

Four decades **after** sprinting **into**
THE RECORD books,

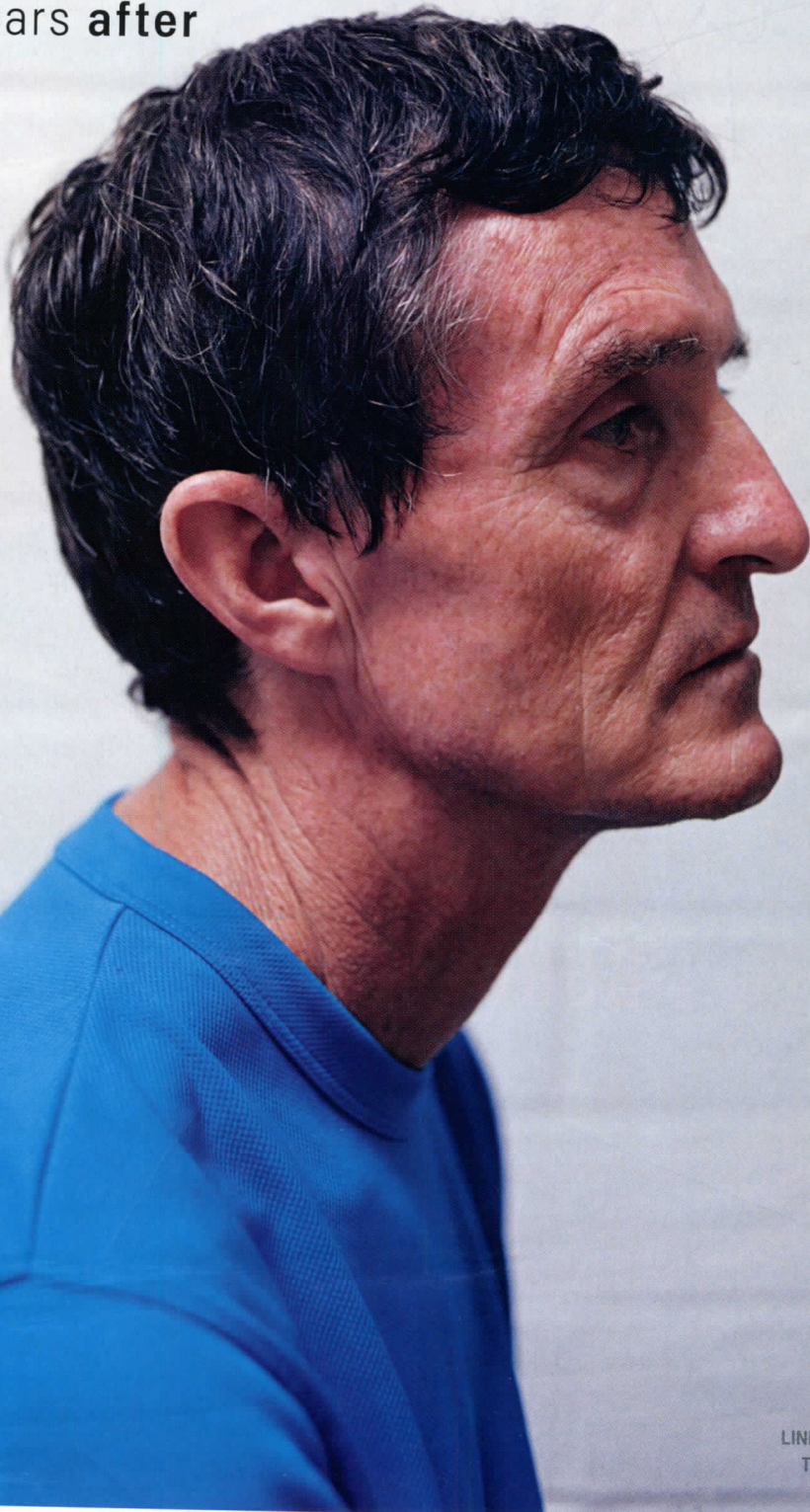
lost and

and 24 years **after**
walking out on
HIS LIFE,
Gerry Lindgren
is blowing
people's
MINDS again

BY **chris** BUCK

BY STEVE **FRIEDMaN**

PHOTOGRAPHS



PROFILE OF A LEGEND
LINDGREN TODAY, AND AS A
TEEN IN THE EARLY '60s.

f o u n d



"You tell yourself a lie so you don't have to face the reality."

—BETTY CALEY LINDGREN

SPEED

won't bring victory. The boy knows this. Speed can't possibly save him. All he can hope for is to avoid shame. The boy will do anything to avoid shame. But he knows only one thing. He needs more speed.

It is late afternoon on a midsummer's day, July 25, 1964, at the Los Angeles Coliseum, long before anyone suspected the boy's secrets. He has run nearly four miles. He has two to go. It is 93 degrees on the track. The two men in front of him are world-class, race-hardened. He is 18 years old, 5'6", 118 pounds, barely a month out of high school. To sprint now is madness. It is self-immolation. On the curve, where they won't see him, he sprints. He sprints to the outside. He sprints past one, then 15 yards later, the other. Of course, it is folly. Later, he knows he'll fail. But he has no choice.

He sprints around the curve and straight into California's setting sun. It's no use. They won't break. He hears their footsteps. Kritch-kritch. Kritch-kritch.

He beat Steve Prefontaine. He beat gold medalist Billy Mills. He lapped Jim Ryun in a 2-mile race of the nation's greatest schoolboy runners. Most astonishing, in a sport where genetics, nutrition, technology, and training techniques conspire to make records ephemeral, Gerry Lindgren, in 1964, broke the high school 2-mile record by nearly a minute. The same year, he ran 5000 meters faster than any American schoolboy ever had—or has.

"There was no frame of reference for what he was doing," says Bob Payne, who as a young reporter for the *Spokesman-Review* in Spokane, Washington, covered Lindgren when the runner was a high school senior. "There'd never been anything like it before. And it's safe to say there never will be again."

To study contemporary track records is to pore over knots of present-day phenoms and 21st century dates. But look closely at the high school record books and rub your eyes. It must be a misprint, "1964," yet there it is, next to Lindgren's name, in category after category. Second fastest 2-mile and 3000 meters, ever. Sixth fastest mile, ever. Eighth fastest 1500 meters, ever.

In the world of track, ignominy and immortality are separated by hundredths of seconds. Half a second looms—an impregnable barrier. High school records routinely fall within months, even weeks. It took 15 years before a high schooler could break Lindgren's 2-mile record. It took 22 years before a boy could shave five-tenths of a second off Lindgren's 3000-meter time. The number that can't

possibly be real, the record that defies all running logic: 13.44. In 40 years, no schoolboy has ever run 5000 meters faster than Lindgren.

He was neither graceful, nor classic, nor, much as it defies belief, blazingly swift. At the height of his powers, he couldn't step onto a track and run a 440 faster than 53 seconds. Among elite runners, that's pathetic. But he could run a 55-second 440 when others couldn't—at the end of a punishing six miles. What he was, was indomitable. He took on Olympians. He took on the Soviets at the height of the cold war. He took on the ruling bodies of the sport. He helped ignite the first American running boom.

And then something went terribly wrong. Or maybe it was wrong from the beginning.

His wife awoke on January 15, 1980, and found a note on the kitchen table. Sell the business, it said. Get a divorce. He would be back in touch with her and their three children when he could.

They never heard from him again.

We meet in a hotel lobby, underneath a three-story, 280,000-gallon aquarium filled with manta rays and black-tipped reef sharks, in a room thick with the odors of suntan lotion, garlic, and saltwater. Across the street lap the waves of Waikiki Beach, where Lindgren sold water-filled insoles called Happy Feet from a pushcart after washing ashore here more than 20 years ago.

Writer and former Olympic marathoner Kenny Moore tracked his old friend and running partner here in 1987. In *Sports Illustrated* Moore told of a champion who never believed in himself, a husband and father crushed by the demands of family life, a track legend living under an assumed name.

I had called from the mainland a month earlier to try and find out what had caused such wreckage—and to see if Lindgren had discovered the peace that had always eluded him, or whether he was more lost than ever.

"Aloha," the voice on the other end said, cheerfully, musically.

"Gerry Lindgren?" I asked.

"Never heard of me!"

I called again a few weeks later and got his recording. "If you want to leave a message for Gerry or Gale..." Gale Young was the name he had adopted when he had disappeared. He was still using it?

He is fleshier than the scrawny schoolboy who sprinted away from modern track's demi-gods, but still slight at 138 pounds. He

wears unfashionably large wire-rim glasses that frame his soft, blue eyes. In the center of the blue is a shocking golden cornea, which you can see when he gazes directly at you, which he doesn't do often. His teeth are graying. He wears a tank top, running shorts, and flip-flops, and his upper arms are soft and undefined. (He doesn't believe in weight lifting, and never has.) They jiggle when he gesticulates, which he does when he tells stories. His right big toe is blackened and blistered, no doubt from the 50 miles he runs every week. His hair, brown but graying, is carefully combed and looks as if it might be held in place with hairspray. He is an unremarkable-looking middle-aged man. Only one thing about his appearance sets him apart. His thighs are knotted, industrial-looking. He leans back in the couch beneath the placid sharks, and his feet dangle, not quite to the floor.

We talk about his origins as a runner, the self-doubt that drove him and that continued to plague him through his record-setting career. "I was stupid and wimpy, and no one liked me," he says, "and I thought sports might help. I never did believe in myself. I hated myself from the time I was little."

He says his schoolmates hated him, too, that the coaches at his junior high school hated him and drove him from their teams, that when he ran through the streets of Spokane as a youngster, the local police arrested him 17 times, once firing a bullet that creased his hair. He says that the Army kidnapped him and held him in an abandoned men's room without food or medical attention before releasing him with a bleeding ulcer, and that when he defied the NCAA to run in an AAU-sanctioned race, a "famous football coach from an eastern university" told Lindgren he knew where he lived and if he ran, the coach would burn his house with gasoline. He uses the words "stupid" and "wimpy" to describe himself so many times I lose track.

He recounts all this in perfectly reasonable tones, in a high-pitched, slightly excitable voice that his former friends and competitors still remark upon, and he frequently says "yah?" in a rising



HAWAII 5-0 ALONG WAIKIKI BEACH, LINDGREN (CENTER, IN WHITE) STILL LOGS 50 MILES A WEEK, OFTEN COACHING RUNNERS FROM AREA CLUBS.

inflection at the end of sentences, a vocal marker from his heritage and birthplace in the Pacific Northwest.

I broach the subject of his family. He tells me he was never married and has no children.

He was always a joker. He told a reporter at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics that right-footed runners had an advantage at long distances. Another time he said the intense heat of a summer race hadn't bothered him because he had (uncharacteristically) stayed behind in the shade of the frontrunners.

"I must remind you," Bob Payne, now retired, e-mailed Lindgren last year, after the runner requested comments on a memoir he wrote and was trying to get published, "that your humor sometimes has whizzed right over the heads of your listeners—and that in some of those cases, their reaction was not laughter, but anger and irritation."

But he is not joking. He insists. The other kids *did* hate him. The coach *did* threaten him with fire. He *was* arrested 17 times. A bullet *did* crease his hair. No ex-wife. No children. Fiction. "Not true."

He was Eleanor Lindgren's third boy, her most difficult birth. Eleven days before the end of winter 1946, the baby was in the wrong position. The doctors had to turn him. When Gerry entered the world, he did so with a broken arm, struggling to breathe. His mother didn't see him for two weeks. Nurses told her he'd been almost black from oxygen deprivation.

"I knew then he was special," Eleanor told Kenny Moore in 1987.

His father, Myrl, apparently didn't agree. Gerry was tiny and weak, but Myrl picked on him just like he did his two older brothers. Eleanor wouldn't stand for that. She defended her baby. That made things worse. On good days, Myrl came home from his job as a mechanic at Spokane's Kaiser smelting plant, sat in his rocking chair, read his paper, and smoked his pipe. Little Gerry would watch wisps of smoke float through the house, catching the last light of day as it flooded in through the picture window.

"I was stupid and wimpy and no one liked me. I thought sports might help.
I HATED MYSELF from the time I was little."

He was neither graceful nor classic nor blazingly swift. But he was indomitable. **HE TOOK ON OLYMPIANS**, the Soviets, and the ruling bodies of the sport. He helped ignite the first **AMERICAN RUNNING BOOM.**

Most days were not good days. Most days Myrl stopped off at the tavern before he came home. He was a big drinker. When he drank, he hit. Once, Gerry says, Myrl hit his wife so hard that her dentures broke in three places and flew across the room. Another time, when Lindgren was just three and sitting at the dinner table—on two dictionaries that had been placed there for him—he sang a song.

“Open all the windows,” he sang. “Open all the doors.” His father hit him in the face. There would be no singing at the table. The child fell out of his chair, then returned, and sang again. His father hit him again, knocking him to the floor. Again, the toddler got up. Again, he sang. Frustrated, his father stalked out, back to the tavern.

Myrl continued drinking and continued hitting, “many, many other times,” Gerry says. The family avoided him when they could. Usually, they couldn’t. Gerry got the worst of it. The more his father hit him, the more he hated himself. “I always had in my head,” he says, “that my father wouldn’t have to be like that if it wasn’t for me—if I was a better kid.”

In eighth grade, he tried football and failed. He tried basketball and failed. He tried baseball and failed. He ended up on the track team, where he was the slowest runner on the B squad. Nobody got cut from the track team.

Freshman year at John R. Rogers High School, in the cross-country pack, his teammates bumped him, and they elbowed him in the face. He hated getting hit. The only way out was in front, so he became a rabbit, darting to the lead, where he was free from blows. He stayed in front until his body failed him. First, one runner passed, then another, then the entire team. The next day, barely able to walk, he planned to quit the team. The coach, a man named Tracy Walters, urged him to stay. Locally famous for his character-building speeches (he was also the school’s guidance counselor) and his winning records, Walters told the boy that his tiny stature and squeaky voice were gifts. If he could lead his teammates even for short stretches, Lindgren recalls the coach telling him, it would inspire the bigger, stronger runners to do better.

Every day, he would dart to the front. Not for himself, but to help them. Every day, the pack would pass him. First tall, rangy, and aptly named senior Len Long, then senior Arvid Anderson, then everyone else. But each day the little freshman would stay in front longer and longer. Then one afternoon, as the team ran a weekly time trial through the streets of Spokane to the southern edge of the high school, he found himself in front with half a mile to go. This had never happened before. He kept churning, three steps for every one of Long’s. The boy only weighed 108 pounds then. His legs burned. He kept churning. Was he running from the drunk who beat him, who broke his mother’s teeth? Or was he sprinting toward his hero, the man standing 20 yards away, clutching a stopwatch? Was he

doing both? He still hated himself, but now he could chase victory and tell himself it wasn’t for personal gain. No one would beat him for his efforts. He was still wimpy; he was still stupid; he was still unworthy of honor, incapable of saving himself. But he wasn’t doing this to save himself. He was doing it to inspire others.

Long and Anderson didn’t have a chance.

The scrawny, squeaky-voiced kid’s very first victory. God, it felt good.

As a sophomore, he would run six miles upon waking, do his team workout after school, then wake up at 2 a.m. and run another 10 miles. In the summer, he would run 10 miles to Peone Creek to go fishing and swimming, or 15 miles to the radio station. He would run 44 miles to Mt. Spokane. By the fall of his junior year, Myrl had left the house for good and Gerry was running 25 to 35 miles a day.

For fun? For victory? To push his teammates? “You are constantly being judged,” he wrote in his unpublished memoir, a remarkable compendium of race strategy, stream of consciousness, preposterous adventures, inspirational pieties, and a studious avoidance of anything credible beyond his life as an abused child and a championship runner. It’s told in the first person, from the point of view of Lindgren’s shadow. There is no mention of a wife or children. “Every workout is a test,” he wrote. “For you to become the vessel that serves all mankind, you will be tested constantly. Your courage and dedication has to be proven through pain and agony.”

What happens when you take a boy who hates himself and a coach who believes in him? What happens when the only way a boy knows to express love is through self-annihilation?

This is what Lindgren did his senior year of high school: He set national high school records in the 1500 meters, mile, 3000 meters, two miles, and three miles. The 2-mile mark was 9:27 before Lindgren lapped a field of all-star schoolboys (including Ryun) on his way to a nine flat record. Two weeks later, he ran 8:46. Three weeks after that, he ran 8:40.

At California’s Compton relays, on a dusty track in Modesto, during a night meet, organizers set up light bars above the track every 55 yards so spectators could see better. Bursting from blackness into light, then disappearing into darkness, then bursting forth again, over and over again, Lindgren ran 5000 meters faster than any American schoolboy ever had. “I was thinking,” he wrote, “if running killed me, it’d be better for everyone anyway. I think that helped.”

Since the **USA-USSR dual** track meets had begun in 1958, no American had ever won the 10,000 meters. Lindgren’s fastest time was a full minute slower than world-class pace. Still, the coach of the American team, Sam Bell, then the coach at Oregon State, asked Lindgren to run. It was 1964, the summer he graduated from high school. “He was a midget,” says Bell, now 76, who went



JOKER'S WILD EXCEPT ON THE TRACK, LINDGREN WAS ALWAYS TOUGH TO TAKE SERIOUSLY.



COLD WARRIOR
LINDGREN (78) TAKES
ON THE SOVIETS IN '64.

DOES HE BELONG IN THE HALL?

HE BEAT BILLY MILLS, STEVE PREFONTAINE, and Jim Ryun on the track—but they've all beaten Gerry Lindgren into the National Track & Field Hall of Fame.

Mills and Pre were tapped in 1976, Ryun in 1980. But Lindgren remains plaqueless at the sport's leading hall of fame, located in New York City's Armory. How come? His credentials appear fame-worthy. Considered by many to be the greatest high school runner ever, Lindgren still holds the record of 13:44 for the 5000 meters, set in 1964. While in college, he set one world record (in the 6-mile) and 11 NCAA marks. Still, no call from the hall.

John Granger, an author in Port Hadlock, Washington, says the reason is simple: Lindgren's spotty Olympic record (he sprained an ankle in 1964 before the 10,000 meters and failed to make the 1968 and '72 teams) and "because Gerry's been forgotten." If Granger and his daughter, Hannah, a 16-year-old cross-country runner, have their way, those days are over.

Earlier this year the Grangers launched a letter-writing campaign to get Lindgren into both the National Hall and the National Distance Running Hall of Fame in Utica, New York. Hannah became a Lindgren disciple after hearing "Gerry stories" from her dad. Later, when she learned he was not in either hall, she began contacting the likes of Mills and Ryun to gather support.

Thanks to the Grangers, Lindgren has passed one mark: He is among 70 athletes being considered for the 10-name ballot USA Track & Field sends to voters, including hall members and sportswriters, in late July. This year's inductees will be announced in September.

—LOGAN PLASTER
Is Lindgren Hall worthy? Let us know at runnersworld.com's "Reader Forum."

on to coach at Indiana University from 1970 to 1998 and is a member of the United States Track Coaches Hall of Fame. "But he had a huge heart."

Bell told the boy that the world thought of Lindgren and his ilk as "lazy Americans." Yes, the coach knew the Soviets would defeat the boy; chances are they might even lap him. But wouldn't it mean something if the boy could put up a brave fight? Wouldn't it be inspirational if the boy could stay with the mighty Soviets for at least a little while? Could Gerry stay with them for a few laps?

Did Bell have any idea how ravenously Lindgren devoured his plea? For others, he would run. This is what Lindgren heard, and this is what he would do. Not for himself. Never for himself. For his country.

Lindgren turned to Tracy Walters. Back in Spokane, Walters had enrolled in a masters program in education. He took time off from studying to train his protégé. Every day for six weeks, they met at the high school track where their connection had been forged.

Walters might have been a beloved counselor, but he was also a painstaking tactician. He had studied accounts of the Soviet races, their times, the speeds at which they raced certain segments of the distance. He had discovered something. At the 15th of 24 laps—right at four miles—they would suddenly surge. They would shift from 69-second laps—a very fast pace to hold in a 10,000-meter race—to a 63-second pace. After a lap at 63 seconds, they would return to 69 seconds. Other runners, unaccustomed to such bizarre mid-race speed, would let the Soviets go during the sprint lap, knowing they would have to slow down. What other runners didn't realize is that the Soviets had hardened themselves to never go slower than 69 seconds—race pace. After one surge, no runner could ever catch them.

"They were Pavlovian trained," Walters says. "That was the way they broke people down."

There was only one way to beat the Soviets.

First, he made Lindgren put together consistent 70-second laps. That wasn't a problem. The boy had always been good at holding pace. Then, after hours and hours of grueling intervals, he added a 60-second sprint after a 70-second lap. Lindgren could do that, too. Other runners could do it, as well. To sprint in the middle of a long distance isn't as difficult as many might think. What is difficult—what is near impossible—is to continue the race after the sprint, to return to anything other than a flailing, gasping lurch. But that's what the Soviets did. That's what Walters asked Lindgren to do. Run a 70-second lap, sprint a 60-second lap, then return to pace, without flagging. Lindgren did it. Do it again, Walters said. Lindgren did it. He got to the point where he could do it twice in a row.

Afterwards, Walters made Lindgren run up hills and through sand. "It was gut-busting," says the retired coach, now 73, an orchardist near Spokane. "I've never had anybody whom I trained who could handle that."

At the end of a workout one day, just weeks before the teenager would face the Soviets, teacher and pupil lay on the infield grass at the Rogers High School track. They talked about how they met and what the boy might do in the future. They talked about a lot of things. "Life and one thing and another," Walters remembers. "And

“If you don’t know why you run,” Lindgren told the young runner, “you’re not going to last. **YOU HAVE TO HAVE A REASON TO RUN.** Run with your heart.”

Gerry says, “You know, Coach, what would be really cool? After they do a fast lap, and I stay with them, what if I do one of my own?”

A lap at pace followed by a sprint lap was difficult. Pace followed by sprint followed by pace was very, very difficult. Pace a lap, sprint a lap, sprint another lap?

The coach remembers what he said. “I said, ‘Gerry, you’re blowing my mind.’”

When the boy takes the lead, the spectators scream. It has been only eight months since the assassination of J.F.K. and convulsive national grief. More than 50,000 people have come to the Coliseum for the 10,000-meter race, Robert Kennedy among them, and they continue to scream as Lindgren sprints. But he hears something through the screams, right behind him. Is there a more terrifying noise in a race? Kritch-kritch.

He finishes his sprint lap, still ahead. Now he will blow their minds. He sprints another lap. But the footsteps stay with him. So he does something he hadn’t planned. He begins a third sprint lap. It is insane, inspired. To run as Lindgren is running is to court injury, to insure ugly, total defeat.

Still, they scream. A supernova is a tragic thing, but it is awesome. In the stands, Robert Kennedy weeps. Four laps to go, and the boy has nothing left. He can’t go on, but he does. He tries to sprint a fourth lap, a fifth, a sixth. The footsteps have faded. Where are they? When will the Soviets pass? The boy looks at Sam Bell, standing on the infield, then puts his hands together, a foot apart, then jerks his thumb over his shoulder. How far back? The coach yells something, but it makes no sense. The boy continues sprinting.

Here come the footsteps again, faster, more insistent. Irrefutable evidence of his weakness, his failure. Kritch-kritch. Kritch-kritch.

In the fall of 1964, Lindgren enrolled at Washington State University. The next year he ignored threats from the NCAA and faced Billy Mills in an AAU-sanctioned 6-mile race, setting a world record with Mills in a photo finish and breaking the NCAA’s stranglehold on the sport in the process.

During his college career, he set 11 track and cross-country

records (breaking Jesse Owens’s national mark of eight), and handed Steve Prefontaine his only college defeat (1969, at the Pacific Eight Cross-Country championships. Lindgren was a senior, Prefontaine a freshman). There were failures, too. A sprained ankle cost him a medal in the 10,000 meters at the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo. An inflamed Achilles tendon kept him out of the Mexico City Olympics in 1968. In 1972, after spending a disastrous 47 days in the Army before being discharged with his bleeding ulcer, he tried again. Training for Munich, he pushed himself to 50 miles a day. Two weeks before the trials, a car hit him, injuring his knee and ending that Olympic bid.

The next year, he joined the International Track Federation, the short-lived professional track tour. He also did a stint with Glenn

Turner, the Florida supersalesman who operated a pyramid scheme of cosmetics franchises. Lindgren served as an international motivational instructor until the enterprise was shut down. By 1974, he’d married his college sweetheart, Betty Caley, and they had two boys and lived in Oxnard, California, where Gerry managed a Straw Hat Pizza restaurant.

On weekends, he’d disappear, sometimes to race, sometimes to do who-knows-what. “He was leading a double life, living like he was single,” says Betty Caley Lindgren. “He was flirting around, acting like he was a college kid.”

In 1976, Lindgren was charged with fathering another woman’s child the previous year and ordered by the state to pay \$75 a month in child support. He left home without telling Betty where he was going. Months later, she tracked him to San Francisco. “As soon as he saw me, he packed up his stuff and we moved back to Tacoma,” she says. They opened two athletic shoe stores, one in Tacoma and one in Bellevue—both called Gerry Lindgren’s Stinky Foot. They also had a little girl. Life was settling down. Or was it?

He still disappeared on weekends. And when she drove him to work at one of the shoe stores, he’d ask her to drop him off at the edge of the parking lot, like he didn’t want to be seen with her. Betty says he didn’t tell any of the store employees he had children. “He was a good liar then,” she says, of their life in the 1970s. “I used to believe him because I wanted to.”

When she found his note that morning in January 1980, typed, with no signature, she crumpled it and threw it in the fireplace. Gerry Lindgren had run again.

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SOLE OF A CHAMPION LINDGREN NEVER NEEDS TO RUSH HOME TO LACE UP. HE KEEPS 16 PAIRS OF NIKES IN THE TRUNK OF HIS 1980 MERCEDES.

Lost and Found

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 69

THE BOY IS 58 NOW. For six days in a row, an hour a day, we meet to discuss running and life and one thing and another. He comes straight from his job as a manager of a string of parking garages. We meet underneath the giant aquarium, or next to a banyan tree in the shadow of Diamond Head, or on a high school track.

I ask about the "Gale Young" pseudonym. He says it's not really a pseudonym, that the original Happy Feet businessman was named Gale Young, and that after Young left Hawaii, he'd kept the name because it made business sense. When Kenny Moore found Lindgren in 1987, Lindgren told him that he created the Gale Young alias in Los Angeles. "I didn't choose the name," Lindgren said. "It just worked out that way." He later told a reporter from the Associated Press that it was all an innocent mix-up—that a friend had been unable to run after entering a race and that Lindgren had run under his name, and people had become confused.

He says he's married to a woman in Hawaii named Yoshiko. One day he tells me he's been married "almost twenty years," another day, "I think I met her on a beach in Waikiki, ten years ago." None of the runners I talk to in Hawaii, a few whom Lindgren describes as friends, know he's married. But a photographer who visited his rented bungalow in Hawaii Kai says a woman lives there with him. According to the county records office in Honolulu, the renters are Gale E. Young and Yoshiko Young.

He says he left Tacoma because, after he complained about the United States' decision to boycott the 1980 Olympics, "I suddenly started having trouble with the government. They came in and closed my stores to look into my taxes. Immigration came in and closed my stores because they were checking for illegal aliens."

He says he never knew Betty Caley or the woman from Oxnard who claims to have borne his child. He speaks calmly, reasonably. But he says crazy things. I tell him that if I quote him, people might think he is mentally ill. He thanks me for the warning. "You've tapped my heart," he says, "and I appreciate that."

Then he says more crazy things.

"In 1937," he says, "in a little town in Ohio, there was a man who stayed off the ground and flew under his own power for 37 seconds. After 1937, for two years, there were people trying to fly—there were five instances of people staying off the ground for up to 17 seconds of free flight. Then, in 1939, the Ecumenical Counsel of Churches came out denouncing human flight as against the will of God, and it stopped."

Another time he tells me that cancer is caused by chemical-secreting parasites, and that many doctors know this but refuse to cure people, because there's not as much money in it.

One day, Lindgren says the woman and children who claim to be his family don't exist. Later he says he knows who they are, but never knew them, and was not married to the woman. Another day, he says, "I had a relationship with this woman. I loved this woman. Or I liked this woman. She had cute little kids. They used to come in my kitchen and bang my pans."

STEVEN LINDGREN FLEW to Hawaii three years ago. Gerry's eldest son wrote down 13 questions on a scrap of paper. "I didn't expect him to turn into a dad," Steven says. "I just wanted to look him in the eye—I just wanted to see why he left."

When Gerry disappeared, the shoe business went under. Over the years, Betty has worked as a dry cleaner, a census taker, a summer camp administrator. For the last 15 years, she's taught school in Tacoma.

When he was home, Steven remembers, his father took him and his little brother and sister for walks in the gully that ran behind their backyard. He made them pancakes. If you're a small child when a parent leaves, memories are few, and you hoard them. Steven was 10 when his father left. He's 33 now, a hoarder. "He was always eating protein pills," his son says. "I remember getting into his protein pills and eating them when he wasn't looking."

During their meeting in Hawaii, Steven remembers, his dad said the reason he had left the family was because "my mom ran him off. That he was just kind of tired of it all..." Steven told his father he'd like to keep in touch. Gerry has neither called nor written since.

Steven says he always knew his father

was coming back from his long, mysterious absences. So when he left for the last time, "I assumed he was coming back again, and I'd ask and ask when he would be home. After a while, I just quit asking."

CONSIDER THE BOY, a country's sacrificial offering. Jug-eared, with an overbite, he is not a handsome youth, but, with his blotchy skin and baggy shorts and desperate, logic-defying dash—much too fast, way too early—he is beautiful as only the doomed can be.

Think of him then, in his frantic, foolish dash, almost a half century ago, before he disappeared, before the false identity and the grieving wife and the confused children and the countless lies, before he forced track fans to reconsider their notions of heroism and courage. The Soviets are pounding down the track behind him and he is doing the only thing that might spare him shame, the only thing that might set him free. He is doing the only thing that ever brought him any peace. It won't save him, but he knows nothing else. He is running.

It's no use. Behind him, proof of who he is, of who he will never be. Kritch-kritch.

IS IT THE ISOLATION? The simplicity? The way pain and glory are so inextricably bound? How else to explain why running—compared with sports like football and basketball and baseball—produces such a disproportionate number of religious leaders, motivational speakers, and, depending on your perspective, charismatic maniacs or divinely inspired champions? Eric Liddell, the Scottish sprinter portrayed in *Chariots of Fire*, ran with his chest out and head lifted toward the sky. He told a reporter who asked him how he knew where the finish line was, "The Lord guides me." Billy Mills, the 1964 10,000-meter gold medalist and national spokesperson for Running Strong, an organization dedicated to helping Native American youth, says on his Web site: "Your life is a gift from the Creator. Your gift back to the Creator is what you do with your life." Jim Ryun, the first schoolboy four-minute miler, has leveraged his success into a Kansas congressional seat and preaches the gospel of the born again.

(continues on page 109)

"Running with Jesus," he has written, "will give you the peace and joy you long for." Even the gloriously profane Steve Prefontaine has gained in his early death deity like status among the more romantic and stoned of long-distance runners.

The most spiritual runner of them all might be a middle-aged parking-garage manager. A squeaky-voiced, possibly delusional jogger. A compulsive fabulist whose life is more fantastic than any of the lies he can't seem to stop telling.

He's neither rich nor famous. He doesn't have fourth-row season tickets to the Sacramento Kings, as Mills does. He doesn't have a press secretary, as Ryun does. He has neither a movie (Liddell and Mills each had one, Pre two), nor a book nor the fame accorded lesser, less disturbing former champions. The state of Washington finalized his divorce from Betty in 1999. His parents died more than a decade ago; he hasn't spoken with his brothers in years.

What he has are the Coconut Road Runners, a collection of recreational joggers he trains, for free, five days a week. And the Niketown gang, the scores of Honolulu runners he joins for a 4½-mile jog that takes off from the Waikiki store every Wednesday afternoon. And Gerry's Joggers, a loose and informal collection of Hawaii's premier athletes, along with their coaches and parents, who solicit his wisdom (also free), who pass his cell-phone number and e-mail address among themselves as primitive tribes might have passed a potent and secret talisman.

What he has are the 16 pairs of worn and scuffed size-8 Nikes that he lugs around in the trunk of his 1980 Mercedes 300 diesel, next to a cooler filled with 23.5-ounce cans of Arizona Green tea with ginseng. (Ten more pairs of running shoes sit at home.) What he has are the empty jars of homemade apple butter and huckleberry jam that Tracy Walters sends him at Christmas, and a tiny backyard where every night after he runs, he dangles his naked feet in a koi pond and listens to the plaintive birdsong from the trees above. What he has is his unpublished manuscript and his 40-year-old record and his spooky conspiracy theories and his odd, infuriating, unshakable faith.

He so wants to share it. Three years ago, he got a call from Tia Ferguson, a fresh-

man at a local high school. She had just lost by three-tenths of a second in the 1500 meters at the state meet, to a senior. The girls became friends, and before the senior left for college, she bequeathed to the freshman a precious secret—Lindgren's phone number. That summer and much of the next year, Ferguson and Lindgren ran together, e-mailed each other, talked on the phone.

"I gave her a magic pillow," he says. "Told her when she felt tired, just to lean back into that magic pillow."

As is often the case, I don't know if he's speaking metaphorically or literally, if he believes what he's saying, if he wants me to believe it. He laughs, shakes his head. I catch a split-second glimpse of those golden corneas. "You don't have to be realistic when you run," he says. "It's a magic world."

A GASPING, MIDDLE-AGED man struggles to keep up with his teenage daughter. Just behind him is a slightly pudgy woman in baggy shorts and T-shirt. Ten yards back, three rangy young men glide. It is late afternoon in Honolulu, the same time of day he challenged the Soviets. Shadows lengthen across the McKinley High School track. Lindgren jogs behind the pudgy woman, ahead of the gliders. The greatest high school distance runner who ever lived doesn't move from the middle of the pack.

He has put the Coconuts through warmups, sprints, cooldowns, intervals. Now they jog. Sometimes he asks them about their lives. Sometimes he exhorts them to run more, to add distance. Sometimes he tells them stories.

"He'll tell us about the Russians or about Billy Mills," says Rolf Kvalvik, a 26-year-old environmental consultant.

"If we were running into a really strong headwind," says Buffy Whiteman, who runs with Lindgren with the Niketown group on Wednesday, "he'd say, 'Think of it as your ancestor trying to push you back, trying to hold you and challenge you.'"

"It's fact-based," says Michael Tunick, a 28-year-old who spent a year in Hawaii before enrolling at the University of Michigan law school this fall. "Like a parable."

The first time Lindgren met Tia Ferguson, he asked why she ran. "Gee," she said, "I dunno. I'm just a sophomore." For

months, they ran, and they talked about running, and life. He instructed her in the subtleties of pace, and strategy and keeping her knees up, but those are not the things that were most important.

"If you don't know why you run," he told her, "you're not going to last." She had never heard of Billy Mills or Jim Ryun. She had no idea of Lindgren's records, his defiance of the NCAA, his place in running history. She just knew he was funny and fun to run with, an inspirational teacher, "one of the most grounded, present people that I know."

"You have to have a reason to run," he told her. "Run with your heart."

Her sophomore year, after her sessions with Lindgren, Ferguson won state titles in the 1500 and 3000 meters. She was All-American at 3000 meters last year. This fall, she'll attend Duke, where she'll run track and cross-country.

The magic pillow? "That's something I use to this day—the philosophy of leaning back. Even today when I'm nervous about something my mom will go, 'Now, Tia, remember about Gerry's magic pillow.'"

And what does Lindgren do when he's nervous about something? Is he ever nervous? Always? The last time we meet, I ask if he's happy.

"I think that ever since my dad departed, I have had a happy life," he says. "I don't worry about things. I don't let things get me down...I can take it. Any problems, I know I can solve any kind of a problem that comes up."

On the McKinley High School infield, girls playing soccer giggle and shriek. Outside the fence around the track, past the banyan and palm trees, Honolulu rush hour thrums. The air smells of grass and paradise and something sad and sweet. The shadows grow longer and longer; pink pudgy clouds scrape the impossibly green mountains in the distance. The seven runners move around the track in a knot. Lindgren, the ferocious front runner, doesn't budge from the middle. He's chasing no one, and no one's chasing him.

WHEN THEY FIRST saw him, track fans laughed at him, then they were mystified by him, then they loved him, because he ran the way we all like to imagine
(continues on page 111)

ourselves running—absent self-consciousness, elementally, as animals run—for survival and for sheer joy and for both. They screamed for him.


But they've never screamed as they are screaming now in Los Angeles. They started screaming as Lindgren shot by one Soviet on the curve, then by the other. They screamed as he bolted into the setting sun. The more he sprints, the more they scream.

The boy has sprinted—or flailed, or lurched—for the past seven laps. Somehow, he has endured. Now the bell sounds, and the boy is shocked. He won't be lapped. Now the sound of screaming is nearly deafening. Still, it doesn't drown out the noise behind him. He can't go faster, but he must. The sound behind him: remorseless, world-class, conclusive. Kritch-kritch.

You won't see his likes again, so once more, look at the boy. Look closely. Regard the would-be hero, the utter failure. Forty years ago, another world, more than half his lifetime, and Gerry Lindgren is running for his life. What choice does he have? The terrifying sound is getting louder. Closer, closer. He needs more speed. No use. It was never any use. Kritch-kritch. Kritch-kritch.

Only when he breaks the tape, only when the screams turn to cries of national pride and triumph, only when he knows he has won does he dare turn to look behind him. There is no one there. The closest Soviet is 150 yards back.

The boy has been running from the sound of his own footsteps. Now, one last time, regard the boy. Look at him in his moment of triumph and revelation. Is he ecstatic? Is he relieved? No?

What's wrong? 

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