

"IT'S AWAY OF LIFE"

Running Toward the Olympics

BY HELEN MAY
cross country writer

The feet are crashing along, pounding the hot-hard mud path that stretches along a trickling creek. Heads duck under low-hanging branches that lean over the path. Runners are oblivious.

The runners are women, young women, girls in fact. The youngest is six and the oldest is just 20.

Before they pass you, you can hear them breathing. The breathing is husky, rhythmic, rancid, reaching almost. At first a murmur in the distance, then growing louder, and now it's fading as they move on.

Running for the spectators is an instant, a moment when you're with the runner. Then she is off to another point, another milestone in her course.

The day we were with the runners a some went three miles, some two and others a mile and a half.

These were the Wolverine Parkettes of Lincoln Park—a girls track and field club, one of 15 in the state. The club's one of the few places a female track athlete can get experience, coaching, and maybe even a push towards the Olympics.

Two members of the club are hoping to reach the Munich Olympics this year: Loretta Matelko, 14, holds the American Athletic Union (AAU) women's high jump record and Sue Parks of Ypsilanti also at Parkettes, has previously competed in the Pan-American Games in the 100 meter race, and is aiming for the Olympics in the half-mile.

IT WAS A SATURDAY in Trenton's McClooth Park. The smell of fresh cut grass gave a Little League-picknick type spin to the gathering.

Proud, concerned fathers with holding belted smoked cigars and cigarettes as they watched the girls first mark off the course, then walk it. Walking the course is necessary since 8-year-olds sometimes get lost on a long run—but what the girls called walking seemed to be a fast trot to me. That was until they were off running for real.

Racing, running to the finish, against some inner deadline, some inner pressure which wins over rough terrain, weak lungs, dripping sweat, and the spectators gawking at all that effort.

"We've run in two international championships," Dick Dick, the Parkettes coach is saying.

"And the whole thing started on a fluke back when Lincoln Park eliminated interscholastic sports. I just couldn't agree with that philosophy."

Dick's an English-history instructor at junior high level in Lincoln Park, a former runner and boys' coach, now Parkettes coach.

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for me," he was saying as he watched his young wife, Pamela run with the other girls. Pamela is just 20—and top runner of the Parkettes—she's won Junior AAU cross-country championships and been to the World Games (a sort of Olympics for cross country runners) twice.

Dick's a lean man, wearing loose fitting dark trousers and an olive green sport shirt. His face is ruddy, lines drawn tight around his jaw. He explains all the lean and mean track clubs, why they're necessary.

"There's a certain amount of pride in the discipline you need when running," Dick continues. "I always compare it to a field of freshly fallen snow. Running is like that field when you race across it alone, your feet sinking deep into the crust of snow. It's a feeling, you'll find no where else."

AS THE GIRLS were running, Dick coach-bulhorn and stopwatch in hand; he was running too, at times to coax the girls along.

Pam was in the field of runners, going three miles. Her pigtail bobbed in the air, her feet and knees locked up and down. Just eight weeks earlier she had a baby.

"I want to get back in shape as soon as possible," Pam said. "This is the second time I've been out on a run since I had the baby. I figure if I force myself, I'll make it quicker."

The baby comes along to the practice and Pam finds a couple of mothers of younger girls who don't mind watching the sleeping infant.

Saturday the nine-year-olds ran the mile and a half. They could have been mistaken for a bunch of youngsters out at play, that is, until they were rounding the last half mile. There, the coach caught the slackers, coaxed the walkers and all picked up legs with great determination. Flushed cheeks, soaking shirts showed they were very weary. The six-over-odd in the group though still looked playful.

"I REALLY don't like getting them too young," Dick says. "A girl's body goes through a lot of changes. The best time for a girl to run is when she is a young adolescent. Trouble is that magic age of 14—the girls fall in love and fall out of shape. That's the drop out time."

"I like to take my runners slowly—let them build up gradually so that when they do reach a peak of performance there's solid physical fitness underneath."

"Some of these girls will make the Olympics next time, if they stick with it. I wish some of them would qualify this year—but I know reality they have slim chance."

Loretta Matelko of Lincoln Park has a chance in the high jump where the qualifying is 5 feet 9. She's already jumped 5-7.

Saturday Loretta was running the three-mile, leaving along with the others. The field is quiet when the runners are at the far end, but as they cross the finish mark the shouting starts.

When a girl ends her run she holds her trembling legs and walks slowly with shaky knees but suddenly she gets enough energy to scream at the others near the line.

"Come on Baker, come on."

"Push it Diane, push it."

Foot flying over the ground, Pam Beyst leads the pack.



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