

## PEOPLE

### Browning Ross: The Father of US Distance Running

Any running historian would have to place Browning Ross on the short list of those who have been most influential in the sport of US distance running. Running author Tom Osler has said "Ross is to running what George Washington is to this country." Yet Ross is far from ancient history. He still coaches

track and cross-country at Gloucester Catholic High in New Jersey, and still runs three miles a day in the woods near his Woodbury New Jersey home. He also organizes about thirty races each year, many of which cause local runners to alter their summer vacation plans in order to take part.

Ross, now 72, was an Olympic steeplechaser in 1948 and 1952, and was the first Olympian to emerge from Villanova University under the tutelage of legendary coach, Jumbo Elliott. In the 1950's while Mickey Mantle was winning home run titles for the New York Yankees, Ross was arguably the top runner in the country. He used his 48 second quarter-mile speed to win an NCAA steeplechase title, an AAU national cross-country title in Boston, and 8 national AAU Championships. He also won a gold medal at the Pan Am Games in 1951 in the 1500m, and countless road races all over the country from the Berwick Marathon in Pennsylvania (ten times) to the Hamilton, Ontario 15 mile race (four times). The usual reward? A bed, a free meal and a tank of gas. Ross also found time to found the Road Runners Club of America, and publish the first mass circulation US running magazine (with over 1000 subscribers), "Long Distance Log" in 1957.

Ross covered some of his illustrious past, and his vision of the future of American distance running, in an interview with *American Runner*.

**American Runner:** You were threatened with expulsion by the AAU for helping women run in the 1950's. Can you explain?

**BR:** Susan Morse, an Olney High School runner, asked me if she could run in a marathon in Philadelphia. Since I was the Middle Atlantic AAU Long Distance Chairman, I approved. She ran well and finished, but the AAU promptly barred her for life? Thus we organized the Road Runners Club of America and started



to stage our own races.

**AR:** You have been running since 1939 and coaching since 1951. Who is the most impressive runner you've seen in your career?

**BR:** Early on, Emil Zatopek [Winner of the 5000m, 10,000m and marathon at the Helsinki Olympics of 1952 - Ed]. The European crowds would rhythmically chant ZAT-O-PEK at meets. Today, Haile Gebrsilasse of Ethiopia [world record-holder at 5000m - Ed].

**AR:** You are mentioned in Roger Bannister's classic autobiography "The Four Minute

Mile" for a mile race you ran against him in London. Could you share some recollections of your favorite international experiences as coach and runner?

**BR:** I coached the first US World Cross-Country team that went to Tunis, Tunisia in 1968, and the second that competed in Vichy, France in 1969. I was more the manager than the coach. The runners were the best in the country at the time. In 1968 we toured East Africa and the cross-country courses were just amazing. During the races we had to wade across chest-high streams, and run through cornfields where we scared the life out of women carrying cornstalks stacked on their heads. I remember one race where we had to long-jump a deep stream; our runners were coming up short on the outer bank and sliding back into the water. (Note: Ross, as coach, ran in many of those races with the team). We also had to run through deep sand hills: this was in Ethiopia, Kenya, Zambia and Tanzania.

My most memorable road race was the New Year's Eve Race in Sao Paulo, Brazil. The race started at midnight before thousands of bombed spectators. The first Pan Am Games in Buenos Aires, Argentina were also memorable. I won the 1500m, tied with Kurt Stone in the steeplechase, and placed fourth in the 5000m.

**AR:** What was your typical training week like during this period?

**BR:** I ran about 40 miles a week with speed pick-ups on the road. I'd run hard for two telephone poles, for example.

**AR:** Are runners today as good as those of the past?

**BR:** Yes, I think so. It's like a revolving door that rotates completely around. The training methods and tracks are altogether different than in my time. The runners are every bit as good, though.

**AR:** What can be done to improve the popularity of track and road running in the USA?

**BR:** Separate awards for US road runners. Colleges should strive to bring back dual meets instead of big meets every weekend. This would encourage rivalries, and also take up less time. I just finished two days of officiating at the Big East meet at Villanova, and even I was bored. People do not want to spend eight hours at a track meet.

Also, many youngsters don't bother going out for college track to compete against all-scholarship athletes. Non-scholarship athletes should be encouraged to run after high school when your best running years are starting. High schools could drop the metric distances for running events. People are more familiar with, and interested in, the mile and two mile rather than the 1600 or 3200 meters. Why have running distances in meters and field events in feet if you are trying to encourage interest in the sport?

**AR:** Should US races do more to encourage American runners? Is it detrimental to allow foreign runners to win almost all of the prize money?

**BR:** I think so. Even though the US runners are improving, it may be to the detriment of their future careers since they have to follow the training schedules of the Kenyans, Mexicans and Ethiopians and other top foreign runners in order to compete. Most Americans don't want to devote their lives just to running. What do you do for a living once your peak years are over? The Kenyans, for example, can make more money from road races than they could earn in a lifetime in Kenya!

**AR:** You are credited for starting the Irish runner pipeline to Villanova. Do you have any favorite memories of those first Irish runners at Villanova?

**BR:** John Joe Barry, the great Irish runner, told me when he arrived at Villanova, "Ross, I'll run as slow as I can. You run all out and try to stay with me!"

**AR:** What is your definition of a successful runner?

**BR:** A person who sets goals, but fits the training in with the rest of their life. It should not consume you. It's not fair to your family, which should come first.

**AR:** The future of distance running in the United States?

**BR:** I don't see any let-down. We'll continue to have an overwhelming number of road races, plus cross-country and track meets, despite the focus on the pro sports - football, basketball, baseball, etc. by the media. What's the old saying? "Forty thousand people watching eleven is news: eleven people watching forty thousand is not."

- JACK HEATH