

Looking Back On Tennessee's National Champs

A recent reunion in Knoxville brought together Tennessee's 1972 N.C.A.A. National Cross-Country champions. The author looks back at that unpredictable season.

by Ron Addison



The Tennessee Volunteers—10 years later. Author Ron Addison is third from left, kneeling next to Doug Brown.

No one was as surprised as we were. No one expected Tennessee to win the N.C.A.A. Cross-Country title. We won the 1972 championship to the surprise of everyone.

I remember showing up at training camp in the Smokey Mountains before the season started. I met the other members of the team and none of them gave me any indication we would finish the season as National champs. As we trained together we became good friends. We learned about each other. It was a team never lacking in spirit. Coach Stan Huntsman encouraged this by not holding back our competitive or adventurous spirits. Just show up for practice every day at 6:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. and the rest of the day was yours.

Captain Doug Brown and side kick Danny Zoeller also tried hard to keep our spirits up. Brown had just come back from the Munich Olympics and almost decided to sit out the season for a needed rest. Zoeller almost sat out the season too; he hadn't trained in the months before the season and practically died from exhaustion and sore muscles after two weeks training in the Smokey "Mountains."

I thought they needed a rest from life as well as running. I never could understand how they could show up for morning practice after being out till 2:00 a.m. night after night. It must have been the naps they took while they were supposed to be in class that kept them going. Maybe late nights were the reason Brown was always late. We never went on a trip that we didn't have to wait for Brown. He was late for every meeting and trip but he never had that problem once he arrived at the race site—being our number one man all year and placing second at the nationals.

I never understood how our second man, Roberto Lenerduzzi, kept running either. He was also up until 2:00 a.m. every night, studying. Carrying twenty-one hours as an electrical engineering student and maintaining a 3.5 G.P.A. isn't easy. Needless to say, we saw Roberto only at practice.

There was only one guy on the team that actually liked to train. At the time I couldn't figure him out; I still can't. I actually went to bed hoping for rain so I'd have an excuse to skip morning

practice. At 6:30 a.m. we'd all be looking out at the rain getting ready to go back to bed and here comes Phil Bonfiglio in a rainsuit. I don't know how he would do it but he would make us all feel guilty and out into the rain we would go. I think we all felt a little sorry for him because he was a little crazy. After all, he had run a marathon!

Bob Bentz hated to train as much as Phil liked it. Every group of guys has its chief complainer and Bentz was ours. Bob was great to have around. Every team likes to have a lot to complain about. If we couldn't find anything to complain about, Bentz would find something for us.

John Angel (his real name) and I were the straight men of the team. We had short hair and looked responsible. We were quiet, hardworking and respectful. No one would suspect us of any wrongdoing and we worked hard to maintain that reputation because there had been a wave of crime on campus that fall. Two male students were seen walking the halls of the women's dorms during a power outage. Another time somebody planted fireworks with time fuses throughout the dorm. The women's dorm suffered a rash of prank phone calls resulting in a large number of girls emptying their closets in anticipation of maintenance men coming to replace some conduits in the wall behind the closets. The wave of pranks remained unsolved.

The season itself started out as a failure. Our first couple of meets were mediocre. We even suffered an early season loss to arch rival Kentucky. Coach Huntsman really let us have it after that loss. Being a freshman, I had never seen Coach Huntsman angry before. Now I had my chance. During his tongue lashing even the always excitable Brown was subdued. This inspirational talk marked a turning point in our season. We had always been hard workers, but now we renewed our commitments. This, combined with two months of Coach Huntsman's workouts behind us, put us in good shape for the Southeastern Conference Championships.

There is something mystical about Southeastern Conference meets at Tennessee. Being a freshman, I had never experienced it before, but I could feel

the tension and anticipation building in the days leading up to the Conference. All everyone talked about was "the Conference." People I didn't even know kept asking me how we were going to do at "the Conference." "How's Alabama this year?" "Are you guys ready?" "Is Florida any good?" These questions echoed through my mind at night keeping me awake. The more the pressure built, the more confident we became as a team. It must have been the power of positive thinking. After all, everyone knows that Tennessee never loses the Conference and it was a tradition we guarded jealously. Our aggressive attitude, along with the rest of what Stan (Huntsman) finally gave us, made us feel great. We couldn't wait to travel to Alabama and take care of business.

Take care of business we did as Tennessee placed five in the top twelve and Doug Brown won the individual title. We had done it. I didn't quite yet comprehend what we had done, but we had done it.

The next week was tough. The mental letdown was tremendous and Stan hammered us at practice. He said it was important to get in a good week of work if we wanted to do well at nationals. It turned out to be a brilliant strategy, but we didn't think so at the time. We struggled to a fourth place finish at the district qualifying meet—being the last team from our district to qualify for the nationals.

One of the workouts we had done just before the district was exceptionally hard and geared toward the national meet. We were to run a two-mile with the first mile under 4:20. The second mile we were to hang on. After that we did a couple of more miles at race pace, about 4:40. This was to simulate going out hard as they always do at the national meet. The other teams at the district meet thought we had peaked out at the S.E.C. meet, but we were actually still reeling from the effects of this workout.

It started again, the much needed physical rest along with the mental buildup. This time people were asking, "Where are the nationals?", "How's Oregon this year?", and "How are you guys going to do?" No one really felt we would do well at nationals, they were

just being friendly. However we did expect to do well. By well, we meant the top five. Every person on the seven-man team would have to run well, but we felt we could do it.

We traveled to Houston for the race in a university-owned twin-engine plane that had half the team looking for airsickness bags. We never did find any. After checking into our hotel we drove to the course. We found it totally flooded from a week of continuous rain. And there was no letup in sight. We didn't need Bentz to point out the negative aspects of this trip.

When we awoke the morning of the race it was still raining. We gathered in one of the rooms for the pre-race team meeting. Everyone was nervously laughing and joking to relieve the tension. More than one guy stuck himself as we pinned our race numbers to our jerseys.

Stan always stressed mental preparation and mental toughness. He said the bad conditions would dampen spirits as well as bodies. Most athletes here he said were dreading racing in the cold rain and mud. This mental attitude would adversely affect their performances. Bad weather even discourages people from warming up properly and hurts them before they even get to the starting line. By making a positive effort to forget the conditions, warming up properly, and running an aggressive race, Stan said we could place in the top five. Our assistant, Mike Tommasello, chipped in with a "we could win today." We were all too nervous and scared to laugh at his unrealistic prediction, but we exchanged knowing glances.

Sure enough, the race went as Stan had predicted. At the mile I was in 30th place in 4:20. Not to panic though, I just had to hold on as we had practiced. I saw Angel and Zoeller together just ahead of me. I tried to catch them, but to no avail. Eventually I lost sight of them. It left me with a lonely feeling in the middle of 300 muddy, soaked, and miserable fellow runners. No, I couldn't look at them as fellow runners, they were the competition. I knew Brown and Lenarduzzi must be with the leaders and that Zoeller and Angel were still ahead of me. That left me with the awesome responsibility of being fifth man.

When adding up the team's first five finishers with the low score winning, every man is important. Even the sixth and seventh men can displace some of the other team's top five. Because five runners actually score, however, there is a lot of importance placed on that number five man. When you win it's because the number five man came through. When you lose or do poorly as a team, it's because the number five man blew it.

I was alone no longer. Stan was screaming at me. "You're 40th, hold on! Don't let that guy pass you, pick it up, lower your shoulders, get that guy, relax, concentrate. You were 9:10 at two miles just as we practiced." I wished I had more mud in my ears so I couldn't hear him. I'd finally leave him behind and he'd show up again. I still haven't figured out how he kept showing up all over the course. The rest of the team all claim he was yelling at them the entire race, also.

Everytime he saw me though, I was worse off than before. "Hold on, you're 50th. Keep pushing, you're 60th. You're 70th, the finish is close. You're 80th, don't let anyone else pass you."

Finally, I saw the finish and sprinted for all I was worth. Then I was in the finish chute, leaning on some stranger. No, not a stranger now, but a fellow runner. Brown was out of the chute already and he came jogging over. He reported he had finished second and we had placed in the top five as a team. That was super. Brown must have run a great race to take second. To place in the top five teams made the months of workouts and races worthwhile.

Ron Martin of William & Mary was the guy I was leaning on. I knew their team was supposed to do well and that he was one of their best runners. I was surprised when he said that he was their third man and he was flabbergasted when I told him that I was our fifth man.

Lenarduzzi then came by and said he thought we were fourth. He had also run a super race—finishing 27th. I was still being processed through the chute when Assistant Coach Tommasello came by to say we may have finished third. Fantastic!

After we had all been processed and were out of the chute, Stan said we were second on his quick score card.

Unbelievable! We're all in a group, muddy, soaked, and looking like drowned rats when Bonfiglio sneaked behind the scorer's table to take a peek.

Angel and Zoeller were relating to me how they had run most of the race together before Danny had pulled away over the last mile. I hadn't seen them since early in the race. Danny had finished 42nd and John had run the race of his life to place 56th. Not bad for homegrown Knoxville talent. I had officially finished 82nd.

We were trying to determine how Stan had been everywhere at once during the race, when we heard a whoop of joy. We looked up to see Phig sprinting toward us yelling, "We won! We won!" A moment of uncomprehending silence and then more screams of joy. Miracle of miracles. Stan's words of wisdom had paid off. We had prepared properly, ran aggressively and taken advantage of the poor conditions. We had been better prepared to race than any other team. We had beaten East Tennessee State 136 to 142. Their first three men were 1st, 3d, and 15th, but they had no depth.

This past November we had a ten-year reunion in Knoxville. Everyone was there and we had a great time. We've scattered quite a bit and do not see each other very often. No matter how far we scatter the thread of that experience will always be a part of our fabric stretching from that day in November of 1972 to wherever we may venture.

The last morning of the reunion we were to gather at 10:00 a.m. on the track for a re-enactment of the team picture. Everyone was present at ten sharp, except for Brown. His thread must have been a little loose as he was twenty-five minutes late again. Some things never change.

Ron Addison now lives in Eugene, OR where he works in running promotions for NIKE. He and his wife, Sue, both compete for Athletics West, their specialties being the the steeplechase and 800/1500 meters respectively.