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Essay

My 1968

Rich Elliott

It was a year of atrocities and miracles, a year when anything was possible. National leaders gunned down. Killing in Vietnam at a fever pitch. Students rioting in the streets, cities set on fire. Women threw bras in a trash can, astronauts trained for a trip to the moon, and a company began making something called “computer chips.”

I couldn't have cared less.

I was oblivious. I was on a mission. I wanted to run fast. I wanted to see how far I could push my body. In 1968, in my senior year of high school, I wanted to run two miles in under nine minutes, and then I wanted to break the national record.

Three years before, a sane person looking at me would have said these were absurd goals. Even for a distance runner I was a shrimp, less than a hundred pounds and barely five feet tall. Big gusts of wind dealt me fits, and I was about as aggressive as a shadow.

Like many in my sport, I had the standard issue of work ethic and masochism. But if I had any real talent, it was my imagination.

I was an unapologetic distance-geek, and the heroes of my youth were the rock stars of the running world. They appeared regularly on the televised track meets back then, so I knew their styles. I could imitate the head-roll of the great miler Jim Ryun. I could fling my cap into the infield on the final lap, like the irrepressible Kip Keino. I memorized the ramrod posture of the multi-world record holder Ron Clarke. (In my book, the best of them all.)

I dreamed of being a great runner like Ryun or Keino or Clarke, and I was lucky no one told me my dream was ridiculous.

“There are no limits to what you can do,” my coach told me. I clutched those words like a life vest. I believed them with the full naiveté of youth.

Then something amazing happened. As I was slogging through thousand-mile summers, my body underwent an inexplicable transformation. I got faster. I still don't understand it — except to say that mileage, a wonderful coach, and imagination can work miracles.

So here I was, as 1968 began, racing against a field of the best prep two-milers in the Cow Palace, San Francisco's famous arena. The highly-touted Doug Smith, from Sioux City, Iowa, was headlining the race. We warmed up together before the race, and we talked about where we might go to college. Doug was an extrovert and a very likable guy. Then came our race, and we waged the first of many fierce battles. I tried hard to shake him with a fast first mile, but I could not, and he overpowered me at the end. Thus my year began with defeat.

The day after this race my coach Hugh Enicks and I walked around Haight-Ashbury. For two straight-arrow, Midwestern athletes, seeing streets crowded with merrily-stoned hippies was like visiting some exotic zoo. We had no idea what to make of it.

That winter most mornings found me, not in my first-period home room, but on the indoor track. In our cavernous fieldhouse not another soul was there, and I jogged to the patter of my Adidas flats. I ran in semi-darkness; not all the lights had been turned on yet. I found solace in these morning runs and in my aloneness.

My mother had died of cancer the year before. On the track in the half-light it felt good to numb my body and think of nothing. Running was a welcome narcotic. I was unaware my miles were filling a hole, just one of many things I was oblivious to.

I wanted to shave seconds. I was on a roll, my times were tumbling down. I sought a fast mile time because logic dictated that the faster your mile PR, then the faster you can run the first half of a two-mile, and the faster your final time.

Coach decided I should try for this fast mile time in a race at our fieldhouse. This generated a bit of interest, and that day a dozen college coaches came, stopwatches in hand. To spice things up, my coach asked the coaches to predict my final time. They all guessed too slow. My coach's prediction came closest to my time of 4:10.8, which was the second fastest prep indoor mile.

That winter Joe Henderson, a young writer for *Track and Field News* magazine, reported on the current debate about training systems. Which was better for distance runners, speed work or high mileage? Quality or Quantity? Igloi or Lydiard? My coach knew where he stood. We did both, and a lot of it.

Some of these workouts were fearsome; 50 years later they remain indelible. One was a set of quarters in the low 60s. Coach left the quantity open-ended: “Let's see how many you can do.” From the first one, hitting the times was harrowing. My oxygen debt soared. I told myself,

“I’ll do one more, then I’ll stop.” On and on it went like this until I reached eight.

Pushing to the edge like this, and surviving, achieves an effect. Confidence soars.

Despite the severity of our training, Coach kept things entertaining with his banter. “Let me tell you a good one,” he’d say, and then he’d spin one more fabulous tale about the characters in his hardscrabble southern Indiana town, or his dive-bombing his father’s congregation at a tent revival, or his college coach’s war heroics, or the exploits of his friend Fred Wilt, the Olympic runner and FBI agent. Hugh was, and still is, the greatest storyteller I’ve ever known.

Outside our fieldhouse our country lurched and seethed. Before Tet our leaders could say we were winning the war. But following North Vietnam’s surprise invasion, when dozens of towns in South Vietnam were attacked, claims of progress were no longer credible. In a special news report, Walter Cronkite, “the most trusted man in America,” now questioned our entire mission in Southeast Asia. Then came President Johnson’s unexpected decision to not run for re-election, which added to a growing sense of national defeat.

In early April, the hero of the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. Cities across America exploded with rage. Fifteen miles from my hometown, Chicago was in flames. Mayor Daley declared a 7 p.m. curfew and told police to “shoot to kill any arsonist.” The president sent five thousand soldiers from two Army divisions to quell the riots.

For me, the rumble of tragic events that spring was like some far-off storm, barely noticed. I focused on a race. Coach had conjured an ambitious goal.

By now I was used to his radical claims, but breaking nine minutes for two miles—after I’d already taken big chunks off my PR — seemed wildly optimistic. I had doubts. But in the middle of May, when the piercing cold and implacable wind finally relented, we took a shot.

Have you ever had a moment in sports when you enter a magical zone, and you can do no wrong? This was my moment. I expected my first-mile goal of 4:24 to feel awful—it was way faster than I’d ever attempted. But surprisingly, it felt easy. I was locked in. Lifted by giddy anticipation, I flew on, lap after lap. The crunch of the cinder track never sounded so good. By the end of the race, I had so much left I sprinted the final quarter and broke the tape at 8:56.7.

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That race resulted in an invitation to the Compton-Coliseum Invitational, a world-class, international track meet in Los Angeles. The meet promoter liked to invite a rising prep to join the men in a distance race. Would I like to compete in the Coliseum in the 5,000-meter race? Would I!

Coach and I traveled to balmy southern California, which seemed like a dream world. There were palm trees and an ocean, for goodness sake! And at our hotel there were all these track stars walking around — I recognized them from TV!

The day we arrived, Californians voted in the primary elections for the Democratic nominee for president. The newest candidate, the charismatic Robert Kennedy, was leading in national polls. He would be speaking that evening in a hotel down the street from where we were staying.

The next morning we awoke to the news that Kennedy had been shot. When Coach and I went on a training run that day, we saw people holding signs that read “Pray for Bobby.” He died later that night, another inspiring leader gone.

The day of my race Coach and I were sitting down for lunch at our hotel when Ron Clarke walked by. Hugh waved him over and proceeded to cajole the Olympian into having lunch with us.

“Rich here is running in your race tonight.”

Clarke looked at me skeptically. I imagined him thinking, This little kid? You must be joking!

Hugh rattled on amiably. “Ron, what kind of pace you think you’ll run tonight?”

Clarke took a bite of his sandwich and stared at us. Finally he shrugged and said, "Just even pace."

After lunch Coach said to me, "Oh, boy."

"What's wrong, Coach?"

"When a runner downplays his race like that, watch out. His pace will be hot."

That night in the majestic bowl of the Coliseum, I toed the line in the 5,000, a boy racing against men. In lane one stood Clarke, the holder of 17 world records. I snuck a peek at him. He seemed all business.

On a perfect California evening, the gun sounded, and Clarke blasted away. The rest of us, in shock and awe, were splayed around the track running for second. I hung at the back of the pack for dear life, gasping for air. By the end I managed to not get lapped by Clarke, and I actually beat one person. I ran my heart out.

I had my 15 minutes of fame. It seems like a dream now, though I'm pretty sure it happened. On that night a permanent line of code was written into my personal creed: If you can imagine it, and if you believe it, anything is possible.

Everything about 1968 was unusual, so that was the summer we had *two* Olympic Trials. The first one, a semifinal, was held in Los Angeles. The second one was held later at Lake Tahoe at the same altitude as Mexico City, where the Olympics would be held. There was talk of me going to the first Trials, but then I ran a prep race in Sacramento, aiming for the national two-mile record (8:48.4), and I crashed and burned, finishing an exhausted second place, and the decision was made: I should pass on the Trials. There would be other ones in the future when I was bettered prepared.

Those other Trials never came for me.

It had been a long season, and I was glad for a break. For the first time in months I took several days off running, spent time with my girlfriend at the beach in the waning days of an American Graffiti summer before leaving for college.

While I lazed, the world around me convulsed with change. A new company called Intel started making computer chips. (Did that have something to do with those odd punch cards?) The beloved pediatrician Benjamin Spock was convicted of counseling men on avoiding the draft. Outside the Miss American Pageant women threw bras, girdles, pots, and pans into a garbage can as a symbolic act of liberation. And in London the musical *Hair* opened, featuring naked performers on stage.

In 1968, the adults, the authority figures, seemed unsure of themselves. They were in unfamiliar territory, grasping at straws.

Days after I left for college, Chicago exploded again when thousands of anti-war protesters clashed with police in the streets near the site of the Democratic National Convention. The battle turned violent, with dozens injured, much of it captured on national TV.

In the fall of '68, college was a pot of water set to boil. Sit-ins, marches, and people with bullhorns were roiling the campus. I just wanted to do my homework and do my miles. The distractions were entertaining, but also frustrating. I had my student deferment from the draft, and I found it hard to relate to my contemporaries getting shot at thousands of miles away in Vietnam.

My notions about the world's problems were naive. Why can't the solutions be simple? Why can't we all follow the advice of the Beatles in their latest song "Hey, Jude?" Why can't we just "take a sad song and make it better"?

College running was a rude awakening. Kansas University had one of the best track teams in the nation — as well as the fierce expectations and competition to go with this status. Several teammates ranked nationally in their event, including Jim Ryun, the world record holder in the mile. Me being a high school state champ was no big deal — nearly everyone on our team was a state champ.

My training load blew up. My mileage went from 100 miles in the month before I left home to almost 400 during the first month of college. My cross country teammates and I got very fit very fast. Workouts were insanely competitive. I was holding my own, but every workout, every race, was a dogfight.

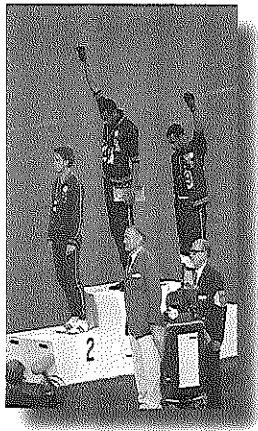
Fortunately, I had a buddy, a comrade in arms, my roommate Doug Smith, the rival I duelled months earlier in San Francisco. He turned out to be the funniest, the most mercurial person I'd ever encountered. This was lucky because college life in 1968 seemed on the verge of total chaos. That semester felt like we were constantly scrambling to keep up, like Lucy and Ethel at the chocolate factory. Doug's sense of humor helped me survive. He had a talent for seeing the crazy in things. And there was a lot of crazy to go around.

In 1968, the adults, the authority figures, seemed unsure of themselves. They were in unfamiliar territory, grasping at straws. One example: We had our first full track team meeting in October. A controversy had flared up, and we needed to talk about it. The blacks on our team wanted to have moustaches and beards, which was strictly against team rules. The coaches asked the team for opinions. We discussed all the pros and cons. Several teammates made impassioned statements. We freshmen sat wide-eyed and silent. Finally, the problem was settled. Our coaches handed down their rule change: The blacks could have facial hair, and the whites could not. Though the illogic was glaring, many felt this solution sounded reasonable. That was the Wonderland of 1968.

The only TV was the little black and white Zenith in our dorm lobby, and we track guys crowded around it to watch the Mexico City Olympics. Even this noble event had no immunity from the convulsions of that year. Before the Games opened, thousands of Mexican students demonstrated for a more democratic government — and they were met by federal troops who shot into the crowd, killing hundreds.

Inside the Olympic Stadium two US sprinters raised gloved fists on the medal stand during our national anthem. They wanted to bring attention to American inequalities, and they were promptly expelled from the Games.

Time magazine described the fractious Olympics as "Angrier, nastier, uglier."



Gold medalist Tommie Smith and bronze medalist John Carlos raised fists in protest at the Mexico City Olympics 50 years ago.

Fifty years later, all the volatile issues of that era remain with us — race, gender, war, democracy, terrorism. We continue to argue, to strive, to dream.

Still, as always, there were marvels: In the thin air of Mexico City, long jumper Bob Beamon sailed to an eye-popping distance. Quarter-miler Lee Evans exploded to a record that would stand for 20 years. And two of my heroes were shattered there. My Kansas teammate Jim Ryun was crushed in the 1,500 by his nemesis Keino, while my idol, the indomitable Ron Clarke, unused to the altitude, fell apart in the 10,000. After the race the great Clarke lay unconscious in the infield, and I turned away from the TV gang to hide my tears.

Our cross country team's final race of 1968 was the NCAA Championships in New York City's legendary Van Cortland Park. Our coach had a strategy. A key section of the race, about one mile in, would take place on a narrow trail. Therefore, his thinking was, you had to get out fast and grab a forward position early, because it would be hard to pass runners once you hit that trail. For days we practiced our strategy and come race day we executed our start perfectly. By the first turn, the half-mile mark, our entire team was several yards ahead of the field. But now we were wasted and had over five miles to go. When your race consists of one long train passing you, it is no fun. We ran on fumes.

By the end of this tumultuous year, America was staggering and shell-shocked. People angrily debated the latest scandal: An interracial couple kissed on *Star Trek*! Another jetliner, the 24th of the year, was hijacked to Cuba, and a madman, dubbed the Zodiac Killer, stalked northern California.

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As for me, my 1968 ended with the needle on empty. Back home on holiday break, I fought with my girlfriend. I stewed about my grades and my cross country times. I ran aimlessly through the woods, my spirit as flat as the frozen landscape. I jogged and thought of nothing, having little energy to make sense of any of it.

I couldn't recognize it then, but another transformation was underway, this one nonphysical. My head was cracked open. My 1968 gave rise to revelations.

My elders and my heroes were fallible. I needed to learn to trust myself and be guided by my own compass.

The world was wide. I'd made friends with teammates and fellow students from around the country. I'd traveled to meets in towns and cities all over America. I had seen things. I could no longer ignore the campus bullhorns and the nightly news that bespoke of a wider, more complicated world than fast laps on a Tartan track.

I still clung to the belief that there were no limits, that anything was possible, though now my life vest was pretty weather-beaten. Tempered by reality, the belief seemed more like an ideal.

The following spring, 1969, in Knoxville, Tennessee, at the NCAA Track and Field Championships, our team waged an epic battle against San Jose State. "Speed City" edged us by three points for the national title. I ran in a sweltering 6-mile race that was won easily by someone unknown the year before, a guy named Frank Shorter. In another race that June a kid broke the prep two-mile record I'd been shooting for. His name was Steve Prefontaine.

While I logged miles on dirt roads and fought the notorious Kansas winds, my country was battered by cultural winds. The Palestinian Liberation Organization proudly displayed posters of Bobby Kennedy's assassin. Gays fought police at the Stonewall Riot. Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. Charles Manson and his gang went on a killing spree. Four hundred thousand people traveled to a rock concert in upstate New York. Protesters and police clashed yet again in Chicago in the Days of Rage.

Somehow America persisted. Historians say that 1968 marked the peak of the turbulence of that era. Maybe 1968 toughened us.

Fifty years later, all the volatile issues of that era remain with us — race, gender, war, democracy, terrorism. We continue to argue, to strive, to dream.

I also learned to persist. Maybe my distance runner's mentality helped.

My 1968 left both scars and blessings.

Like many in my generation, I carry a sadness for my contemporaries who did not survive that year. It remains difficult to speak of that tragedy.

My running kept me safe and protected me from the worst excesses of that crazy time, and for that I am grateful. The things I learned from my running, things arcane and profound, I later shared with my own distance runners. Now some of my protégés themselves are coaches, and many have children who are runners.

My education — though it sometimes seemed pointless as I dodged clouds of tear gas — served me well. My eyes were opened to an outside world that was complex and fascinating. And I discovered callings.

My old buddy Doug — despite our fierce contests (or maybe because of them) — remains my trusty friend, as do several others from our memorable team.

As an added bonus, my lifelong habit for distance has brought one more rich reward: A good, honest workout still gives me solace and joy.

Rich Elliott has been a gravedigger, English teacher, dishwasher, textbook writer and editor, construction gofer, video producer, and track coach. His published work has mostly been in the field of sports nonfiction. He is the author of *The Competitive Edge: Mental Preparation for Distance Running* and the award-winning anthology *Runners on Running: The Best Nonfiction of Distance Running*. He also writes short fiction, and his stories have appeared in literary magazines such as *Indiana Voice Journal*, *Confrontation*, *Northwest Indiana Literary Journal*, and *Aethlon*. A collection of his work, *Duck and Cover: Eleven Short Stories*, a fictional memoir about growing up in the Sixties, is due out soon. He lives with his wife in Valparaiso, Indiana.