

The Thrill of Victory

In the spring of 1961 there was still a lot of activity on the football field at JHS. Not football, it was track season, and there was no track at JHS. So, under the direction of Coach Fisher, we ran laps around the edge of the grass playing field and ran sprints the length of the field, heading eastward, because that was uphill.

Nobody could do distance running, we were all sprinters. An 880 yard run was a "gasser", a 440 yard sprint was too much, and none of us were fast enough to compete in the 100 yard dash. But Coach Fisher found 4 of us who could run the 220 yard dash reasonable well so he formed up the 880 yard 4 by 4 relay team for competition.

By tradition, the fastest team member ran anchor leg (4th), the next fastest ran 1st, to get us off to a good start before passing the baton to the 2nd runner, and the middle two were skill team members because they had to both accept the pass of the baton and pass it successfully to the next runner. Terry Smail was lead, Tim Lavens (Sophomore) ran 2nd, Ron Woolley ran 3rd, and Jim Magarrell ran anchor leg. Jim not only had to be the fastest team member, but he also had to compete against the fastest member of all the other teams.

Each team ran the entire first leg of the relay within a lane. Starting positions were staggered by the amount of extra distance required to run around the longer curve. The track itself was 440 yards around, so each of us had half a lap to traverse, each running one curve. After the first leg of the relay the runners could change lanes to get closer to the inside where the distance was shorter, if they could get far enough ahead to do so. The baton exchange was critical; the pass had to be made from one very tired runner to the next starting runner while running at full speed without dropping the baton, which ended the race for that team (hence the famous expression, he dropped the baton). We practiced exchanges along the edge of the football field using the out of bounds line as the inside lane of our track. Coach Fisher had put some markers down in the end zone corners to provide rounded corners for our oval practice track.

Before starting the race the 1st and 3rd runners went to the starting line while the 2nd and 4th runners moved to their starting positions half way round the track. The 1st runners stayed in their lanes and completed that first exchange in that lane, but after that a referee would call out the lane positions for the next runner based upon which team was in the lead as they approached. So the next runners would scramble into the called lane and get ready for the baton exchange.

Track surfaces in 1961 were cinder, so we would arrive early at a meet and get the feel for running on cinders instead of grass, also check out the lanes going around the curves. We had won 1st place in the Big Seven conference, the District meet, and the regional meet. I don't remember those events very well except the regional. In that race we were in second place when I got the baton, and still in 2nd place when I passed it to Jim. I think I may have made up some of the difference during my leg, but no matter, Jim was blazing fast and we won all three of those qualifying races.

As the state meet approached we practiced light, just sprinting through the exchanges. It was total dedication to a cause. I remember that the student council had planned a swimming trip to Banberries down in Thousand Springs area of the Snake River Canyon. I asked the Coach about it and he said that I could attend, but could not go swimming the day before the meet. So I watched from the bleachers while everyone else was having fun — sacrifice.

So the day of the Idaho State Track Meet finally arrived and we went up to Boise to compete. While waiting for our turn they gathered all of the teams together for the drawing of the lanes. For some strange reason, the official had written the lane numbers on the cork lining the inside of pop bottle caps. Even stranger, each cap was a different brand.

Terry drew out a cap for our team — it was the very outside lane — lane 5 — the worst possible lane to get. It meant that after the 1st leg our team would have to make it across from lane 5 into lane 1 if we were going to win. To do that a runner had to run farther around the curve yet get far enough ahead to change lanes.

Terry and I went to the starting line area and he set up his starting blocks in the outside lane — way out in front of the others — but everyone knew that distance represented how much more curve he had to run, the total distance being the same for everyone. They positioned me back on the track at what would become the finish line for the 4th runner. I watched the race proceed from lane 5.

Terry got off to a good start, but the others quickly closed the gap as they ran the curve. They made a good exchange. I lost track of the race details as the official started moving us (the 3rd leg runners) into new lanes. He instructed me to get into the 3rd lane. I got ready as Tim approached, but as he came toward me having come through the curve, he was in 2nd place. So they told us to switch and I moved into the 2nd lane.

We made a perfect exchange. There was nothing else to do but drain every ounce of strength into the cinders of the track. As I ran toward the curve in the 2nd lane I gained some and was essentially side by side with the runner in the first lane as we went around the curve. As we finished the curve I could see Jim in the 2nd lane ready for my exchange. As I handed the baton to him we were essentially tied for first place, or perhaps just a smidge in 2nd. The exchange was perfect. I hollered with what little strength I had left, “go - go - go” and watched as Jim took off like a rocket. I then continued to watch Jim run while I bounced and leaped across the center of the field toward the finish line, screaming. Jim was in first place coming out of the final curve and was ahead by 5 or more yards. He finished increasing the lead further.

We did it! We won the Idaho State High School Track Meet in the 880 Yard 4 by 4 Relay. Not only that, but the timer announced over the loud speaker that we had set a new Idaho State Record in that event!

Awards were presented on a podium, which for relays consisted of 3 elevated benches, like in a bleacher, with 1st place being the highest. We scrambled up to the top bench — all smiles. The 2nd place team was one bench lower down and the 3rd place team just off the ground. The 4th place team stood next to them. We were in runner order on that top bench.

There was some delay in making the presentation, but no matter, we were happy to spend more time on that top podium bench. The delay continued and there began to be some murmuring in the crowd. Then the announcer came over the loud speaker to tell the crowd that Jerome had been disqualified on a lane violation. Suddenly all the other track teams that were assembled on the podium stepped up a rung, and we were unceremoniously bumped off the top and landed on the ground. Our smiles turned to puzzlement in disbelief as we looked at each other. The officials kind of pushed us off to the side and proceeded to award the medals to the next three teams remaining on the podium.

I never got an explanation of what had happened. No film to review. No opportunity to protest. The “thrill of victory” had suddenly turned into “the agony of defeat”.

High School finished shortly thereafter and we all had a signing party with our yearbooks. I just found mine (in honor of the 60th year anniversary) and looked through it again, this time a little more carefully than before. Jim Magarrell had signed mine on the football page. I include it herein as a tribute to Jim. Here is what he wrote:

“ Hi ya Ron,

Never forget all the fun we’ve had in football and track. I want you to know that I’ve really felt honored in knowing such a swell S.B.P. as you, and as good a runner as you. Even though our state record in the 880-yard relay didn’t go into the books, we know ourself that we beat them, didn’t we? Here is wishing you the best of luck in everything you encounter in your many prosperous years to come.

A pal always,

Jim Magarrell

(“Maggie”) “

That sentiment expresses the kind of guy that I knew and enjoyed being friends with my senior year. He was a very nice person — and proven to be a blazingly fast runner.

I’ve been asked more recently why this near triumph was not better known among our classmates. I believe that the most logical explanation is that the 880 Yard Relay Race at the State competition in Boise happened at the very end of the semester, just before graduation in 1961. And because of the ending, there was not much talk about it between team members and classmates. Track was not like it is now, a ruling by one judge was final. There was no instant replay. No coaches disputes. That’s just the way it was, and the way it ended.

Discovering Jim’s entry in my yearbook was like discovering a treasure, it really made me happy. And so I adopt his positive outlook on this nearly forgotten painful experience, ***“Even though our state record in the 880-yard relay didn’t go into the books, we know ourself that we beat them, didn’t we?”***

by Ron Woolley

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