

Bill McChesney

'There is no reason not to be happy'

By Doug Levy
Of the Emerald

The 5000-meter race was about to begin, and a buzz travelled through Hayward Field. It seems Oregon track fans always have a special feeling about distance races.

Bill McChesney, the Ducks all-everything in the distances, would win the race. It was that simple. The fans knew, the other runners in the race knew it, and McChesney knew it.

Yet, if someone is looking at McChesney for the first time, they would have trouble believing anything of the sort. He stands only 5-6, weighs only 115 lbs. and is dwarfed by the bigger runners surrounding him.

But when the race starts, McChesney becomes the epitome of the distance runner. He surprises people. As a matter of fact, McChesney has made a lifetime out of surprising people.

• "Billy" is a dwarf of a child. As a seventh grader he weighs only 63 lbs. Being that size, organized sports are out of the question, so he turns to running.

And why not? Brothers Tom and Steve (both of whom went on to become high school all-Americans) are already running, so Bill decides to try. All that results is six state championships for South Eugene High School, three in the two-mile and three in cross country, along with a 1976 state meet record in the two-mile (8:50.9).

• McChesney is in the 1980 NCAA 5,000. Sure, he's had a good year, but these are the NCAAs, and nobody expects too much of him. So what happens? McChesney churns out a 13:47.96 clocking and speeds to a third-place finish and all-America status.

• The 1980 Olympic Trials are at Hayward Field. The United States will not go to the Olympic games, but

some of the world's finest track and field athletes are here to prove they would have belonged. Bill McChesney is one of those athletes. He thrills the local crowd with a third-place finish, making the team, as he says, "by the skin of my teeth."

• The 1981 Northwest Relays at Hayward Field. McChesney, redshirting this track season, has been sharpening his skills in Europe. He has run a 13:18 in Norway, and today he plans to go after the American 5,000 record (13:15.06). He doesn't get it, but oh, he comes so close with a blistering 13:15.77 that electrifies the Hayward Field crowd. "The highlight of my career — the hometown kid makes good," he says of the race.

To hear McChesney tell his story, one would think it was all a matter of course. "As a kid, I was extremely small. I can't imagine how small I must have been. Physically, I had the type of body to be a runner, then I found out I was very good at it."

"Plus I had a very good junior high coach, Jerry Andrews, and of course, Harry Johnson at South. Between those two, I feel I got the finest coaching a young distance runner can get in the whole country, if not the world. Then, of course, I came to Oregon and the coaching expertise continued."

The funny part of that story is that McChesney almost didn't come to Oregon. The urge to get away from home led him close to signing with the University of Arizona, but the atmosphere of Eugene kept him home. "There are not very many towns where you have people wanting to grow up and be distance runners," McChesney explains with a laugh. "Eugene, I believe, is unique."

His father, Bill Sr., himself an excellent high school and college runner and current holder of the age-group

mile record for 53-year-olds (4:51), adds, "when it came down to it (McChesney signing with Oregon), it was Hayward Field and those doggone fans."

Another factor in McChesney's staying home was the late Steve Prefontaine. "He came to visit when I was in junior high school, and that inspired me," the younger McChesney recalls. "I'm glad I came here. I remember the first time I went away to a dual meet. I couldn't believe there weren't 6,000 fans there. Eugene is definitely different."

Bill Sr. and his wife Marcia never pushed McChesney to go to Oregon. "Like a lot of kids, he kind of wanted to get away, but we're obviously glad he did what he did," says the elder McChesney.

Once at Oregon, McChesney joined a distance corps that included Alberto Salazar, Rudy Chapa, Ken Martin and Don Clary. McChesney had run against Chapa and Salazar in junior races, and a rivalry between the three was bound to occur.

McChesney explains: "Rudy and Al were my own age, and we'd run similar times in high school. There was a problem the first couple of years because we were so close in ability that we raced too much in workouts. I honestly think we wasted some of our better efforts during those workouts. After a couple of years we realized we had to work together and become friends rather than rivals."

Now McChesney has only praise concerning Salazar's present success. "I think he's fabulous — he's deserved every win he's gotten. I really admire Alberto."

The senior also has praise for another man who has made running at Oregon a little easier — coach Bill Dellinger. "My first couple of years here, I was from a

regimented high school program, so I had to get used to Bill's structure, which was a little looser," says McChesney. "It takes a couple of years, and that's why we have what's called the junior blossom. Ken Martin hadn't done much, and then his junior year, boom. And look at Jim Hill now."

The relationship between McChesney and Dellinger now is more one of friends than of athlete and coach. As McChesney says, "He came up to me after I got back from Europe and told me, 'You're a man now, you know where you're going. Think of me more as your advisor than your coach.'"

1982 has been a tough year for McChesney. Sidelined by an Achilles tendon injury in the winter and slowed by a hip pointer this spring, McChesney has been able to run no faster than 13:51.68 in the 5,000 — the time he posted against Oregon State Saturday. Still, McChesney is not the kind of guy who lets a few setbacks worry him. "I'm the kind of person who doesn't panic by adversity. I have had to overcome obstacles before, and I'll do it again. I have a real ability to surprise people."

Besides, bearing down has never been a problem for McChesney. "I just try to think about pace, technique and relax," he says of his races. "There will be a time when I'll hit a physical peak. My best years have generally come when I was supposedly having a down year."

In the future, McChesney hopes to make the 1984 Olympic team. "I definitely want to make the Olympic team, and I think we'll go in 1984," he says. Despite the amateur system in the United States, where a runner often has to train and juggle a job at the same time, McChesney bears no grudges.

"Yeah, it can be really hard to train, have a job and be married, but I think the system is slowly changing."

The Eugene native will go after the 5,000 meters in 1984, but he hasn't ruled out the 10,000. "I've only run it (the 10,000) once since last year — I got a 27:30.47, and I let the pace slide. I'm sure I can run it much faster." He adds, "actually, my major goal is to see how close I can get my mile time to 3:50 (he has run 3:56). Everything keys off the mile."

After graduation, McChesney wants to become a chiropractor, working with athletes, and he plans to live and train in Eugene. He and his wife, Nanci, have been married for eight months, and it has given him a better perspective on running. "It helps immensely," he says. "And, you know, I'd like to run faster, but if I don't, the world is not going to stop."

At the moment, McChesney is optimistic about himself and this year's Oregon team. "Myself, I'd like to get fit and be a real factor in the NCAAs. The team? I think we have a good big-meet team. We have an outside chance (of winning the Pac-10 championship). A lot of our guys have held back, and maybe they can come on later."

McChesney has had a superb career at Oregon: all-American honors in cross country and track, a third-place NCAA finish in the 1980 5,000-meters, a third-place finish at the Olympic trials, and the 13:15.77 at last year's Northwest Relays, which made him the second fastest American ever at 5,000-meters. But most importantly, Bill McChesney is a man who values the records for what they are, and he is a happy man.

"I have no regrets," he says. "I've been given a lot of talent and a good mind. There is no reason not to be happy."

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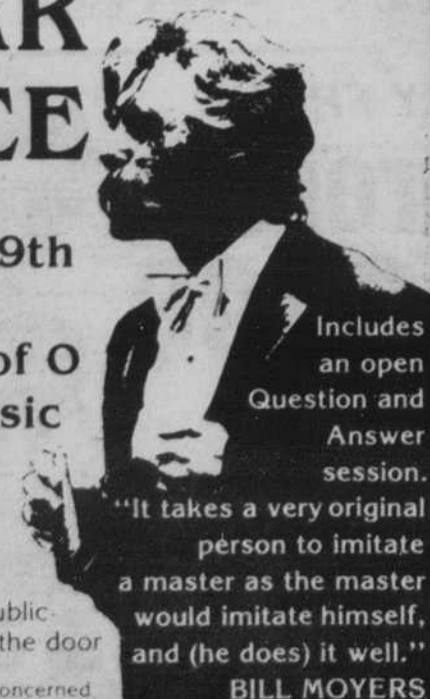
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