

Memories

Robert Braile '77

1978

Teaching by example

After 25 years, cross country and track coach Art Gulden continues to inspire and teach.

A pack of the best collegiate distance runners in the Northeast had just passed the two-mile mark in the IC4A championship race, and Bucknell's top runners were not among them. Art Gulden, their coach, was not surprised.

Boston's Franklin Park, where the 10,000-meter cross country race was held on a bright and chilly day last November, is flat and fast. It is more like a track than the hills Gulden prefers, the kind his runners have trained on for 25 years, the kind that are truer to the sport.

But even if it were that sort of course, Gulden would not have expected his best to be leading so early. It is not how he taught us to run. We were told to let the leaders go at a pace they cannot sustain, run together at a pace we can, catch them with a few miles to go and then begin the test of character and commitment, of pride and heart, that is Bucknell cross country.

Still, seniors Steve Clarke and Chris Priestaf were further back than Gulden had expected. If they did not move up, they would not qualify for the NCAA championships, ending their careers here. Gulden was edgy, counting runners from Dartmouth, Villanova, Penn State and other rival schools as they flew by, past cheering teammates, coaches, alumni, parents, friends, as electric a moment in sports as you will ever find.

Suddenly, they appeared. "Wake up, now! Start to move! Start to move!" Gulden yelled, a bark really, one that penetrates, one you feel as well as hear, one that swept me back 18 years to another bright and chilly day in November when I was a senior running in this race at New York's Van Cortlandt Park, and in the same position as Clarke and Priestaf.

Then, as now, moving depended on memory. We had to remember the searing heat of Furnace Road in September, the impenetrable darkness of Crossroads in November, the snowbound trails of Appalachia in January, the relentless winds of Pheasant Ridge in March, the landscape we ran on and against for four years.

We had to remember the legacy left by our older teammates, now graduated, who pulled us through workouts and races, who made us run faster than we ever dreamed we could, whose presence rushed through our veins with each step we took. We had to remember Gulden, whose handshake before and after each race reminded us that, to him, cross country is not a sport. It is a way of life, one in which adversity is always a step ahead of you, looking back over its shoulder, taunting you to see whether you have the fire to beat it back. And we had to remember the simple grace of running itself, the silent, steady movement, day after day, season after season, along country roads carved through cornfields, and slender trails laced through woods.

We had to remember all of what made us the runners we were, and at that precise moment, bring it to bear over the final miles of the most important race of our careers.

Clarke and Priestaf turned the final corner with two other runners, a short stretch from the finish line. Out of a field of hundreds,



Left: Bucknell's cross country team lines up for the 1975 East Coast Conference championships held at Fairmount Park in Philadelphia. From left to right: Larry Hager '76, Dan Davis (310) '76, Robert Braile (307) '77, Lou Calvano (309) '76, Lee Edmonds (behind Calvano) '79, Bill Turley (behind Edmonds) '79, Coach Art Gulden, George Buckheit '79.

Lower left: Robert Braile crossing the finish line.



they were in the teens, on the edge of qualifying for the NCAAs. A deafening roar filled the crisp autumn air as spectators pressed against the yellow tape marking the corridor to the finish.

Unless you are winning a race, or close to winning one, you do not have the incentive of a victory to drive you to the finish. You have to look elsewhere for a reason. You have to look within. You have to remember.

All four runners were roughly even with about 20 meters to go, although one of the others had a slight edge. Clarke put his head down, as if searching for

something. He then looked up, and with steps to go, powered ahead. He finished 17th, the final qualifying spot for the NCAAs. He would become the latest in a long line of Bucknell distance runners to compete in the NCAAs, dating back 18 years to 1976, when I and a teammate became the first.

Gulden ignored a race official and jumped the tape marking the finish area to shake hands with his runners. He was the only coach in the shutes, a coach whose instincts have always told him this moment is important. After 25 years, he is remarkably more tenacious than ever. Other coaches show up at meets in jacket and tie, assigning their assistants to points on the course. Gulden shows up in sweats and puts in a few thousand meters himself, running from point to point. The greatest teachers do so by example.

Dusk comes early in November. Too early really. As I was leaving Franklin Park in the dim autumn light, I thought about constancy, about experiences that do not change, about the pitch of someone's voice on a bright and chilly day in November and how it resonates in precisely the same way, season after season, year after year.

Constancy is home. It is why so many cross country alumni are drawn to meets, often as many as there are on the team itself. They are coming home. It is why they see more than Bucknell's best when they catch the eye of a Steve Clarke or a Chris Priestaf crossing the finish line. They see themselves, and they remember. **SW**

Robert Braile ran on Art Gulden's cross country, indoor and outdoor track teams from 1973 to 1977. He captained the cross country team as a senior, breaking Bucknell's course record that year. He is now a journalist, reporting on the environment for the Boston Globe. He lives in Durham, New Hampshire, with his wife, Dale, and their children, Emily and Alexander.