



Jim Ryun and the Philosophy of Pain

Through the ordeal
of self-inflicted torment,
this remarkable young
man has conquered
himself and become "the
greatest middle-distance
runner of all time"

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The first time I saw Jim Ryun was in the Compton Relays in the spring of 1964, a skinny kid running a mile race against Peter Snell, Jim Beatty, and five others. They ran at a whippet's pace, bunched like a subway rush-hour crowd, running the way men run these days, not just a contest of speed, but a war. The Americans ganged up on Snell, hoping the terrific pace would sap his finishing kick.

In the middle of the race, in the middle of the pack, young Jim Ryun suddenly found himself shoved off the track. The whole field thundered by while Ryun—a tall, slender schoolboy, with startled eyes—waited at the curb before leaping back onto the cinders, now dead last. That was how he finished, last in the field of eight.

Snell, who won on wobbly legs, is gone. So are the rest, either retired or else running just on occasion, to satisfy the odd restlessness that builds in a runner's legs and won't quit.

Only Ryun is left. The eyes are still startled, like the eyes of a deer roused by a foreign sound, ready to run. He was a high-school boy that day in 1964—17 years old—and he is barely more today, a sophomore at Kansas University, just 20.

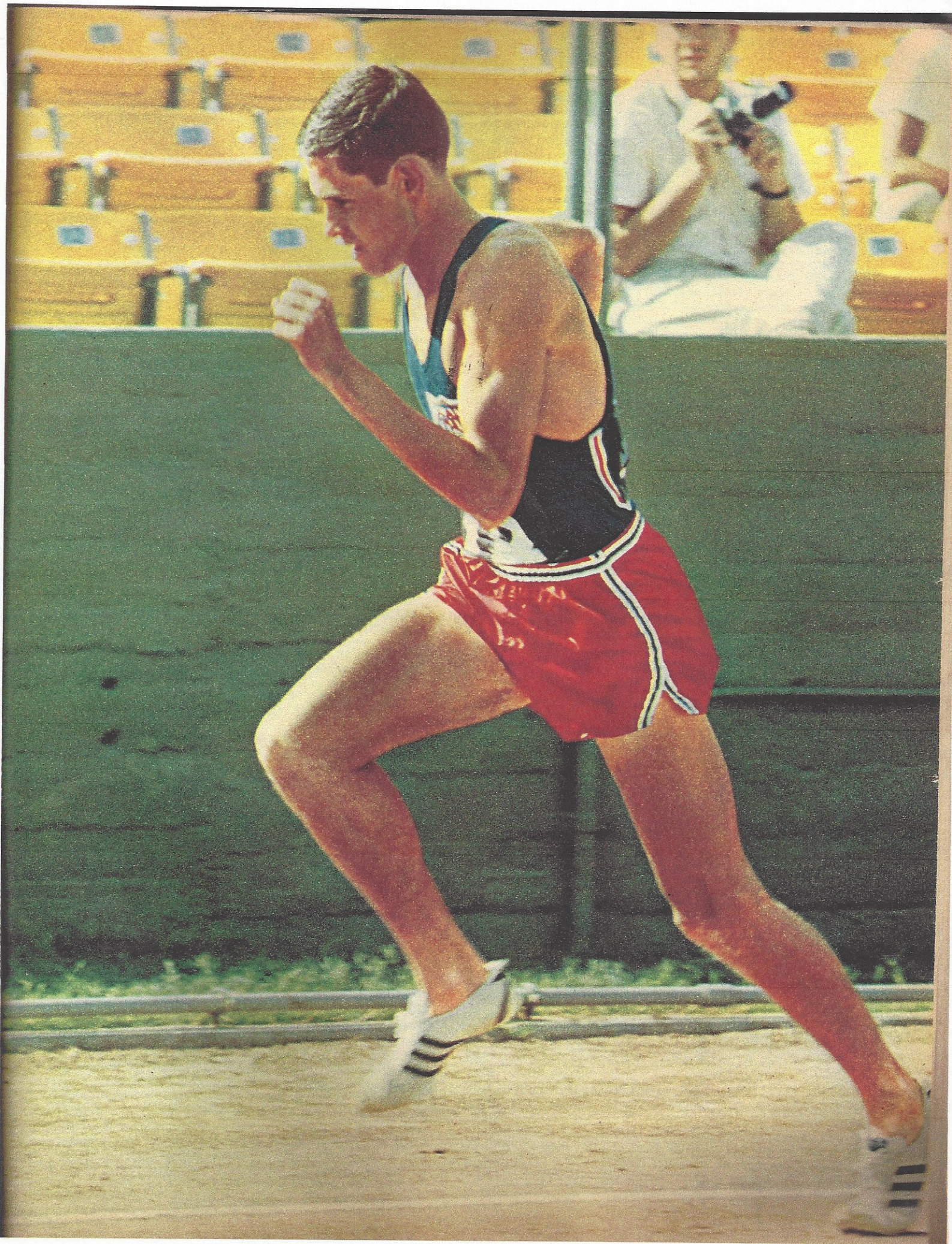
But in between the day at Compton in 1964 and today, Jim Ryun has become the greatest middle-distance runner of all time. Two years later, he returned to the Compton Relays, and this time Ryun did not finish last. He won, and he ran the mile in 3:53.7, a fleeting tenth of a second back of Michel Jazy's world mark. Six days later, at Terre Haute, Indiana, running the seventh half-mile of his life, he won in 1:44.9, breaking Snell's world mark of 1:45.1 (though it has not yet been sanctioned by the International Amateur Athletic Federation, the ruling body in track and field). Five weeks after that, he ran at Berkeley, and this time he did not shade Jazy's mile mark, he demolished it. He ran away from the field, ran by himself in one of those exhibitions that take your breath away, a man achieving man's potential: blood, muscle, nerve, mind, heart, soul all integrated into total effort. The men in the foolish hats at the finish line, the official timers, stared in disbelief as he came gliding toward them, and then he flashed by, body erect and proud, and the watches said, 3:51.3. Over two seconds, and 20 yards, faster than anybody had ever run the mile.

Jim Ryun has revolutionized middle-distance running. Sprinters come along at 17 or 18, to run their swiftest races before they can vote, and then quickly fade away. Swimmers break records at 14 or 15, and are through at 20. But middle-distance runners—men who run the half-mile and the mile—need not only speed, but strength. Speed will bullet you down a path 50 yards long; speed will flick you over the hurdles or the bar or into the water for a few thrashing yards. But a man must be strong to run the distances, strong enough to run them fast and strong enough to still be able to turn on the speed at the end. Such strength usually comes with maturity, the strength of men in their middle 20s. Not that Ryun is totally unique. Tiny Gerry Lindgren is a year older than Ryun and has been running his fabled distance races just as long. There are others, and more will come. It is a new age—an age where a youngster, still in his teens, is as strong as a man—and Ryun has helped make it what it is.

What it is is a revolution in running. A young revolution. It marks Jim Ryun's generation. Some youngsters drop out, withdraw. The race—the world—is too swift, too hard, too cruel. But others find that the competition whets them. They are the youngsters with the competitive urge, the killer instinct. They are on the rush, and they will take over, more hardnosed than the fading generation they are kicking out.

Jim Ryun. Twenty years old this past April 29. Thirteen days younger than Lew Alcindor, who is just starting to face the toughening competition. Years younger than Cassius Clay, who seems perennial youth. Five years younger than Richie Allen. Three years younger than Rick Barry; years younger than Donny Anderson, Tommy Nobis, Dave Bing, Joe Frazier, Mike Garrett. He is the youngest great track star in this new golden age of sports, the age of the young prince turning out the old king from his place on the hill, in center field, in the bucket, in the T, on the ice, on the fairway.

Jim Ryun does not think in these terms. He would be appalled if he thought anybody did. He is a boy, not a man, and when you meet him, you think: My, what a nice kid. Polite. Earnest. Ingenious. But that is the surface, and though it is true, there is more. Ryun has gone through a regimen of arduous training, a diet of pain, almost not to be believed, except that it is common in the track world. He has run his 85 to 100 miles nearly every week



for years now, lonely miles through the wheatlands of Kansas, tramping miles through the slush and snow of the hilly streets of Lawrence, Kansas, boring circles on a track of cinders, miles of sprints and canters, miles that grind away at the heart and lungs and mind, stultifying miles that glaze the eye and edge you closer to the dim grey area of oxygen debt when your body cries for an end to the self-inflicted torment.

It has hardened Jim Ryun, without harming him. But beneath the nice, polite, earnest shell is an icy blade of confidence, whetted by those long, lonely, empty, gasping miles. He is soft on the outside and hard on the inside, a boy on the outside, a man inside, flesh here and steel there, startled eyes here and clean hard white bone there. It reminds me of a short story by Jack London, *The Game*, which tells why a young boxer chooses to batter another man in the ring and be battered. The boxer tells his girl friend how he feels—clean all over, not just outside clean, but inside clean, down to the bone and then inside the bone. And the girl, who is soft like you or me, sees these two people, the boy here and the man there, the tenderness and the hardness.

Jim Ryun would never want to batter a man. But he likes what he is doing. And he knows the alternative, because he is not unique. "If you don't train," he says softly, "there are plenty of runners who will whip you." In the winter of 1966, Jim Ryun suffered a mild back injury, forcing him to give up cross-country running, and throwing his 1967 schedule slightly out of whack. In 1967, he has already lost races at 100, 600 and 880 yards, and at two miles. They climb up your back, if you don't train. So the combination in Ryun is one of pride and fear. Fear of the other guy; pride in himself. This is what makes Ryun run.

He was born on April 29, 1947. That year the one-mile record was 4:01.4, set by Sweden's Gunder Hagg.

There it stood, so close to four minutes yet so far, for nearly a decade, through the first seven years of Jim Ryun's life. Not a mark, but a barrier.

Jim Ryun had an older brother and later a younger sister, but neither his brother, nor his father was an athlete. The father, Gerald Ryun, was a toolmaker at Boeing Aircraft in Wichita, Kansas, where the family lived in a white frame house. Jim played sandlot baseball and rode a bike, but you wouldn't have tabbed him an athlete. He was a tall skinny kid, with big hazel eyes, a skinny neck, broad shoulders but very bony, and long skinny legs. In junior high school, all the students had to run the 50-yard dash. Jim ran his 50 barefoot, in just over six seconds, pretty good but no cigar, and he didn't make the junior-high team.

Nor was he a terribly healthy kid. "I was home one day when I became very ill," he recalls. "I began to vomit. I tried to eat, but I couldn't keep anything down. Not even soup. We got the doctor. An hour later my appendix was removed. I was so sick I passed out when I checked into the hospital. They didn't have to use anesthesia. If I'd waited four or five hours longer, I wouldn't have lived. Then I contracted—what's the word; what's the next thing after appendicitis?—yes, peritonitis. I was pretty sick."

He also had a hernia operation, and it turned out the reason he squinted was he was nearsighted, and he began to show allergic reactions to dust and feathers. They bothered his throat.

He attended Wichita East High School, and in his sophomore year the school held an assembly at which the athletic program was explained. Jim decided to try out for the cross-country squad that fall. This was 1962, the year Jim Ryun met track coach Bob Timmons. Timmons is an ex-Marine and a shrewd man. Nobody really tries out for track—Timmons knew—unless he wants to run, maybe even loves to run.

Jim Ryun, perhaps without knowing it, loved to run. You ask him today why he runs, and he says, "I run for different reasons at different times. In the beginning, it was a way of life, a drive for a letter, a desire to make the team."

A way of life.

So he ran a practice mile, a skinny kid at 6-1 and 145 pounds, and finished behind 13 teammates, in 5:38. He ran his first race, a two-mile race, and finished sixth. Then he ran another mile, and the few weeks of practice suddenly paid off. He ran an amazing 4:26.4 in the spring of 1963, and coach Bob Timmons, who'd been spelling the name "Ryan," learned the right spelling. The training now truly began. Ryun had a paper route which he delivered on a bike early in the morning. Then he'd cycle to the high school and put in his first five miles of the day, out on the lonely roads of Wichita. All this before his first class. After school, he'd put in more miles, as Timmons stepped up the program.

There isn't much finesse to Timmons and his training. There isn't much finesse to running. You can learn pretty quickly how to carry your arms and your head and raise your knees to get the most of your stride. The rest is work. Work and pain.

Timmons laid out the work schedule for his protegee. A typical afternoon might find Ryun reeling off ten quarter-mile dashes in 70 seconds each, followed by such exercises as weightlifting, then ten more quarters in 68 seconds each, more calisthenics, ten more 440s in 66 seconds each, a mile of jogging and a 15-minute swim. Timmons calls it "the philosophy of pain." You build up stamina. More, you punch through the fatigue barrier, the pain barrier, to that area of third and fourth wind. Today, Ryun will run a race in which his legs feel "heavy" two or three different times along the route. He runs right on through the heaviness.

He and Timmons embarked on a program geared to get Jim through a mile in less than four minutes. Not at some vague future date, but right away, in high school. Nobody ever had run the mile under four minutes in high school, but then nobody had ever run the sub-four-minute mile until Roger Bannister, and then like water behind a crumbled dike, the sub-four-minute milers poured through. Why not a high-schooler?

The results kept right on amazing everyone, except Timmons and Ryun. In the summer of 1963—16 years old—he ran in a Missouri Valley AAU meet, and completed the swiftest double in Kansas prep history, a 4:08.2 mile and a 1:54.5 half. He had a teammate and friend, Mike Petterson, who ran a 4:10 mile in high school and a 14:20 three-mile ("pretty great," says Ryun, "until Gerry Lindgren came along."), and the two boys ran together and helped each other.

Which is not to say it was not grueling, boring, painful. You couldn't always find somebody to run with. You had to do it alone. Once, in his junior year, Ryun came back from one such session of early morning miles, by himself, and as he peeled off his track suit, he wondered aloud why he was doing it. Timmons quickly told him why, and Ryun says today it wasn't really a case of "nearly quitting," as has been reported. "I was running in snow, over ice, and in cold. I'd do a hundred to 120 miles a week. It was still new to me, all the work, and I didn't know whether it was worth it." Timmons told him it was, and that was that. All Jim wanted was reassurance from the man he trusted.

At the end of that junior year, Timmons was hired to coach track at Kansas U., in Lawrence, and Ryun's new high-school coach became J.D. Edmiston. If Timmons gave Ryun a base from which all else has been built, Edmiston gave Ryun something less tangible, yet just as important. "Mr. Edmiston made me make a few decisions on my own," Ryun says. "Everybody before had told me what to do. Not just about track, but about life in general." Timmons had given the orders, tightened the reins; now Edmiston loosened them, and Ryun found he ran just as well, and with a sense of freedom. He was starting to become his own man. Which is a problem of school athletics. You have a young mind, a young body, and both the mind and the body seem to want to grow at their own pace and in their own way. But along comes a coach—football, track, swimming, whatever—and the mind and the body are bent to the will of the coach, a stronger man, obviously a wiser man, and an older man. It makes for a great young

athlete, though it may make for a constricted man.

Still, how constricted is it? Ryun answers: "Kids say to me, 'Gee, Jim, you have an awful lot of work.' Yet what do I miss? How many of them have been to Kiev or Japan? There is some sacrifice, some self-denial. But it is balanced."

In 1964 Jim ran the last lap of a sprint medley relay race at a meet in Manhattan, Kansas, and Wichita East set an interscholastic record of 3:25. Good college teams often don't run the sprint medley any faster.

And that June, young Ryun found himself in Compton, California, running against Peter Snell, Jim Beatty and the rest. They shoved him off the track and ran past him, but he climbed back on the track, and when the race was over, all eight men had broken four minutes. Ryun was 17.

This was 1964. An Olympiad. They would be running in Tokyo in October. You knew some of the Americans who'd go—Bob Hayes, Henry Carr, John Thomas, Mike Larrabee, Bob Schul, Al Oerter. And you knew Snell would be there, and Brumel, and others, the greatest in the world, men who had established themselves over the years. Men. Not boys. In the States, Dyrol Burleson would go, and probably Tom O'Hara. These two were a whiff of a second apart, with nobody else as good. Jim Grelle won the 1500-meter run at the US-USSR meet that summer, and afterwards Grelle said, "I've already bought my wife a roundtrip ticket to Tokyo."

And so when you ask Jim Ryun to name the races he best remembers, he begins with the final Olympic trial.

"It was a breakthrough race," he says. They ran it at the Los Angeles Coliseum, in September of 1964, and seven men lined up to see which three would line up again half a world away. "I was in last place with 150 yards to go," Ryun recalls. "I thought, 'I've put in an awful lot of work to finish this way.' So I told myself, 'Try harder.'"

Ahead of him were six men, but only three counted, the first three, Burleson, O'Hara and Grelle. Ryun drove up to Grelle's shoulder, and then with the tape just ahead, he summoned whatever it is men summon. He edged out Grelle at the tape, and made the trip to Tokyo.

Maybe he shouldn't have gone. He picked up a cold in Tokyo. He often gets sick when he travels. This one was worse than usual.

Did he think it was psychosomatic, he was asked?

"Define it," he said.

It was defined, and he said, "Gee, maybe the pressure made me feel worse."

At Tokyo, he roomed with Burleson. Ryun calls Burleson his idol. "He was so nice and friendly. He helped me. In the Nationals, he once ran to the outside so I would not be too close to the curb."

But Burleson could not help Ryun in his heat at Tokyo. Ten men ran, or rather, nine men and a boy. You look at photographs of that race, and you study the faces, men with grim looks, half-sneers, half-snarls, lips drawn back to show teeth. Then there is Ryun. He is easy to see, because he is far to the outside. You could have thrown a hula hoop over the heads of the nine men. They shouldered Ryun to the middle of the track, where he ran 20 yards farther than anybody else, and in the field of ten, the kid finished ninth. End of an Olympiad.

But with the pressure of Tokyo now off, the cold went away, and in Osaka, Japan, Ryun ran on a 6000-meter team with Bill Dellinger, George Young and Bob Schul, and they set an American record of 15 minutes, 26.2 seconds.

He came back and resumed his successful war on the four-minute mile, and in 1965 he ran it in 3:58, fastest ever by a schoolboy.

He finished high school in June of 1965, and joined Bob Timmons at Kansas U. in the fall, on a full athletic scholarship. But before college, he went to Russia, with the U.S. track-and-field team, to compete in Kiev, and he ran second to Jim Grelle in the 1500. But all the pain was paying off. He'd seen the Buddhist temples of Japan;

now he'd been to Europe. The reasons he runs keep changing, and one of the reasons they change is he keeps fulfilling them. He ran, at first, as a way of life, and to make the team, win his letter. He made the team and won his letter. "In my junior year of high school," he says, "it became a desire to run in the Olympics." He ran. "In the back of my mind I wanted an athletic scholarship, and track would be the way." He had the athletic scholarship, and had begun his college education.

"Now," he says, "I run for the competition and the travel." He gets both. "There is no limit where you can go, and who you'll run against." He runs the relays on the Coast and in the midlands of America, and on the tracks of the eastern seaboard and in Madison Square Garden. This summer he had the NCAA finals to look forward to, and the Pan-Am games in Canada, and the Helsinki World Games.

Not that track is his total life. He is a serious youngster, serious about his studies, his religion, his jobs, even his dating. He is a good-looking kid, with a boyish smile, and the girls have to go for him. But some romance founders on the rocks of fame, as a thousand movie stars could have told him. "I told a magazine writer the name of the girl I was going steady with, and that seemed to end that." When I saw Ryun in Lawrence, Kansas, he'd just been to the dentist. "No cavities, darn it," he said. "That dentist had six great-looking girl assistants."

At school, he maintained a B average in his freshman year, not sure exactly what he eventually wanted to do. "I'm interested in mathematics, photography, the business world, and coaching." When he went to Europe with a touring team in 1965, he took a camera with him, loaned him by Rich Clarkson, of the Topeka *Capital-Journal*. The Topeka paper used the photos Ryun sent back. "I was not paid for them," he says pointedly. Amateur athletes have lost their nonprofessional status by selling such material to newspapers. But it did help land him a paying job during the off-season, putting in six to eight hours a day, five days a week in the summers at the *Capital-Journal*. "I got \$1.75 an hour at first, and then they raised me to \$2.00."

Another influence works on Ryun. Three times a week—Sunday morning and evening, and Wednesday evening—he attends the Church of Christ, a conservative church which teaches adherence to the letter of the Bible, with strictures against smoking, drinking, or even dancing. People have mocked the church, and Ryun finds himself defending it. But even this is mild-mannered. "People say it is a left-wing group only located in this part of the country. It is all over the country." (He said, "left wing," but he probably meant "right wing.") Not that it is either. It is what it is, fundamentalist, with 20,000 congregations and 2,500,000 members, Pat Boone among them.)

Ryun does not think himself superior to those who do drink, smoke, or dance. He and I had dinner in a roadside restaurant outside Lawrence (and let me tell you, the Church hasn't told him not to eat—he polished off a monstrous filet mignon, blood-purple and still quivering, plus a baked potato the size of a football, with sour cream and chives, a salad with roquefort dressing, and iced tea, and he was disappointed when he couldn't begin it all with a shrimp salad; they were all out), and he didn't mind when I had a beer with my more modest steak. His eating habits are refreshingly unlike those of many stars. He does not go the wild honey, mustard greens, brewer's yeast route. He'll take an occasional vitamin pill, but he'll balance it with a pizza, and he does not get neurotic about his sleep. Rest is vital, he says, but if he doesn't sleep the night before a race, he'll try to make it up the day of, catnapping until it's time to run.

This business of catnapping on the day of a race, or at least isolating himself so he can rest, has not helped his relations with the press. Last summer when Ryun went down from Berkeley, after his world-record mile, to run in the Los Angeles Coliseum the following Sunday, sportswriters were warned not to expect total co-

operation. "Jim is very difficult to interview," a meet official said. "He does not always answer or return calls. He is often inaccessible."

Why? I wondered.

The meet official said, "I think he's afraid of the press."

If so, Ryun may have cause. The press has taken liberties. On Tuesday, July 19, 1965, the Los Angeles *Times*—sponsor of the meet the following weekend—put words in Ryun's mouth, to the effect that he would try to set a world's record in the 800 meters. The story read: "I've got the 880 mark, and now I'd like the other," said Ryun on his arrival." Actually, Ryun had not even arrived, and would not for two more days, and he was mildly miffed. "I never said I would try for a record." He had hopes, naturally, but he sensed he had peaked out and was now reaching the stale side of the season. Nor would he have said, "I've got one record and now I'd like the other." It has a cocky ring to it, and Ryun is not cocky.

He is an accepting sort, really. He'd perhaps rather duck an interview, but once he's pinned down, he never ducks a question.

It has been said that the 1968 Olympics would mark the end of his running. As of now, he thinks not. "After the Olympics, I'll still have a year of college." He understands his obligation to Kansas U.; he will run in his senior year. "After that, I'll probably find myself in the service. Maybe I can do some running there. That way I'd find myself running right into 1971." The year following is another Olympiad. Jim Ryun will be 25 years old in 1972, the age a miler is supposed to reach his peak. Who knows?

And there is more to running than the mile. Ryun enjoys the half-mile, the two-mile (where he is close to world-record time), and he'd even like to run some marathons. When Ryun details those memorable races—beginning with the final Olympic trial in 1964—he next ticks off the half-mile record-setting race at Terre Haute, in June of 1966.

"In the prelims, 45 minutes before the finals, I felt terrible. I qualified, but I ran badly. In the final, I ran an odd race. I did the first quarter in 53.1, which is not the way to run an 880. Too slow. The ideal would be a first 440 in 51-52 seconds. I was worried about placing, not just winning. Then with 300 yards left, I figured if I could go hard, I might win. I drove, and I turned around, and I was ten yards ahead of everybody else. I could not believe it. I kept moving, and then I was 20 yards ahead. The race surprised me. I ran the second quarter in 51.8. I realized I had had a lack of confidence in myself." But he found he could run not feeling well and leave the rest behind. His confidence soared.

A third memorable race, according to Ryun, took place in the Nationals at San Diego in June of 1965. He ran against Snell and Grelle, among others, and with 300 yards to go, Ryun fell into a slight box. "Snell was ahead, and he opened up. I opened up to stay with him, and I caught him, and with 150 yards to go, I passed him. Then Grelle came up and caught me, and fell back, and then Snell came on again the last 50 yards. I didn't exactly shake him, but I won." He won a race when challenged twice by great runners; he'd beaten them off. Beating Snell, the Olympic champion and world record holder, was heady stuff, and in so doing, Ryun ran the fastest mile yet by an American citizen, 3:55.3.

How about the Berkeley race? Where does that fit with Jim?

"That one," he says. "Of course." He keeps it separate, something special. What he remembers best is hearing the time at the three-quarters—2:55. "Boy," I thought to myself, 'maybe I can go 3:50.' I'd run final quarters in 53 to 57 seconds all year. If I ran a 55, I'd have run the mile in 3:50."

So he ran for the tape, all by himself, Cary Weisiger 80 yards behind and vanishing, but he did not run the final quarter in 55. Nor had he run the three quarters officially in 2:55. It was 2:55.3, and he ran the final 440 in 56 seconds, for his tremendous 3:51.3. The track world fell at his feet.

How did he feel?

"Thrilled. Happy. But not knocked out."

What would knock him out?

"A win in the Olympics would knock me out," he says, soberly, "or a success in business, in the field I choose."

So that is Jim Ryun, heading for Mexico City, where the altitude is such that a man's lungs are squeezed dry just walking the street. He will have to run 1500 meters, and people will not be satisfied if he just wins. Ryun will be satisfied, because he knows how hard it all is. The very best can lose a race, and Ryun knows it. Even without the mile-high air as thin as a consumptive's breath, Ryun may have his troubles at Mexico City. The Olympics could knock him out, literally. They send amateurs to the Games, but they are a tough crew. Bob Timmons has said that in one-mile and two-mile races, Ryun lets others "control the race."

He does. The memory of Compton is a true one. It happened again in Tokyo, men shoving Ryun out of the way. He let them shove. In the States, other milers have learned to handle the boxes, the shoving crowd. Burleson and Beatty shouted men out of the way, announced they were coming through, and then made their move. With others, you got out of the way, or you got trampled.

Not Ryun. He disdains such methods. "I have never told a man in front of me to move over because I was coming through. It is his race, too, and he has the right to be there. If I get into a box, I have to get out. I have to run outside. I never will burst through." He repeats it all; it is a way of life, just as much as not smoking or drinking or dancing. "If the fellow's there, why not go around him? You got yourself there; it's your obligation to get yourself out."

But beyond the unwillingness to shout or shove a man out of the way, there is more. Jim Ryun subscribes to the philosophy of pain. He does not control other men in the race, but he controls himself. Look at the pictures of Ryun winning the big races, his body erect as a Marine's, his eyes clear and intent, his jaw set. He may be a boy, but he looks like a man then. A tenth of a second past the tape, and the pain becomes visible. His eyes roll back in their sockets, his head lolls on a broken swan's neck, the mouth opens wide for precious oxygen, the arms flap like a doll's. He gives in, finally, to the luxury of exhaustion.

But he has won. And in winning, in controlling his body, that sense of confidence keeps building. No, he won't shove a man out of the way. It goes against his religion, against his grain. But more, he doesn't think he has to. He *knows* how good he is. Not cocky, no, because he never says these things, but a man would be a fool not to know how good he is when he has run a mile 20 yards faster than any man who has ever lived.

So when he runs these days, in the awful hours of training, either at dawn or at twilight, and in between, he says it does not really bother him. And he really means it, this young man really means it.

"I enjoy myself. I do not run alone as much. My roommates run with me. We talk about the day's doing. Or, if I run alone, I search for enjoyable things in my mind. I look for new scenery. I run in a halfway daydream, in a daze."

He runs in a daydream, in a daze, because the pain is not real, not important. It does not matter. In its place is something more real, that inner blade of confidence. After he and I had dinner that night in Lawrence—a steak and a potato glutting his belly—he climbed into his blue shorts and began to run the streets of Lawrence. People were getting ready for bed; the night was black. But Ryun ran, for a solid hour, for ten miles. "It's easy," he says.

This is how the young stars do it. They do it with a dedication almost frightening in its totality. And you don't have to get out of their way, if you don't want to. It doesn't matter. Because they're going to run right on by, anyway.

