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American Distance Runners: Getting Lapped in the Fast Lane

My goal in life is to become an elite distance runner. I want to indulge in victory and be able to tell myself that I am the best at what I do. With this goal embedded in my thoughts, dreams, attitude, and character I am forced to look back upon United States distance runners and learn from the past. In studying the recent history of distance running, I have noticed that American distance runners have not progressed compared to foreign athletes. Each year world records are being set in distance events. None are being set by Americans. This lead me to analyze distance running in the U.S., and come to a conclusion on why American runners are "getting lapped in the fast lane," and whether or not, as an American, I stand a chance to compete at the world-class level.

There was a time when America male distance runners actually won big races. This was a time when distance runners were not in the awe of the Kenyans or other African runners. A time when a little known runner from the Army won the 10,000 meters (m) run at the 1964 Olympics. This little known runner was Billy Mills. He shocked the world in this event, beating the world record holder Ron Clark of Australia. Then, four days later, American

Bob Schul won the 5,000m with another American, Bill Dellinger, taking the bronze (Bloom 36). There was a time when Americans could run distance, but these are fading Olympic memories. The success did not last long. No American man has won an Olympic medal or World Championship medal in the 10,000m or 5,000m events since.

These days U.S. distance runners face a struggle of being unappreciated and having anonymity. They are overwhelmed by the speed and endurance of Kenyans, Algerians, Ethiopians, and various Europeans. In the 5,000m run the last U.S. medalist were Robert Schul (gold) and Bill Dillinger (bronze) in the 1964 Olympic Games (Track & Field 2). In the 1,500m run there has been no Olympic medal since Jim Ryun's silver in 1968. In the distances from the 1,500m to the marathon, U.S. men have won just two medals since 1972 - a silver by Frank Shorter in the 1976 marathon and a bronze by Brian Diemer in the steeplechase in 1984 (Baum 2).

These facts are enough to discourage many runners from pursuing such a dark, unsure path. Many distance runners feel inferior to African runners. They believe that they have no chance to compete in the future and allow their dreams to wither away. Runners begin to ask themselves why they should put forth the effort necessary to become an elite runner, when they do not stand a chance against their competitors. However, there does