

Gerry Lindgren

Young Phenom

Gerry Lindgren loved to run. During high school he ran twice a day, up to 110 to 120 miles a week. He knocked an astonishing 46 seconds off the high school two mile record to 8:40.0. Later that spring, he set a prep record (13:44.0) for 5000 meters. The 18-year-old stunned the track world with an inspiring 10,000-meter victory in the 1964 USA-USSR meet in Los Angeles. In the six-year history of the meet, the Americans had never won the 10,000. The two Soviets led early in the race, but Gerry ran close to them. Approaching the four-mile mark, he was barely hanging on when U.S coach Sam Bell called out for him to lead. The youthful Gerry Lindgren, fighting off fatigue, summoned up the courage to pass the veteran Soviet Union runners by sprinting for an entire lap to open up a 15-meter lead. In the back of his mind, Gerry questioned his own move. "Was it too early? Will I pay the price later?" The crowd, surprised to see him in the lead, cheered so loud that Gerry thought the Russians were gaining. Without letting up, Gerry crossed the finish line and turned to see the Russians 150 meters behind.

He went into the Tokyo Olympics as one of the favorites for the 10,000 meters. However, shortly before the Olympic 10,000-meter run in Tokyo, Gerry sprained an ankle. Valiantly, he ran in the 10,000-meter final and led at the 4,000-meter mark, but the ankle affected him and he slowed to finish in ninth place.

Gerry enrolled at Washington State in 1965 and won 11 NCAA championships in cross country and indoor and outdoor track, breaking the record of eight championships set by Jesse Owens at Ohio State. He was one of only two people to ever defeat Steve Prefontaine in an NCAA Championship. As he prepared for the 1968 Olympics, disaster struck in the form of a strained Achilles tendon. He finished fifth in the 10,000 meters and fourth in the 5000 meters at the trials, barely missing the team. Gerry trained hard with the 1972 Olympics in Munich as the goal. He ran a staggering 50 miles a day during one training stretch. But two weeks before the Olympic Trials, he injured his knee when he had a collision with a car. Later that year, Gerry joined the pro track tour, the International Track Association, but the association folded in 1976. Although Olympic glory passed him by, Gerry Lindgren is still remembered as one of the greatest U.S. distance runners.

Questions for Thought:

1. Gerry Lindgren had trouble making the high school cross country team until he made a commitment to increase his mileage. What type of commitment are you willing to make?
2. Gerry was not afraid to take the lead in the race against the Russians, and had the courage to make a winning move. What does it take to show courage in the face of fatigue?
3. Gerry ran a staggering 50 miles a day for one training stretch. However, he also had a history of injuries, perhaps overuse injuries from overtraining. What does it mean to train hard, but train smart?