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FIRST MONDAY IN JULY

Joe L. Bolster III '75

Three summers ago, that would be the summer between my freshman and sophomore years in college and the summer I turned 19, I had a job shovelling tar all day long for two dollars an hour. This job took care of my day pretty well but at night I had a lot of free time on my hands. During the school year I competed on the track and cross country teams for my college, so at night I did a lot of running in order to get ready for the fall season. Unfortunately now that I'm in grad school I never seem to have time to run anymore, I keep saying I'll start tomorrow but I never do. Well, anyway, as I said, I was doing a lot of running that particular summer. Near my town was a small college and every summer the track coach at this school would put on four track meets for tracksters in the area. These meets were held every Monday night in July and anyone was welcome to come and compete, and since I lived nearby I attended regularly. That summer I looked forward to the first meet because I expected to see a lot of kids I'd run against in high school and hadn't seen in a year. The Rider Meets, as they were called, were great for seeing old friends and competing against them in odd events like the mile walk, events which you ordinarily wouldn't have a chance to try. As a matter of fact I'd even tried the mile walk at one of the meets the summer before. What a joke that was. At the end of the first lap I was way behind, probably because I didn't know what I was doing. On the second lap I cheated and started running here and there which prompted all my friends to yell, hey look at him he's running, at the meet official. The official didn't seem to notice my running but he couldn't help but notice when I tried to cut across the track on the third lap. I got kicked out of the race at that point but I was laughing so hard it didn't matter, besides who cared?

The Monday of the first meet I drove to the track with my girlfriend. The track was in the middle of a field about a mile behind the main campus and it was surrounded by a four foot high wire fence. There was one entrance in the fence and at all the meets a table was set up at the entrance with a clipboard on it and the meet director sitting behind the table. The clipboard had a list of all the events to be run and the contestants signed their names under the ones they wished to try and then paid a quarter entry fee to the meet director. When I got to the table on the first Monday I found myself in line behind three people. One was a burly high school kid who signed up for the shot put, paid his quarter and waddled towards the shot ring. The other two people appeared to be husband and wife. The woman was in her early 40's and very small and she looked like one of those quiet, patient women who make good wives. Her husband was of comparable age, with thinning hair and a face that reflected a great many decisions. He was wearing some old tennis shoes, blue trunks, and a gray shirt that read, Property of Such

and Such Athletic Dept. on it. The letters were too faded to read where he had gone to school. He had a good tan and looked to be in good shape for his age, he was trim of build with firm muscles and the legs of a runner.

When the shotputter left this man proceeded to write his name, John Simmons, under Mile Run. At this point the meet director pointed out to him that a Masters Mile was being run for men over the age of 30. John Simmons said yes he knew that but he wanted to run in the regular mile. The meet director shook his head and said okay so Mr. Simmons paid his quarter and he and his wife walked onto the track. I was next so I signed my name below John Simmons under Mile Run and then I went onto the infield to talk to a buddy of mine. We sat on the grass talking about our races of the year before, it seemed like a long time ago, and as the time for the mile got closer I noticed John Simmons jogging on the track. I'd kind of forgotten about him and as I watched him jog I wondered about him. I couldn't figure out why he wanted to run in the regular mile, he was in good shape but he was going to be blown off the track in the race, why didn't he want to run in the Master's race? I didn't dwell on him long though because I had other things to think about. I was going to be in for a big battle from a local high school whiz and I had no intentions of letting any young upstart beat me. I was the only collegian entered in the race, except of course for John Simmons but he didn't count, and it would be a blow to my pride for a high school kid to win.

I started to warm up during the 440 yard run because the Masters Mile was next and then the regular mile.. That summer I was sort of coaching a boy who was two years behind me in high school and he was in the quarter hoping to run his best time. He came in fourth and I could tell he'd been slow. He walked over to me after he was done and I told him not to worry because it was hard to get motivated during the summer, anyway he had another year of high school to improve. He told me he wasn't disappointed because he didn't expect to be running 56 second quarters the rest of his life. I laughed and said no, he'd probably do a little better than that.

The meet director called us to the area of the starting line while the Master Mile was in progress. Glancing around the track at the guys in the Masters Mile I could see the race was its usual charade. The runner who was firmly mired in last place was wearing a Piel's Beer T-shirt and his stomach indicated that he was a running advertisement. This man's kids had come along with him to the meet and they shouted, there's Daddy, throughout the race. Everytime he came by the finish line he waved to them. A couple of other guys were running together and talking to each other as if they were on a bus. During the third lap one of the timers looked at his watch and then one of the runners said, looks like Amick's going to break six minutes tonight. Six minutes, I thought, you can't get much slower. As the final Master Milers plodded home we all stood by the starting line shaking loose and cracking jokes about how out of shape we were, trackmen aren't very serious in the sum-

mer. John Simmons was standing a little way off from the rest of us and he wasn't talking to anybody, probably because he didn't know any of us.

Finally we got to the starting line, the gun went off and the race was on.. The first half mile was terribly slow so in the third lap the high school whiz and I separated ourselves from the rest of the pack. The last lap was terrifically fast, about a minute, and I outsprinted the kid over the last 100 yards to win in a time of 4:26. As I stood in the neighborhood of the finish line recovering my breath I watched the other runners straggle in. After a minute or so the meet director called the half mile runners to the starting line but somebody said hold it we've got another runner on the track. I looked up and just as I did I saw John Simmons cross the finish line. What a sight. He was laboring horribly, his legs could barely stride forward and his head was wagging from side to side. John Simmons' time wasn't bad, about 5:30, and he would have placed high in the Masters Mile, not first mind you but third or fourth which was better than the last place he'd just finished. His time was respectable but he had paid the price for it. Now as he gasped for breath just across the finish line nobody said anything to him, the meet director yelled again for the half mile and John Simmons wobbled onto the infield and lay down on his back. My girlfriend said he looked pretty sick and she wondered if maybe I should go over and see if he was okay. I said no, he was alright all he needed was air and he was getting plenty of it on his back. By the end of the half mile he'd recovered enough to sit up and cradle his head in his hands but he was still breathing quite hard. His small wife had been kneeling quietly by him the whole time. When he sat up she touched him lightly on the arm and said something to him. She must have asked him if he felt alright or something like that because he nodded his head up and down. I was standing nearby and judging from the look on her face she looked like she wanted to say something else to him but decided not to. I can't say why, I just got the impression she had something else she wanted to say.

The next event was the mile relay. A bunch of my friends got a team together and they were doing pretty well, second place, until the third runner decided he could go faster running backwards. He went about 50 yards before he went sprawling and the baton went flying. That was the end of them. After my friend's display of ineptitude I looked over into the infield and saw John Simmons still sitting there. By this time the running events were all over so I went over to watch the pole vault competition. A few minutes later Mr. Simmons got to his feet and he and his wife walked to their car in the parking lot and drove away. I ran the half mile the following Monday but Mr. Simmons wasn't there to run the mile nor was he at any of the other meets the rest of the summer.