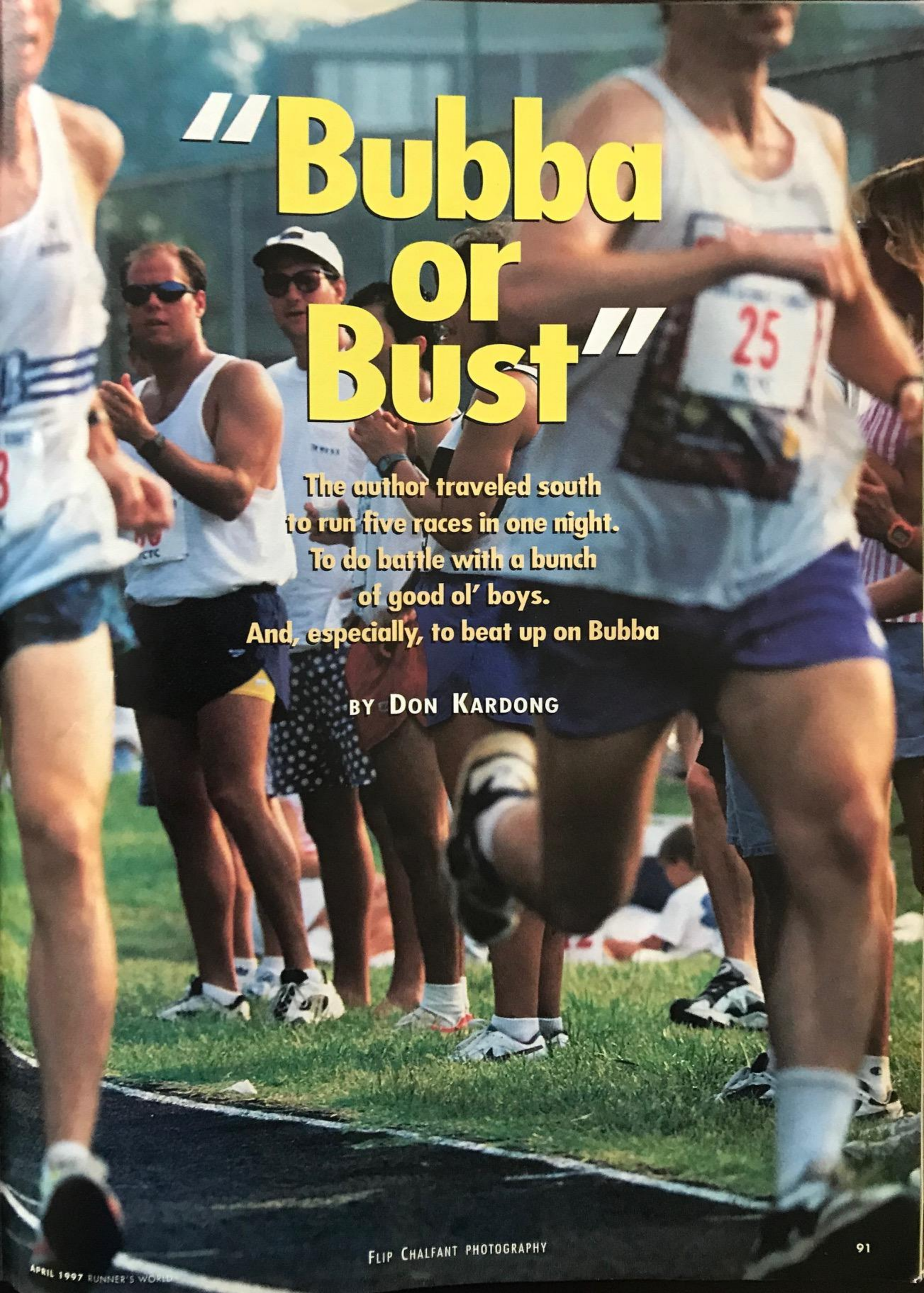




Chasing Bubba:
Passed by
David Gelly
(35, a.k.a. Bubba)
in the final stretch
of the 400,
the author (28)
tries to regain
his position.



“Bubba or Bust”

**The author traveled south
to run five races in one night.
To do battle with a bunch
of good ol’ boys.
And, especially, to beat up on Bubba**

BY DON KARDONG

FLIP CHALFANT PHOTOGRAPHY

I discovered years ago that the strategies I developed as a young runner—attack the hills, don't lose contact, never look back—are at best gratuitous, at worst life-threatening in my current competitive life.

"Why is that man's face so red?" a child often asks as I sprint for the finish.

"He appears to be trying to catch the lady in front of him," answers the parent, ashamed on my behalf.

Thus I was delighted—and that is the right word, delighted—to discover that the little voice in my head in the middle of the 5-K cross-country race (the final event of Winston-Salem's Ultimate Runner competition) was the voice of truth. It was not, as it turned out, just a heliumized version of my high school cross-country coach, shaken loose from memory by heavy breathing, sweat and cut grass, and speaking platitudes.

"Every place counts," the voice said.

I listened. And I zeroed in on the runner ahead of me. Several times I moved up a notch in spite of an opposing voice telling me this was ludicrous, that this five-event competition was just a lark, nothing to suffer over, especially in light of my precarious hamstring. "Be comfortable, be safe," the second voice said.

Ha! That second voice had no notion of what was at stake. It had never met the Sandman or Stoneman. Or, especially, Bubba.

And so, prodded to move up notch by notch in defiance of athletic entropy, I would eventually get to hear one final voice. It was a real one this time, not a psychic concoction, the words of a man telling me I had managed to beat him in the overall standings by two points.

"Two points," said the Sandman, shaking his head in dismay. "I can't believe it."

Scientists have long known that if you put 10 guys in a room with an evening's supply of beer, they will emerge early the next morning with two things: (1) nicknames all around and (2) at least one really bad idea. Send them into the same room for another evening and they will emerge with tattoos.

It should come as no surprise then, that back in the mid-1980s, the get-togethers following the weekly all-comers track

meets of the Twin City Track Club in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, would yield not just a passel of nicknames, but also a multi-event competition called, "The Ultimate Runner." The tattoos would come later.

Dragging limbs aching from a 100-, 200-, 400-, 800-, 3000-meter or 1-mile race each Wednesday evening into Schrock's (a bar across the street from the track at Hanes Park), it didn't take long for the bad idea to effervesce to the surface. Sandy Wetherhold

(a.k.a. "the Sandman"), a 47-year-old real estate agent in Winston-Salem, was the Einstein from whose mind the notion bubbled.

"I got the bright idea of why don't we do all these events in one night," says the Sandman, then adds a raunchy, beery rendition of the universal approbation that followed. "Aw, yeah, that sounds great."

Oddly, it still sounded like a good idea the next morning, and the morning after that, at least to the Sandman. Since it wouldn't go away, Wetherhold got the club to back the idea and by the end of the summer of '87, the first of Winston-Salem's Ultimate Runners shuffled to the starting line.

"We had 57 people show up," remembers the Sandman. "I was really surprised."

Multi-event competition has an illustrious history; even the title "The Ultimate Runner" was already in use in Jackson, Michigan, for its day-long, five-event competition. Wetherhold, though, can't remember ever having heard of this northern event with the same name.

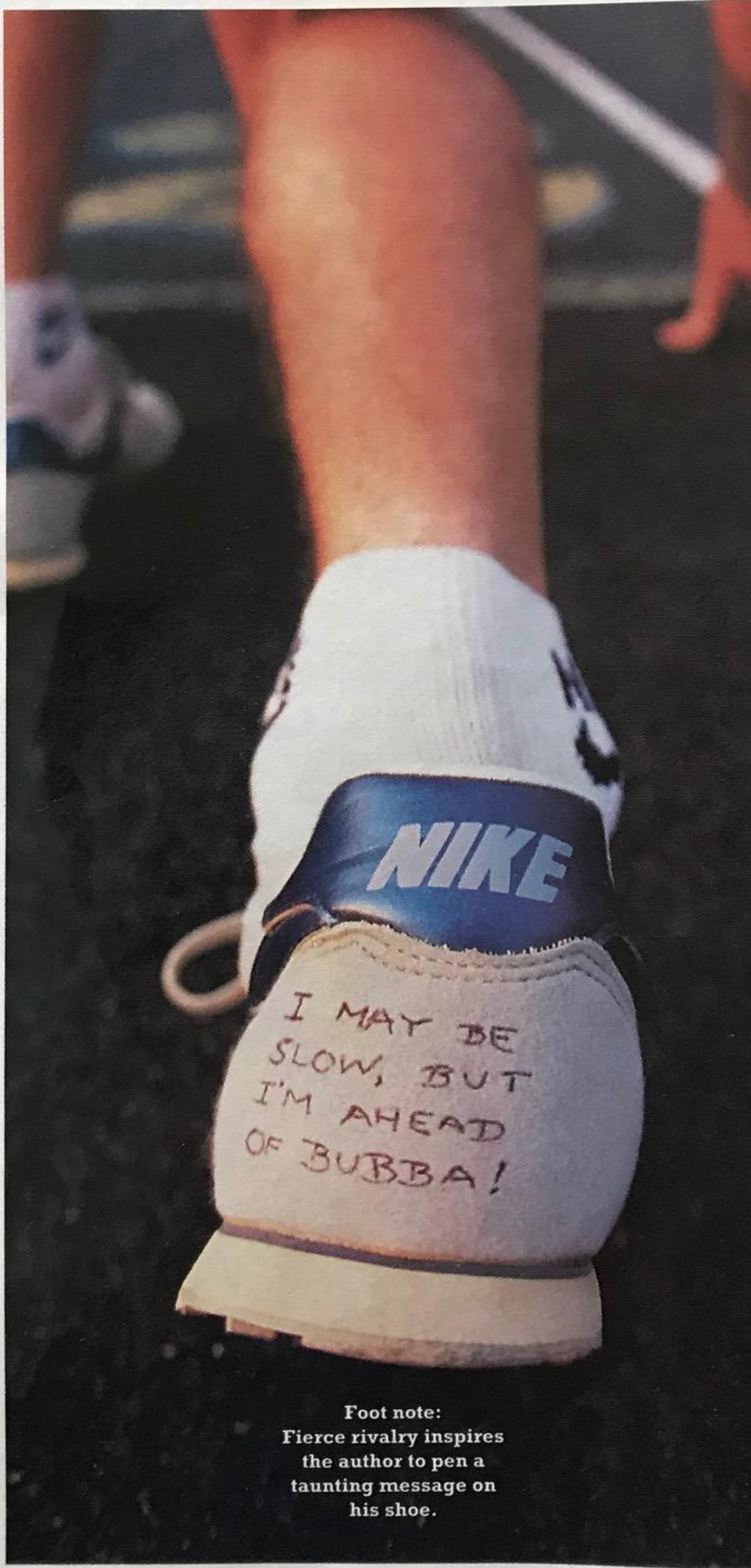
"Somewhere deep in my psyche, there may have been....," says the Sandman, face contorted as he tries to scour his psychic attic for evidence. You can almost hear the scraping and grinding in there. "But I can't recall ever having heard of it."

No matter. Winston-Salem's Ultimate Runner was a different creature altogether. Where Jackson's competition was largely distance-oriented (beginning with a 10-K and ending with a marathon), the Sandman's beast included six shorter events: 1-mile, 400-, 800-, 100-, 200-, and 3000-meters, in that order. Six events the first year and lots of muscle pulls.

"It was just too sprint-oriented," says the founder. "It was hamstringing hell."

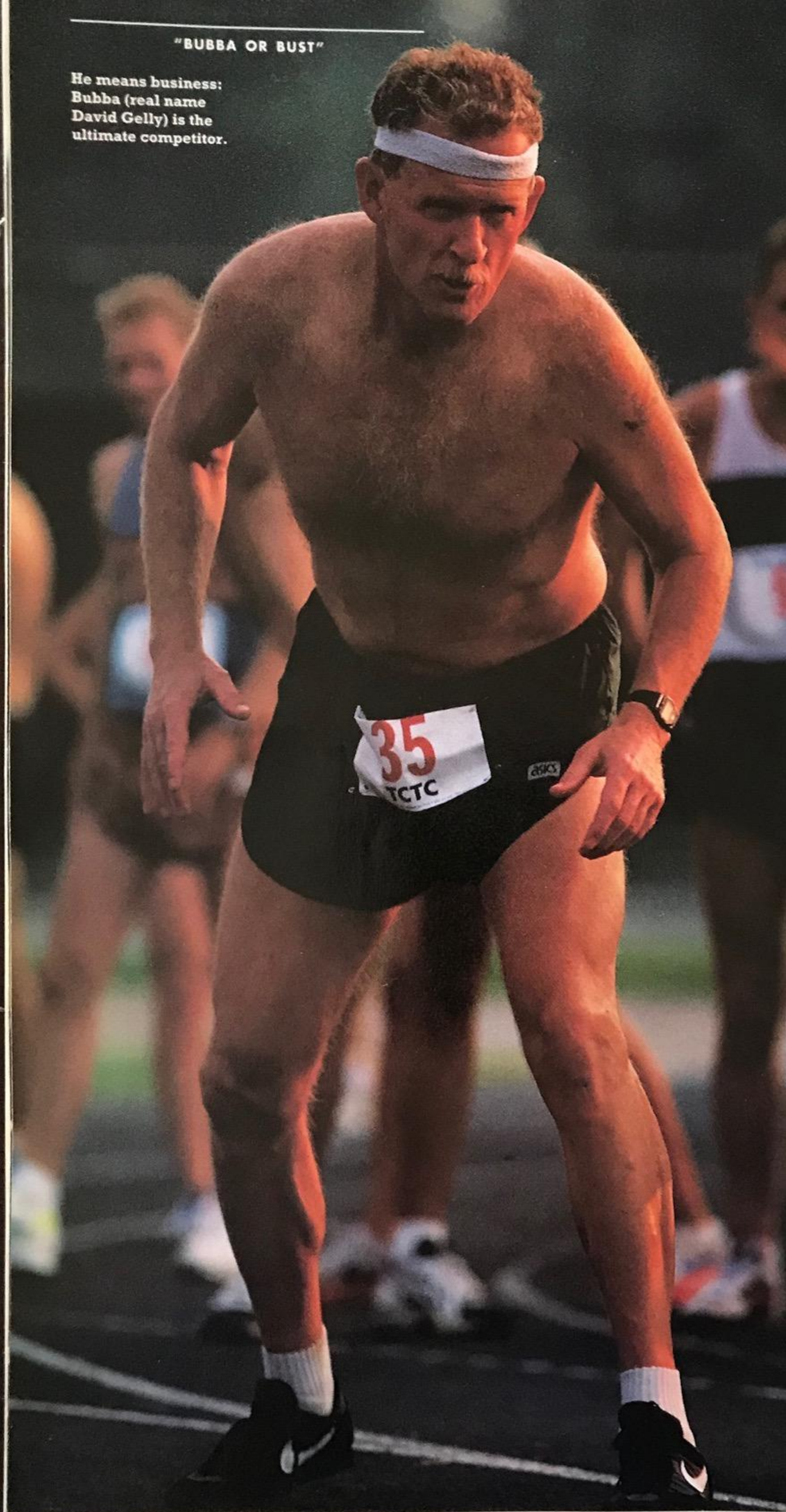
Ah yes, hamstrings. We'll get back to those. In the meantime, the club was convinced to drop the number of races to five the second year, finishing the evening with a 5-K cross-country run. And that's been the package ever since, the one I stumbled onto one sticky evening last June.

This was the tenth edition of the Ultimate Runner. Like the rest of the 108 entrants, I would start with the mile, then do 400-, 800- and 100-meters on the track, finishing with a 5-K around Hanes Park. The final score would be computed by adding the finishing



Foot note:
Fierce rivalry inspires
the author to pen a
taunting message on
his shoe.

He means business: Bubba (real name David Gelly) is the ultimate competitor.



positions from the five individual events.

It sounded simple enough, a personal test of racing fitness. But there was a rub. Along the way I'd have to keep watching the rearview mirror. Because Bubba would be back there somewhere, wearing gold shoes and the grin of Beelzebub. And he wouldn't be alone.

THE MILE

"If you leave your legs on the track in the mile," says the Stoneman a few minutes before the start of the first event, "it's going to be a long, miserable night for you."

This advice comes from Keith Stone (a.k.a. "the Stoneman"). He is, along with the Sandman and Bubba, part of my local advisory committee, helpful to a man, at least until the racing starts. A fourth member of the group, Mike "the Hitch" Kollman, has wisely decided to be on another continent during this year's Ultimate Runner. The friends spend most of each year and—my guess here—most waking hours trying to figure out how to beat each other every June. This year, beating me has been added to their agendas.

The Stoneman is a 37-year-old computer expert who appears to be—and I certainly mean no insult in this—the most normal of the trio. He and his wife are hosting my visit this weekend, but otherwise he seems to have basically good sense.

Can the same be said for Bubba, who is just now arriving in the infield wearing a black "Red Dog" singlet, gold-painted running flats, a straw hat and the kind of grin normally reserved for low-riders? I ask how he's feeling.

"Don, man, butterflies," he responds metaphorically. "Got ulcers today, man. It's ugly out here, it's 95 degrees, the humidity's just as bad. But...it's the Ultimate Runner."

"Bubba" is David Gelly, a 48-year-old corporate securities manager, who became Bubba long before moving to the South from Maine and Wisconsin. Gelly is large enough to be a Clydesdale, but is lanky in some enigmatic way. He has a "Stickman Running Club" tattoo—the mark of many of my mentors this weekend—on his right shoulder and a Roadrunner tattoo on his left. In spite of his size, Bubba can move quickly and unexpectedly, like a bear tailed by hounds.

Bubba, Stoneman, Sandman and others from the Twin City Track Club have been training for weeks on this track for this competition, constantly eyeing each other for hints of weakness. This is war, a testosterone-driven conflict to decide which man can hold his head the highest for the next 12 months. Knowing this, I have tried to prepare myself from afar, steadily progressing to faster and faster trackwork, priming myself for Winston-Salem.

But should there be sprint training in midlife? Two-hundred-meter repeats have never been easy, and at my current age of 47,



Behind the scenes: With a tenuous hamstring, the author (lane 2) begins the 100. In the end, the race sets him back in the overall event standings.

they're downright painful. I know I need this, but somehow I can't seem to reclaim even a modest level of the fluid motion and power that I remember being key components of track racing. I train on the edge of pain, hamstrings clutching. How much is enough? How much will induce injury?

Training done, one wonders about strategy. All afternoon I've been stewing, wondering how fast a time to shoot for in each event. Leaving my legs on the track in the mile does not sound like a good thing.

"Out on that little track, I'll tell you what," the Sandman has warned, "there's nowhere to hide." Especially not from this group.

A 5:15 mile sounds doable, I decide. I line up, surrounded by flesh-eating hyenas marked with "Stickman Running Club" tattoos. All my main rivals—Sandman, Stoneman, Bubba—are in this heat.

Having watched the front-end elite group

run earlier, I know how this should look. Run a conservative opening lap, watch your competition, make a late, decisive move. That's what Keith Mathis, a six-time Ultimate Runner champion and today's favorite, has done, hanging back during the 72-second opening lap, then running 62-62-61 for a 4:17 victory. It's the fastest mile time in Ultimate Runner history.

Of course, that's a 4:02 miler and 1992 Olympic Trials qualifier on display, so my own performance isn't likely to match his in style or content. Instead, I open in about 75 seconds and get progressively slower, finishing in 5:08, and glad of it. The Sandman, Stoneman and Bubba finish, in that order, a few seconds later.

"That's my best time in four years," says a proud Sandman of his 5:15. Then he remembers the next four events, the possibility of collapse, and the paucity of hiding

places in the vicinity. "Of course that could be either good or bad."

400 METERS

Remembering 400-meter ambiance, I put on thermonuclear sunglasses and a gold necklace. Actually, the necklace is more like a yellow string of beads I've reclaimed from paraphernalia of the '60s, and the sunglasses are a free gift from some fast-food joint, but I think I've got the basic idea. Spikes laced, I attempt some Gail Devers warmup jumps, trying to elevate both knees upward simultaneously. It's a pathetic sight, more of a wounded frog or geek sock hop routine than anything vaguely athletic.

I watch Mathis again for insight, see him spring from the line in pursuit of his friend and training partner, John Hinton. When they emerge from behind the tennis courts, three-quarters of the way around the track, Mathis



has the lead. He finishes in an outstanding 50.90, no hint of trouble.

The 400 has always seemed a sublimely elegant race to me, with eight runners radiating power and grace in their separate lanes, steadily whittling away the difference in staggers, finally showing their cards on the homestretch. The talent of the winner is overwhelming at the tape.

That's the view from the stands anyway, where the heaving of chests, gnashing of spikes and flooding of lactic acid in the muscles aren't too apparent. And that is, more importantly, in 400-meter races in which runners *stay in their own lanes*.

Elegance isn't an issue in the Ultimate Runner 400 because we start elbow-to-elbow on a curved line right before the first turn. The first one out front has the advantage. Mistake and you get stepped on, trampled, buried, forgotten. I haven't anticipated this format.

When the gun fires, I leap from the line and grapple for the inside lane.

Of course that's what everyone else does too, like shoppers hustling to get the last Tickle Me Elmo doll. My hamstring twinges, my feet tangle, but somehow I stay vertical, veins popping, wheezing down the backstretch a few meters behind the Sandman, veins popping. Coming off the final turn, I hear the grinding of spikes and correctly fear the worst. Bubba clips my heels and flies past. I struggle in vain to keep up with him. I'm flat out.

Nearing the line, another runner muscles past in a blur, then powers up to outlean Bubba. It's Stoneman.

"That's the first time I've used that lean since high school," he says later. Bubba is not amused. Nor am I, running 64.21, but beaten by my three main rivals. Sandman's 62.91 is the fastest of our quartet and moves him ahead of me in the standings.

800 METERS

There are lots of other runners in this competition, of course, some almost as quick as Keith Mathis, others nearly as nonchalant as 9-year-old Joseph Hampton, who spends most of this evening climbing the chain link fence and trying to squirt another kid with a hose. But it is the competition within the competition, most of which develops spontaneously, that defines the Ultimate experience.

"If somebody's waxed you in the dog-gone 400," says the Sandman, "you want to try like heck to get 'em back in the 800."

Well spoken, Sandman. So I decide to run a nice, smooth first lap, then go after him and his fellow Stickmen in the second. Float like a butterfly....

"I'd say the key to this entire thing," Keith Mathis speculated earlier, "is the 800. There's not a lot of recovery right after the quarter, and the 800 is where a lot of people fold. If you can get yourself to push the pace a little bit, you might be able to break a couple of people."

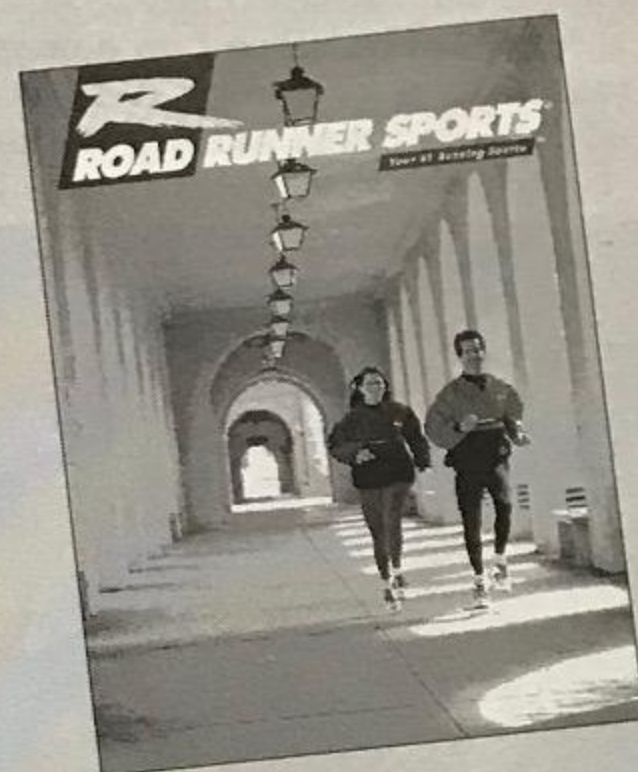
More good advice. I watch Mathis let 26-year-old Ben Thomas, who has been shadowing him all day, take the pace out in 61 seconds. On the second loop, however, Mathis surges and sears a zesty 1:58. The guy can pedal fast, that's for sure.

I open my heat in just under 75 seconds, cruising, then press as best I can, finishing in 2:25, about 5 seconds faster than I expected. Sandman is 2 seconds back, with Bubba and Stoneman close behind.

I would be pleased, but for one thing: that little "zitch" noise I hear in my right hamstring on the homestretch. At least I think I hear it. I know I feel it. And I know that muscle will not be happy to carry me through 100 meters, the next event on the docket. I'm one thin place ahead of the Sandman now, and not far enough ahead of my other two rivals to rub it in.

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100 METERS

"The shorter the distance, the more critical your time is," the Sandman says. That's because point standings in the Ultimate Runner are based on place, and 1 second in the 100 meters can mean 30 places. And a cheesy hamstring means I could easily drop a second or two. And that means...

I'm in trouble.

Best to go down sporting bravado and arrogance, though, so I print a message on the back of one of my spikes: "I may be slow, but I'm ahead of Bubba." Then I say a prayer to the patron saint of kinesiology. That would be St. Jude, also the patron saint of lost causes.

I watch heat after heat of runners blast

the straightaway. Mathis wins his fourth straight event with an 11.69, but everyone else looks pretty swift, too. I massage my hamstring. *C'mon, boy, you can do it.* Somehow, I need to get through the 100 without a major muscle explosion. There is still one more event left, and if I can finesse this, not give up too much, I might just come back in the 5-K.

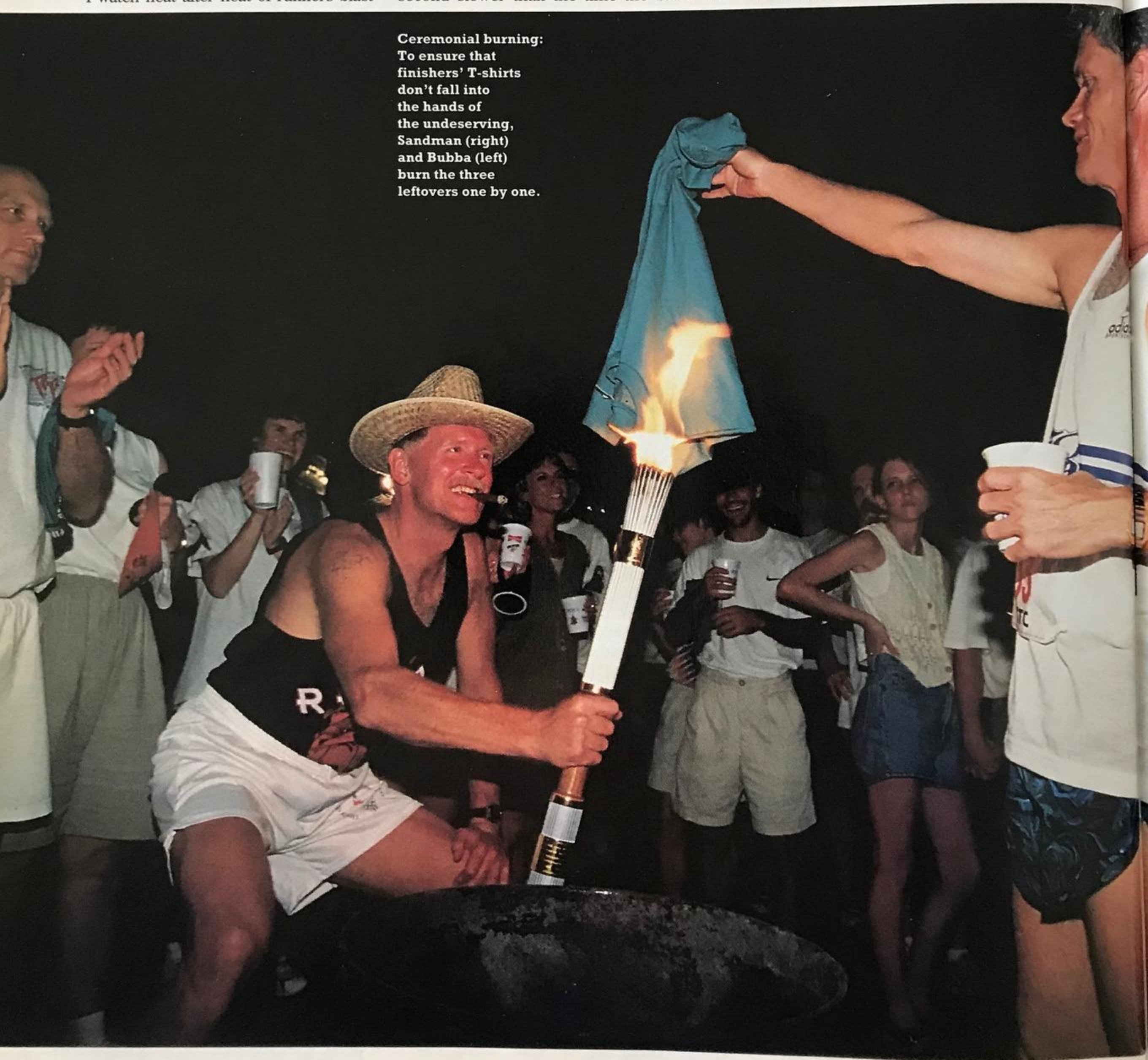
Zam! I'm out of the blocks as fast as a runner can go while simultaneously conducting negotiations with a fibrous body part. Hang in there, hang in there, hang in there....Umph! I make a lean of sorts at the line and then ease up. Done! I check my time later: 14.95. It is ridiculously slow, almost a full second slower than the time the Sandman

runs in the next heat, picking up 21 points on me. Stoneman is a tick behind him, and picks up 20 points, also moving ahead of me in the standings. And Bubba....

"Ah! Ah! AH!" the man shouts at the finish of the same heat. Bubba has blown a propeller, living my personal nightmare before my very eyes. He limps the last few meters, grabbing his hamstring, shouting a plaintive, pained "AH!" to the sky, to St. Jude, to the rest of us, over and over.

"I'll bet we're going to hear a lot about that hamstring pull," someone mutters. Bubba is known for his ability to snowball a minor incident into a major epic. If malarkey were art, Bubba's stories would be the Sistine ceiling—

Ceremonial burning:
To ensure that finishers' T-shirts don't fall into the hands of the undeserving, Sandman (right) and Bubba (left) burn the three leftovers one by one.



expansive, beautifully conceived, exquisitely executed, larger than life.

Meanwhile, I watch the other heats of the 100, rubbing my hamstring some more and wondering if I will end up with a faster time than anyone in this competition. Julie Smith, the fastest female, runs a 13.84. Fifty-seven-year-old John Dunkelberg manages a 14.16. Sixty-year-old Jack Ibrahim zips 14.52. And when I check the list of times later, I find that even Bubba, damaged and hobbling, has beaten my 14.95 by a quarter of a second.

5-K CROSS-COUNTRY

To be honest, I don't know exactly where we all stand, point-wise, going into the final event. I know it was close after the 800. I know I gave up a bundle in the 100. I know Bubba is out of the money, destined to limp through the 5-K with or without St. Jude's help. And I know, relatively speaking, that the cross-country race will be my best chance to make up points.

So I summon that little voice. *Every place counts.*

Starting easily in deference to my tweaked hamstring, I wait for the muscle to loosen up before beginning to climb the ladder. When I finish, I wonder if I have climbed enough.

It will be later, when the Stoneman prints out the list of final standings, that I find out that my place in the 5-K (14th) inches me two points ahead of Sandman and six ahead of Stoneman. We finish in order—30th, 31st and 32nd—with a wounded Bubba back in 50th.

Of course by the time we find this out, we are well into postrace proclivities. We are across the street in Prince's, the establishment where the Ultimate Runner results are celebrated by those still able to stand.

The Sandman is in his element, acting as emcee for the distribution of awards. A lean Letterman-type, he finds something to say about every finisher, steadily working his way from the 108th to the first.

"He's been getting the same perm for 10 years," the Sandman jokes when kinky-haired Jack Ibrahim comes up to collect his finisher's T-shirt. "And he'll be back in 10 years with a wig that looks just like that."

And when Keith Mathis accepts his award for a seventh Ultimate Runner victory, thanking both his girlfriend and his boss for helping to make his success possible, the founder butts in on the mike, "I think he also owes a little bit to the Sandman for puttin' this damn thing on."

Indeed, and so do we all. We think. We're not exactly sure at the moment, though, because we have these aches and pains in peculiar places, and our bodies may not be all that interested in offering thanks.

"I didn't know hamstrings could hurt this bad," says 46-year-old Tom Tune.

Of course the pain will pass eventually, and even ravaged hamstrings will one day be whole. In the meantime, everyone who's managed to collect a coveted T-shirt ("10 Years of

Blood, Sweat and Beers") will begin caring less and less about soreness, and more and more about making sure no one who didn't actually battle this five-headed Medusa gets a finisher's shirt.

Three are left over. The Sandman sets up the ceremonial Weber in Prince's parking lot, and Bubba lights the Olympic torch he has acquired after running a leg of the Atlanta torch relay earlier in the summer. Then, nearly setting the door jamb at Prince's on fire, Bubba exits to immolate the first unclaimed finisher's shirt. Legend has it that ashes from the shirts will be sprinkled on the track later. Frankly, I'm dubious.

Heading home later that evening for

ibuprofen and rest, I am left with two possible quotes to sum up this yearly test of racing fitness.

The first is from the Sandman, who invented and nurtured the Ultimate Runner over its first decade, and who is, no doubt, already trying to figure out how to get me back in town for a rematch. "I hate this thing," the Sandman says, "and I wouldn't do it more than once a year. But I wouldn't miss it."

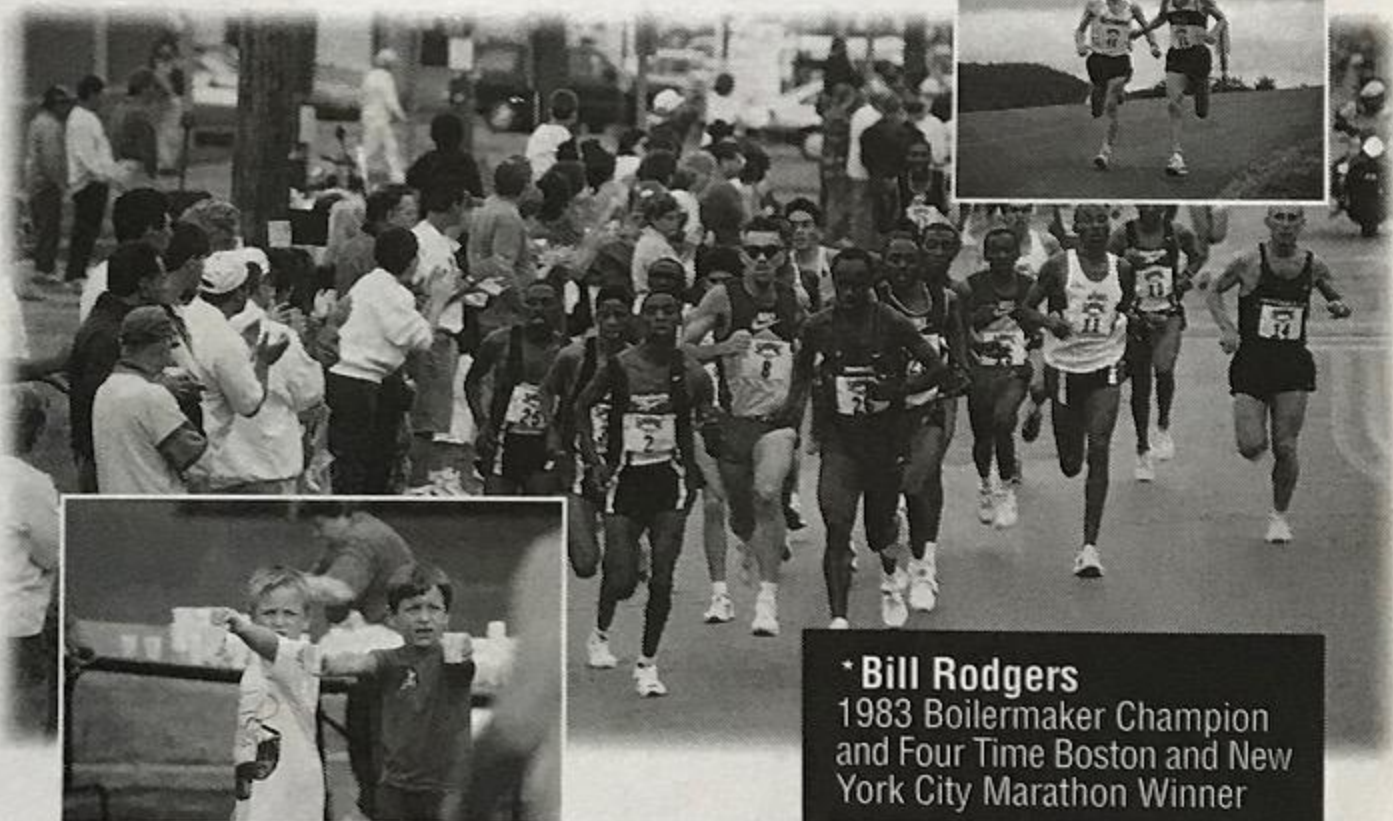
I wonder, though, whether most finishers wouldn't identify more with the words of Tom Tune.

"It was a great event," says Tune (soon, no doubt, to be known as "The Tuneman"). "But it sucked while it was going on." **R**

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