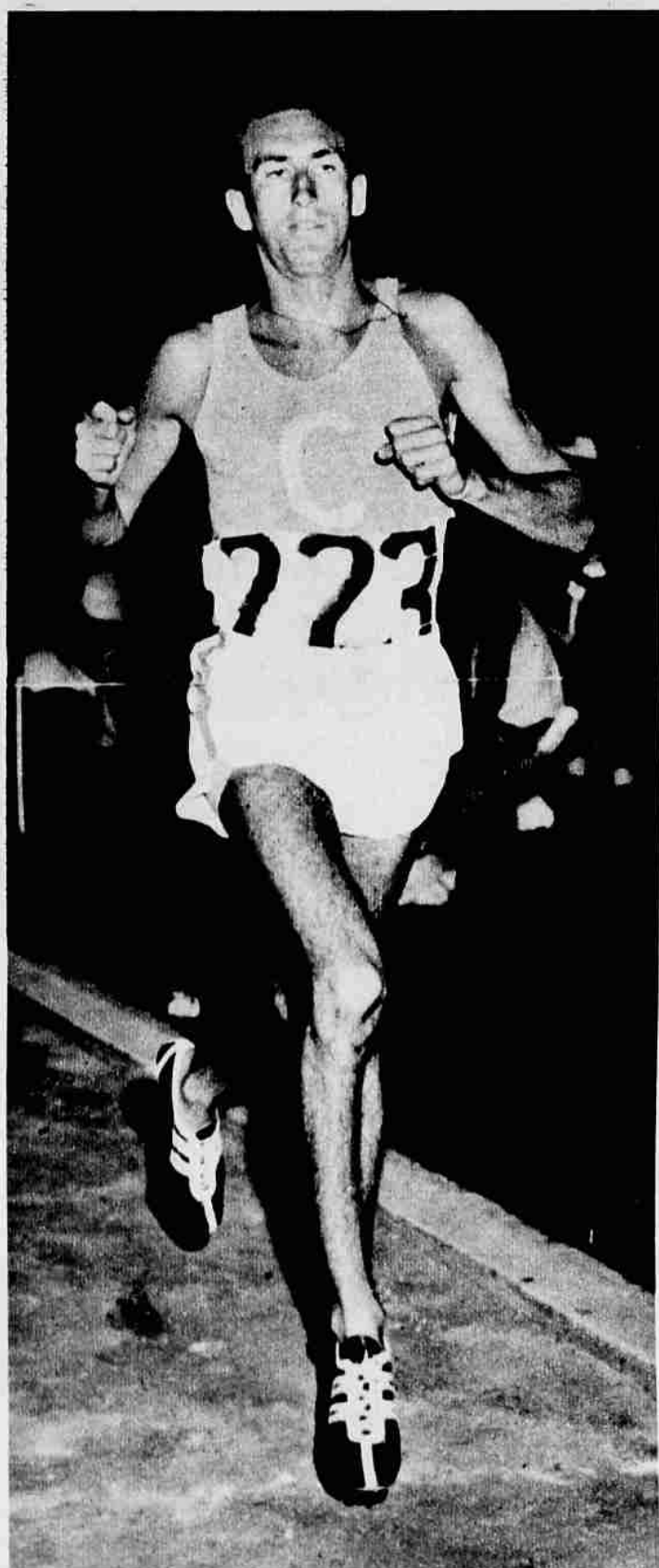


Herb Elliott Says:

"Americans are too soft!"

by William Barry Furlong



Herb Elliott comes in first again in the mile run, leaving behind those with less "staying power." Is there a lesson for Americans in this?

Are Americans too soft? Have they lost that spirit that leads to greatness—the Spartan spirit of sacrifice?

They have—at least according to Herb Elliott, the slender Australian youth who's become the world's greatest miler. His diagnosis of our ills in track may foreshadow the problem we face in maintaining "staying power" in the race for survival.

"A lot of chaps can run the first half in two minutes," says Elliott in analyzing the demands of the mile run. "But running the second half constitutes the real test." America has not turned out a world champion miler in recent years because, he says, our runners haven't made sacrifices to meet the test of "the second half."

The ominous question is whether our failure in the mile reflects our possible decline in history.

Elliott comes from a young country that is vigorous and virile—as America was in its youth. When Elliott and his coach, bright-eyed bantam Percy Cerutti, visited Los Angeles last Summer, they were shocked at the difference between the spirit of their young country and the frenetic, nerve-jangling atmosphere of ours. They were amazed at the "hurrying, scurrying"; at the "pasty look of pampered children"; at "six-month-old babies propped in front of television sets."

To Elliott and Cerutti, this seemed symptomatic of America's flabbiness. For Elliott's own path to greatness was a model of sacrifice, a resolute triumph over indifference and self-indulgence.

Such discipline has made Elliott, at 21, tops in his field. Last year in Dublin, he set an astonishing world record of 3:54.4 for the mile and became the first non-American to be named "Male Athlete of the Year" by the Associated Press.

None of this came easily to Elliott, who admits to laziness. As a teen-ager he had a taste for long nights and short beers. Shortly after graduating from high school, he broke his right foot and abandoned a career in track—though he'd been a brilliant high-school miler. Instead he went to work as a door-to-door salesman.

In November, 1956, the Elliott family flew from

their home in Perth to see the Olympics in Melbourne. The inspiring wins of Ireland's Ron Delany in the "Olympic mile" (1,500 meters) and Russia's Vladimir Kuts in the 5,000-meter and 10,000-meter races determined Elliott to overcome his indolence.

He went to a wind-swept, desolate tongue of land south of Melbourne where iron-willed Percy Cerutti had his training camp which has produced most of Australia's great runners.

Cerutti set out a devastating regimen for Elliott. Day after day, young Herb ran—sometimes 12 miles, sometimes 20 or 25 miles daily—across the desolate beaches, ankle-deep sand, and frigid surf. Hour after hour, he lifted weights or churned up and down a steep 80-foot sand dune—sometimes as often as 42 times in succession.

He went on a diet. For breakfast he'd have oats or dried figs, bananas, raisins, and walnuts. He learned to sacrifice, defy pain, drive beyond previous goals.

"The pain is something real, especially when you're not fit," Herb says. "Three or four times a week it hurts so much that you're dying to stop. Your muscles are screaming but you keep going. It's a matter of will power."

This was not the whole of his life. He had a job as clerk for an oil company. He had a girl he planned to marry this Spring (and did). He had a program for learning and appreciating the larger values in life; ambitious to take advantage of a scholarship to Cambridge University, he undertook a special study program to bolster his academic rating.

What did all this gain him? A measure of greatness but, even more important, the private pleasure of accomplishment. He had triumphed over the mind's constant plea for ease, mediocrity, self-indulgence. He had, through will power, made the most of the gifts God gave him.

It also made him sensitive to softness and to a people who value pleasure more than life itself. He sees such softness in America. He offers this remedy: "If Americans want to run, they'll have to deny themselves of what the body wants."

His lesson, offered in terms of track, may be one on which our survival depends.

Cover:

Ben Deason's cover painting might well illustrate two special features in this issue—"Why Parents Should Encourage Young MARRIAGES" by Philip H. Hines (page 8) and the short story, "The Night Before the Wedding" (page 20).

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