faded, and Prefontaine had his third cross country title. Tragically, Steve Prefontaine died eighteen months later, crushed under his overturned sports car.

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The racers lined up on a wide fairway and the starting gun sent us off at a god awful fast pace. Within 800 meters, the course narrowed to a bottleneck and we jostled to negotiate a hairpin turn. Paul Pearson, a Canadian running for UTEP, says: ‘I remember that turn - it was wicked’. In the middle of the pack, some were reduced to walk / jogging until the course widened again. In the stampede of racers, on the straightaway just past the hairpin turn, Staynings was pushed outside of a marking flag. He could not turn back to correct the situation; Tony might have been trampled and others injured in an ensuing pileup. The final results indicate the crowded conditions - after six miles of running only 120 seconds separated the top 100 finishers. The implications of Tony’s dilemma would change the final result for all of the top teams, except Oregon. Initially, the newcomers from the hills and hollows of Kentucky were runners-up to Oregon. We were ecstatic, but then came word that Staynings and several others were disqualified, including an Ethiopian who hid behind a tree. The tree hugger (later, he became
an eminent professor of medicine) jumped out from foliage during the second lap and finished in fine form! Anyhow, Western Kentucky was relegated to sixth place. That was the only time I cried at a competition.

Some runners told me that they had inadvertently missed marking flags, which were inadequate in height and sometimes stuck in tall grass. Frank Greally of the East Tennessee ‘Irish Brigade’ was disqualified, but never learned why. I missed at least one flag and wondered if the host school had marked the course badly before recruiting members of the football team to act as course marshalls. Poor Tony (at seventeen he held the age group world record for 10 000 meters and enjoyed a long career in the top echelon of world class racing) - he suffered his only disqualification in Hangman Valley. Tony gained no advantage but, no matter, the jury of appeal upheld his disqualification. Washington State moved up in the standings and took the bronze medals.

Oh well…'We’re only here for the beer’ and besides, we’re coming back next year. The events of November 19, 1973, were nothing to get hung about. That night, we ganged up with the East Tennessee Irish in a marathon pub crawl. It was a soaking away of disappointment and the celebration of a remarkable day. Anyhow, no one was arrested and we all made it back to the Davenport Hotel.

One year later, Nick won the NCAA Championship. Western Kentucky placed second to Oregon. This time the result stuck.

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Nick Rose broke road racing world records as he became one of the finest competitors of his generation. Tony Staynings was an Olympic finalist. Chris Ridler’s life was cut short by leukemia. Swag Hartel ran a sub four minute mile. Ross Munro competed for Canada in the World Cup of Athletics. Steve Smith joined the Marines. Joe Tinius became a superintendent of schools. Jerry Bean retired from coaching and moved to Denver, where he made a bundle in real estate. Then he settled in the US Virgin Islands, married a beautiful Island woman, and captained his sport fishing boat.
Two Time Olympian and World Beater Nick Rose
Chris Ridler and Tony Staynings
Swag Hartel Wins the Mile
Tony Staynings and Steve Smith
Joe Tinius

A very hard worker and dedicated runner, Joe Tinius showed a great deal of improvement from his frosh year to his sophomore year last season. The two-year letterman gives the Hilltoppers good strength from the No. 1 spot to the No. 7 spot. His added experience should make him even more valuable than he was last season.

1974 ROSTER

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Coach Jerry Bean

ROSS MUNRO
(2018)