

Just a skinny kid who ran and ran

By Don Lindstrom
State Journal sports reporter

Back in the 1930's at Milwaukee's Grant Street Grade School, a skinny little kid used to outrun classmates to stake a claim on a baseball diamond so he and his friends could play ball during lunch breaks.

"Thus began the development of one of America's greatest milers — Don Gehrmann."

Before he was through, Gehrmann had won three straight National Collegiate Athletic Association mile championships, 39 consecutive major mile races and 15 Big Ten Conference titles in cross country and track. He broke world indoor and outdoor 1,000-yard records, participated on the U.S. team in the 1948 London Olympics and fashioned a 4 minute, 53 second mile before the advent of the sub-four-minute mile by Britain's Roger Bannister.

"I was always quick. I loved baseball and participated in athletics, even as early as kindergarten," said Gehrmann. "But I guess my running really started when I had to 'save' a diamond by being first in the infield with a bat in my hand."

"I remember that I ran home for lunch (about a mile), ate quickly and then ran back again, all in 15 minutes, to save the diamond. That was my first experience at running."

Proud to be honored

It seems like a fantasy. Now, almost 30 years after his last race, Gehrmann was inducted last month into the Wisconsin Athletic Hall of Fame. In 1976 he was also inducted into the Madison Sports Hall of Fame.

"I was particularly proud to be honored in my home town (Milwaukee), but really the greatest thrill was wearing that 'Wisconsin' emblazoned uniform while competing. I'm Wisconsin-bred, competed for my home-state school. I'm very proud of Wisconsin."

"I always tried to keep athletics in the proper perspective as an amateur sport. My family, friends and work are more important and give me more pride, but I did the best I could when I competed, and after keeping a low profile, I admit it's very enjoyable to be recognized again after so many years."

Gehrmann, who received his bachelor's degree from the University of Wisconsin and his master's from UW-Milwaukee, has been a supervisor in the State Department of Public Instruction in Madison since 1968 after coaching for 13 years at Wausonata East High School.

The 5-foot-4, 130-pound lad with a giant-sized heart would certainly be running sub-four-minute miles with the likes of Sebastian Coe, Steve Ovett and Steve Scott were he in his prime today.

In his day, he burned up cinder and brick-composition tracks from New York to California. He even finished ahead of the famous Bannister a couple of times before the British star broke the four-minute barrier.

He was devastatingly versatile. He usually entered the mile, two-mile and relay, but was equally adept at 1,000 yards, the 800 and even the 400.

Nobody figured the Milwaukee Pulaski High School product with spindly legs and spectacles for a world-class runner until he stepped onto the track. Then he convinced all skeptics.

"I guess quickness came early in



Don Gehrmann

the grades and social centers where we played ball," Gehrmann said. "We played a tag game and it enhanced my balance and ability to cut quickly."

"In the 10th grade at Pulaski, I went out for football for two weeks, but I weighed only 110 (pounds) and it wasn't for me. The only other fall sport was cross country, so I ran. We practiced around the lake course, 24 laps to a mile, and I could maneuver turns. That helped me at Wisconsin."

"In the old Annex (next to what is now the Red Gym) we had four big posts near the track. Runners had to lean in, then out, and I seemed to do that better than anyone. I remember my best practice mile (4:06.1) in 1948 was on that old UW Annex track."

At Pulaski, Gehrmann ran low hurdles and long jumped, but was a state champion in the mile. On one occasion, he trailed by a half-lap when receiving the baton in the four-mile relay, then turned in a blistering 34-second first 440-lap.

"I was invited to run a special high school half-mile in the Central Collegiate (college) meet, and I ran 1:38.0 in 1945. That was less than a second off the state record. It surprised me because I ran it so easy. I remember I jumped the gun, but in those days you weren't disqualified. The starter just made you step back a yard on the second try. Because of that I was behind most of the first lap."

Gehrmann always preferred to run the indoor circuit because he liked the "close feel of the crowd and the board track seemed to be an advantage."

"The mile was always the big event at Madison Square Garden. Fans knew track and I often received standing ovations while in warm-up laps. All the national athletes were played as runners were introduced. It was something special."

Gehrmann came to Wisconsin and promptly won 15 Big Ten titles and three NCAA track championships. He was second twice in the NCAA Cross Country Championships. On two occasions, he won the Big Ten cross country meet and then during the indoor season won the 880 mile and anchored the winning mile relay. That, according to many track coaches, would now be worth "four to five scholarships."

He finished his collegiate career with 37 victories in 58 races from 880 yards up to two miles. He also ran in 34 relay races, mostly as the anchor runner, and helped bring the Badgers 20 victories. His list of triumphs included the famous Wanamaker Mile, Cunningham Mile, Bankers Mile and the Washington Star Games. Three times

he was named outstanding performer at the Drake Relays and is a member of the Relays Hall of Fame.

A remarkable aspect of Gehrmann's collegiate career was that he never concentrated on the mile. He was brilliant in the Pacific Coast-Big Ten dual meets. In both 1949 and 1950 he won the 880 and mile, and anchored a winning mile relay.

At the '48 Olympics he ran seventh in the 1,500 meters as a 20-year-old sophomore. To him it may have been a disappointment, but it didn't push his Olympic experience off the top of his career highlights list.

"It was a rainy day and the track was completely under water," he remembered. "It wasn't my kind of track. Because of my speed I had to have something to dig into, and it wasn't there."

"I ran a decent race, considering the circumstances. I was leading some of the way and we were all close going into the last turn. Then I slipped and went down to one knee. I finished, but I was too far behind. My strategy was to wait until the last turn to make my move — that's always the way I won my races."

"But I was too young then to run in that kind of competition. My peak was still ahead. If I had had more experience I would have been hard to beat. Going from Pulaski High to the Olympics was a real big jump."

A few hotdogs, a soda

Following his 1,000-yard victory in the 1952 British Games at London's White City Stadium, he retired to enjoy a few hotdogs and soda. An American runner scheduled for the 440 injured his foot and meet officials asked Gehrmann if he would run because they wanted a U.S. competitor. He agreed.

"I ran relaxed, even in heavy rain, and that 440 was over in a hurry. I finished with a -47.9. I guess British writers couldn't get over the fact that a miler was eating something he shouldn't and then still went out and won the 440. It was one of my most memorable races."

During his heyday he set world marks in the 1,000 (2:08.2) indoors at the Garden and fashioned a 4:03.3 in the 1951 Wanamaker Mile. In 1952, he was selected the nation's outstanding athlete and won the New York Track Writers Association award. He was also honored as the Intercollegiate Conference Athletic Association outstanding miler during the first 50 years (1901-1950) of conference competition.

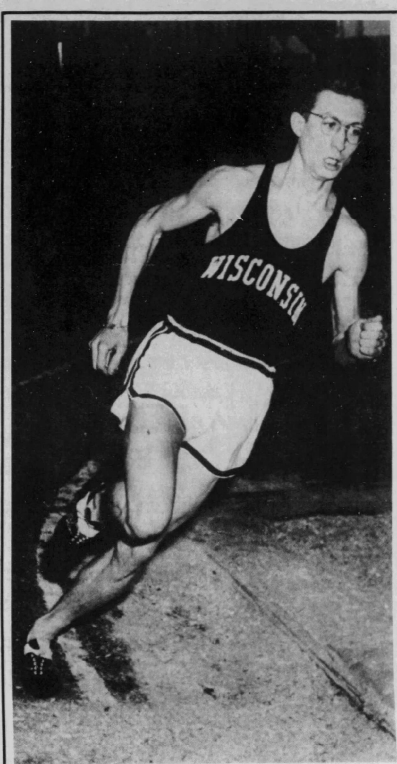
One of Gehrmann's top thrills happened at Camp Randall Stadium in 1950 when he ran the 880 in 1:30.7 in the Big Ten-Pacific Coast meet, then followed with a 48.5-second 440 in the relay.

"People still talk about that relay," said Gehrmann. "It's funny how many thought I ran the anchor leg. What most remember is that I started 30 yards back and finished ahead, but I gave the baton to Luke Collins, and he went on to win easily."

Gehrmann always respected his opponents and two of the most notable were Wendy Gross, a Milwaukee South Division runner, and Michigan's Herb Barton.

"Gross was the state mile champ, and he was the one I envied in high school. I beat him the first time I ran, and he never beat me in the mile. Later, he entered the 880 and won the city championship."

"The finest competitor I had while at Wisconsin was Barton. He had a



A Gehrmann specialty: handling a corner on cinders.

great sprint, and he also made the 1948 Olympic team.

"After my collegiate days I ran against Fred Will, the FBI man, who came down to my event. He was a three-miler on up and had run the Olympic 10,000."

"They met three times in the old Journal Games at the Milwaukee Arena. One of his regrets is that he lost to Will in two of those races, and claimed, 'Chances are I ran the poorest races in Milwaukee than anywhere in the world, and I feel badly about that.'"

Strategy played a major part of those indoor board miles, like today, Gehrmann, who never ran "angry," did have to maneuver in a number of attempts to keep from being pushed to the outside lanes. He remembers that it was former Villanova star Stewart Ray of the New York Athletic Club who finally ended his string of 39 straight mile victories.

Gehrmann found it difficult to give up running in 1952. Family and work responsibilities hastened the end of his

track career as he just missed, by one place, earning a berth on the 1952 Olympic team.

"You know, at the time of those Los Angeles trials I was almost relieved at not making it (Olympic team). It was my third weekend of going to California. I was a little tired of track. I really didn't feel badly about not going (to Helsinki)."

He taught and coached one year at Milwaukee University School and 13 at Wausonata East.

"I always wanted to coach. We had some exceptional athletes at East, some state champions and a medley relay team which ranked third in the nation. In cross country, we usually won the area meets."

"I remember feeling very proud of several youngsters. I discovered that many cross country runners gain immeasurable confidence and motivation even in one year. People in individual sports, like cross country, usually are strong on academics, because they emerge with individual incentives."

"Although times have changed, there's still no change in the attitude of champions, who still put out more. I believe that cross country is a sport where it's a one-by-one concentration of yourself. That's why I've always tried to maintain a role in the Wisconsin cross country banquet (UW co-chairman), because I know it's so meaningful to these athletes."

Gehrmann admits he still misses

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coaching, but felt in 1986 it was time to move on.

"There's a great deal of psychology in the running sports, knowing the opposition, manipulating individuals," he said. "There are many areas where a coach can improve a runner and set up training programs to each one's capabilities."

What could Gehrmann, in his prime, do today?

Current running conditions, training and facilities are a far cry from those in his day.

"I would just love to run today on tracks that don't move. Those cinders (in his day) were soft, like running on small, black marbles at times, and we often ran on water-softened tracks. We had to use more muscle and we also ran 11 months of the year, even into July. But I never had leg problems, and I never overtrained, because practices were only 2½ miles. Now, runners go 10 to 20 miles a day."

His current sports interest is tennis. He never liked jogging, calling it work, not fun. "I left that behind a long time ago."

Gehrmann, now about 150 pounds, feels, like many, he's overweight. That's much different than his collegiate running weight, or the 80 or 90 pounds he weighed when he was "stalking out baseball diamonds."

Gehrmann married his high school sweetheart, Delores, and they are parents of three sons and two daughters, and the grandparents of seven.

Barth 'retirement' challenged

As a former student, player and friend of John Barth I am quite upset over the (Dec. 2) article in The Wisconsin State Journal announcing Mr. Barth's retirement as director of athletics and chairman of the (athletic) department at UW-Platteville as of Jan. 1, 1982. If I am deciphering the article correctly, it was not a voluntary retirement. When a man so respected by people all over the state can't announce his resignation when he wants to, where he wants to, and if he wants to with grace and dignity, someone has some explaining to do and from what I understand it is Chancellor Warren Carrier who is talking out of each side of his mouth. Carrier is quoted in the article. "We feel that he (Barth) has requested." What request? Certainly not to end his years of service this way! When asked to explain his statement, Chancellor Carrier responded with "No comment." As an administrator myself, this is a poor way of handling a ticklish situation.

I am disgusted and totally disappointed that this has happened to this man who has touched so many lives in the 35 years he has served the university. He deserved better than that.

I hope when Chancellor Carrier retires he will be allowed to do so when he is ready and that he can say that he

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has had the positive impact on the university that John Barth has had.

— Milton C. Bakken, assistant principal, Milton High School

Viking wrestler remembered

An important omission was made in the recent (Nov. 29) full-page coverage of the Stoughton-Mineral Point wrestling match. Every person who won for Stoughton was listed except one. Tom Hudkins won an impressive match at 155 pounds and pinned his opponent. Without his contribution, Stoughton wouldn't have won. Please, let's give credit to all who helped Stoughton achieve its victory.

— Mary Beth Haugen, Madison

Chicago writers supported

I am writing in response to Bette Matson's letter (which appeared in The State Journal Nov. 15) concerning Chicago sports writers' treatment of Wisconsin football.

The Chicago Tribune has run a number of articles this fall praising Wisconsin's tremendous turn-around. In particular, the paper did a feature

story on Jess Cole and Tim Krumrie of Mondovi. The Chicago area has always been supportive of the Badgers, precisely because there are so many students and players from Chicago and the surrounding suburbs (attending Wisconsin).

— Steve Wagner, Madison

Basketball needs smaller rim

The basketball season is upon us and already many are complaining about the pros and how easy they make it look. They dunk, slam and shoot the eyes out of the basket (from 30-feet away, making a mockery of Dr. Naismith's original intentions).

There must be a solution. Most often proposed is raising the rim a foot. But that's no good. The big boys would still make it look easy. A better idea would be to lower the floor.

I think the solution is simply to reduce the circumference of the rim by three or four inches, which would make it a much more difficult target.

— Joseph Fanuzzi, Madison

More prep sports on radio

There has been little radio coverage of high school sporting events since Rudy Pock's broadcast on WFWM in the 1960's. The Wisconsin State Journal does a great job of

covering high school sports, but I feel that there would be community interest in radio broadcasts of important high school basketball and football games involving local teams.

There are many people who can't attend such events due to their health, age, or family and professional commitments. Radio coverage would not only provide a service to these individuals, but it would also promote attendance at similar local sporting events. Would it be possible for you to poll your readers on the topic of radio coverage of high school sports? If there is sufficient interest on the part of your readership, then perhaps local business interests might become more interested in financing such broadcasts.

— Thomas A. Kipper, Madison



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