

Buddy Edelen

U.S. Distance Pioneer

In the early 1960s, distance running was not popular in the United States, as the running boom would not be ignited until a decade later. There was no money at road races and no sponsorship by shoe or apparel companies. Therefore, the name Leonard “Buddy” Edelen is not a household name. However, Buddy's success as a marathon runner inspired a generation of runners, including Olympic marathon champion Frank Shorter. As a high school senior, Buddy set records in every cross country and mile race he ran, culminating in a state mile record of 4:28.8. At Minnesota, he was the Big Ten cross country champion and the two mile track champion. However, Buddy enjoyed running longer distances and wanted to move up to the marathon. He realized that U.S. distance runners were not highly regarded by European athletes, and he was determined to change that.

He moved to England so he could train and race with the best marathon runners in the world. In 1962, he set an American record time of 2:18:57, making him the first American to run under 2:20:00 for the marathon. He was also the first American to run under 30 minutes for the 10,000-meter run. Between 1962 and 1967, Buddy won seven of the 13 marathons he ran against the best competition in the world, including the London marathon in a new world record of 2:14.28, becoming the first man to run under 2:15 for the distance.

Buddy taught school in England but returned to the U.S. for the 1964 Olympic Marathon Trials in Yonkers, New York. The race would be his greatest effort. It was run in brutal heat and humidity with temperatures between 90 and 100 degrees. A phenomenal 70 percent of the runners had to drop out because of the oppressive conditions. Buddy was feeling the effects of the heat, but his determination caused him to press on. Leading by a large, increasing margin as the race progressed, he kept pushing the pace, winning by 20 minutes in 2:24.25. However, he paid the price for his effort as he developed sciatic problems and finished a disappointing sixth place in the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo, Japan, behind champion Abebe Bikila of Ethiopia.

Buddy stopped competing at age 28 and became a professor at Adams State in Colorado, but forever remains a pioneer in U.S. distance running.

Questions for Thought:

1. Buddy Edelen wanted to run with the best, so he moved to where the competition was. Do you enjoy competing against great competition? How can good competition make you better?
2. Despite having a large lead in the Olympic Marathon Trials and suffering because of the heat, Buddy refused to back off and cruise in. What does it mean to run hard, but also run smart?
3. Buddy was a pioneer that helped set the stage for future runners such as gold medal marathoner Frank Shorter. How will you set the stage for athletes to come after you?