World records by two milers and amateurish “ultra” runners

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SIR ROGER BANNISTER, MD (1929–2018)

In 2018, newspapers noted the deaths of several significant athletes, including Roger Bannister, who, in 1954, was the first to run a mile in less than 4 minutes (*Figure 1*). Our own editor, Dr. Bill Roberts, had written on Bannister in his editorial column, “Facts and ideas from anywhere,”¹ and my good friend from Atlanta, Dr. John Cantwell, had published his reflections on Bannister in *Baylor University Medical Center Proceedings* in 2015.²

Roger Bannister was a 25-year-old Oxford medical student when he ran the first sub-4-minute mile in human history with a time of 3 minutes, 59.4 seconds at the Iffley Road track in Oxford, England. For years, the 4-minute mile had been a barrier and one of athletes’ unattainable goals, like those of Babe Ruth’s 60 home runs, Joe DiMaggio’s 56 game hitting streak, and Jack Nicklaus’s 18 majors.

Only 6 weeks after Bannister’s breakthrough, the Australian John Landy lowered the world record to 3:58. Speaking about Bannister, a later English runner, Sebastian Coe, who had himself decreased the mile record several times, said of Bannister: “He was running on only 28 miles a week, and had leather shoes with spikes. I think that was one of the great runs of all times.” The current world record is 3:33.13. Still, Bannister said in 2013, “It’s amazing that more people have climbed Mount Everest than have broken the 4-minute mile.”

Roger Bannister retired from running in December 1954. That same year, he was named *Sports Illustrated’s* first “Sportsman of the Year.” Bannister was mainly proud of his neurology research and considered his long medical career in neurology his life’s greatest achievement.

In 1995, Dr. John Cantwell had the occasion to meet Roger Bannister, now Sir Roger Bannister, in London and was impressed not only by his intellect but by the fact that he was a gentle, unassuming gentleman. Bannister said that his wife, a talented artist, knew nothing about athletics when

they were dating and she had heard that he had run 4 miles in under a minute. His 5-year-old grandson had once bragged to a friend that “my grandpa has run a mile in under 4 seconds!”

Dr. Cantwell was on vacation in Oxford in 1999 and visited the famous Iffley Road track where Bannister set the record. He told a custodian that he had previously met Dr. Bannister and wanted to see the track. Shortly afterwards, the custodian returned with a little sack of cinder from the finish line. Later, Dr. Cantwell returned to Atlanta and brought me a gift of a small bottle of cinder, which I still have today.

Finally, Dr. Cantwell stated that Bannister said to a group on the 40th anniversary of his run in 1994:

We remember the good times, the sun on our backs, running the beauty of the countryside, running thousands and thousands of miles. We remember laughter and friends. For us, no matter what life may bring, whatever subsequent shadows there may be, no one can strip us of these memories.³

After experiencing complications of Parkinson’s disease, he died in 2018 at age 88.

RICHARD (DICK) BUERKLE (1947–)

Dick Buerkle was born on September 3, 1947, in Rochester, New York. He is a former Olympic athlete and once held the world record for the indoor mile run in 1978 (*Figure 2*).

In high school, he could run the 1-mile race in 4:28. He had a track scholarship to Villanova University and graduated from there in 1970 with a degree in Spanish. In 1972, Buerkle started seriously training in Gainesville, Florida, with Marty Liquori, who was a good friend from Villanova, along with their coach, Jumbo Elliott. Buerkle’s running competitions significantly improved and he qualified for and competed in the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal in the

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Figure 1. Roger Bannister and John Landy at Iffley Road on the 50th anniversary of the 4-minute mile, May 6, 2004 (Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license).

Figure 2. Dick Buerkle setting the world record for an indoor mile (3:54.9) on January 13, 1978, in College Park, Maryland. Photo by Philip G. Tardif (Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license).

5000-meter event. He also qualified for the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow but did not compete because of President Carter's decision to boycott.

Dick ran the mile in less than 4 minutes on six occasions in his career, with his personal best occurring on January 13, 1978, when he ran 3:58.9 to break the world indoor record. This was at Cole Field House on the campus of the

University of Maryland in College Park; his image appeared on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* and *Track and Field* magazines.

In 1973, Buerkle met another elite runner, Steve Prefontaine, in the 2-mile race and then was named "the man who stopped Pre." Overall, Dick's personal best times were in the 3000 meter (7:53), the 2-mile (8:21), the 5000 meter (13:23), and the 10,000 meter (28:25).

He relocated his family to Atlanta, Georgia, in 1979, after getting tired of the cold weather in Rochester. He and his wife, Jean, had three children. I recalled seeing that bald man running like a gazelle around the 3-mile circle in my neighborhood in Brookhaven in Atlanta. I heard that he could run the Peachtree Road Race, which took place every year on July 4th, in 28 minutes. Additionally, I heard that he had taken first place in the Atlanta Marathon with a time of 2 hours and 23 minutes.

In 1983, I would jog 5 miles early in the morning with my wife, Millie, and friends around our neighborhood in Brookhaven. On one occasion we ran with Dick's wife, Jean, who said that Dick wanted to run with me on the weekend. I was absolutely shocked. I had never met Dick, and how could I possibly run with a world-record "Olympic elite runner"? But Jean heard that I had done some marathons and one or two ultramarathons and he would be interested in "keeping it very slow!"

I called Dick and we decided that we should do a "run and walk" event on his 36th birthday on September 3, 1983. I left his house near Lenox Square in Atlanta along with my friend Dr. John Bostwick, and we ran fairly slowly and walked a lot on Buford Highway to the entrance of Lake Lanier. We ran 37 miles in 6 hours and 30 minutes.

It was easy for us to work along with Dick at a very slow pace of about 10 to 11 minutes per mile, including much joking, singing, and storytelling and stopping frequently for fluid and food. I remembered then the shocking death of Congressman Larry McDonald after a crash on September 1, 1983. A year later, I remember talking to Dick about the basketball upset of Villanova over Georgetown in 1985, which he remembered very well.

Over the next 10 years, we ran and walked about 200 miles in five separate "races," usually in September. On one episode, Dr. John Bostwick wanted to finish a 50-mile run to his family home in Bostwick, Georgia, which we did with Don McGinty, DDS. On my last run, I was getting older and slower and asked Dick if we could do a smaller one—only around 20 miles. He agreed and said he would give me a surprise. We met at the MARTA train station in Brookhaven and took the train to the end of the line, which was the Atlanta airport. I asked Dick for our route, and he advised that we would get back home in roughly 20 miles; little did I know that would include jumping across I-85 to Highway 29.

Even though we were slower, Dick still had his elite ability. I heard that he had met Roger Bannister in Atlanta in 1998. At that time, Dick was still in amazing shape, having won first place in a 10k race in Marietta with a time of 33 minutes at the age of 51. It was amazing to me that he could run so well. Nevertheless, he was very low key, and we enjoyed being with him.

Dick was my patient for years until I retired in 2006. Unfortunately, he developed Parkinson's disease in 2008. He is now being treated for a variation of multiple system atrophy along with orthostatic hypotension.

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1. Roberts WC. Facts and ideas from anywhere. *Proc (Bayl Univ Med Cent)*. 2018;31(3):389–400.
2. Cantwell JD. Reflections on Sir Roger Bannister and his autobiography, *Twin Tracks*. *Proc (Bayl Univ Med Cent)*. 2015;28(4):528–530.
3. Smith G. *Beyond the Game*. New York: Grove Press; 1986:233.

Avocations

Mother and child, Balinese long-tailed monkeys (*Macaca fascicularis*), in Ubud Monkey Forest, Bali. Photo copyright Jeffrey Michel, MD, Cardiology Division, Baylor Scott & White, Temple, Texas (e-mail: jeffrey.michel@bswhealth.org).