

A MEDICAL STUDENT RUNS A FOUR - MINUTE MILE AN IMPOSSIBLE GOAL IS REACHED

[Life International 14 June 1954]

For half a century men have moved with measured strides toward a seemingly unattainable goal. Sweden's Gunder Hagg came close to it nine years ago. But the -four-minute mile still stood, like Everest, challenging and frightening.

It frightened Roger Bannister, a shy 25 year-old Oxford graduate and medical student, as he stepped to the mark at the university's track on May 6 1954 for his first race of the Year. A bystander asked him if he was going to "go for it." Bannister, staring wooden-faced, replied, "I wouldn't like to comment on that."

But he had already decided to go for it, completely and unequivocally. He had a good plan, hatched in secret last fall, which involved two other men in the race. One was his friend Chris Brasher, whose chore, according to plan, was to pace him the first two quarters.

At the halfway point another friend, Chris Chataway, would forge ahead and keep up the hot pace. Beginning the last quarter-mile lap Bannister would take over. He did, hitting the tape (below) in the history-making time of 3.59.4
I had no idea," he said later, "it was so hard."

EXPERTS SAY THIS ISN'T THE WAY AND HIS BODY ALMOST AGREES

According to all the laws of physiology and foot racing, Bannister's mile could not have been done. For more than 20 years physiologists and track coaches had been scientifically plotting the way the four-minute mile would be run. They could foresee the pattern, even to the fractional times for each quarter.

The great feat, they said, would be achieved in Scandinavia where the ozone helps give the runner an added lift. It would be run in a spring twilight at approximately 7:30 p.m. with the temperature about 68°. The air would be absolutely still, for wind hampers a runner more when it blows against him than it helps when it is with him.

The track would have to be dry clay hard enough for spikes to take hold and come out clean. A large and enthusiastic crowd would be on hand, for every miler knows that a swelling roar from the stands gives him a psychological lift in the final lap. The times for the quarters' would be 61, 60, 60, 58. Physiologists insisted that the first quarter be the slowest to give the body time to step up its intake of oxygen to the maximum of 4.5 quarts per minute (the normal human consumes only 1/20 of that while resting).

Bannister outraged all concepts by running on damp cinders instead of dry clay, in a latitude some 10° south of what the scientists prescribed and in a wind blowing up to 15 mph. Because nobody expected him to come close to four minutes, there were barely 1,500 people present to cheer him onward through the taxing last lap. By going the first quarter in 57.5 seconds, fastest of all, he fooled not only the physiologists but himself. Bannister confessed later that he thought Brasher, the early pace setter, was running too slow and kept calling~ to him, "Faster! Faster!"

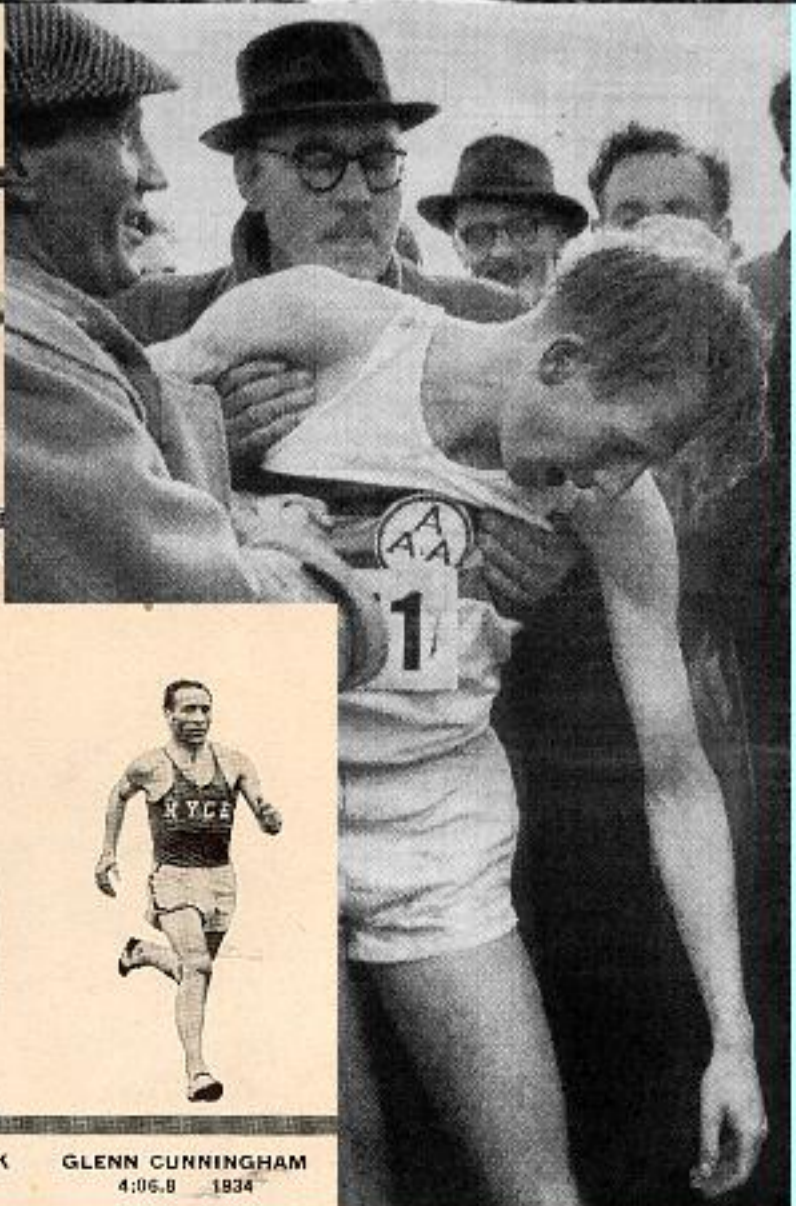
As is the case with so many historic events, it came within an eyelash of not happening. Rain was falling an hour before the race and Bannister was all set to call off the big push he had been planning since November. But as he walked uneasily toward the starting point his confederates, Brasher and Chataway, talked him back into it ---and thus into immortality



SYDNEY WOODERSON 4:08.4 1937 ARNE ANDERSSON 4:01.6 1944 GUNDER HÄGG 4:01.4 1945



WALTER GEORGE 4:12.4 1885 PAAVO NURMI 4:10.4 1923 JACK LOVELOCK 4:07.6 1933 GLENN CUNNINGHAM 4:06.8 1934



JOHN LANDY BREAKS BANNISTER'S RECORD

The historic record set by Roger Bannister in his under-four-minute mile (LIFE International, June 14) 1954 lasted just six weeks before it fell to curly-headed, 24-year-old John Landy, an Australian butterfly collector. Landy started collecting butterflies when he was 10, and running after specimens for hours on rough terrain developed powerful legs and lungs.

When he entered Melbourne University four years ago, Landy was a serious entomologist but only a casual miler. Although his butterfly collection numbered thousands, his time for the mile was nearer to five minutes than four. By working on the track and by chasing butterflies between meets, Landy brought his time down enough to win a place on Australia's 1952 Olympic team. He did poorly in the games, but went home with new ambition and started running 40 miles a week (much of it at midnight after finishing his studies) and running on his heels instead of his toes to rest thigh muscles.

This spring he went to Scandinavia, where tests by scientists in Stockholm helped explain his success: his capacity to absorb oxygen was greater than any yet recorded. Then, late in June in Finland with conditions just right, Landy went out after Bannister's mark.

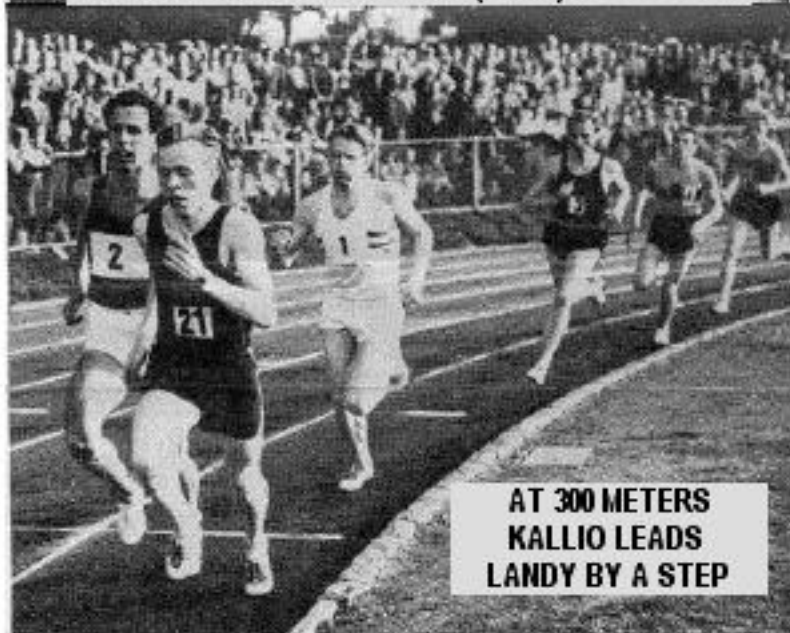
His opponents were four of Finland's best milers and Chris Chataway, the Englishman whose own great race forced Bannister to set a record. In a country whose temperatures experts consider good for setting records, conditions were perfect: it was a clear, windless day with the temperature a comfortable 77°F. The springy, unscarred track in Turku stadium was well groomed. Landy seemed at ease—it was his first chance to run under ideal conditions. The field kept up with him on a fast 59-second first quarter.

At the half-mile Landy moved ahead, with Chataway staying close behind. Said Landy later, "When I felt Chataway on my heels as the last lap began, I got on my toes and said to myself, 'NOW!'"

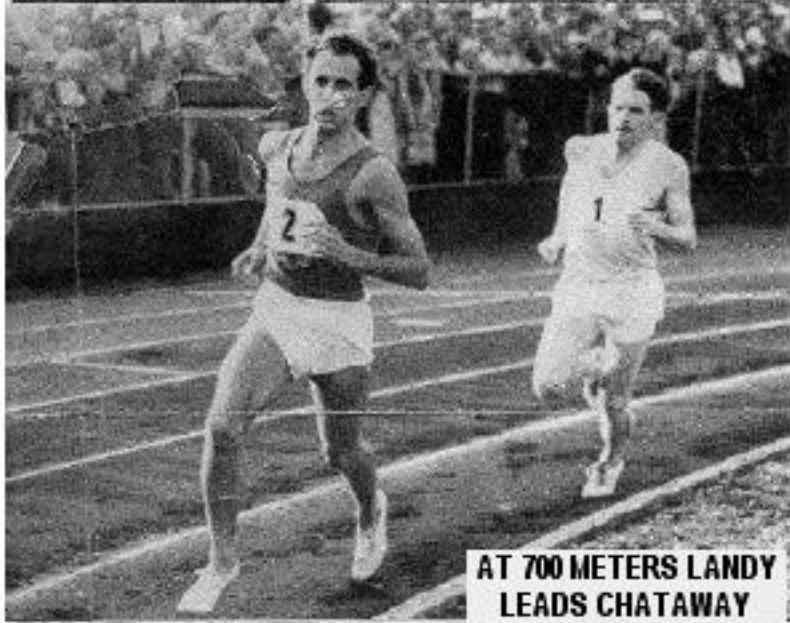
He ran the last quarter in 59 seconds for a 3:58 mile, 1.4 seconds faster than Bannister.



AT START FINLAND'S KALLIO (No. 21) TAKES LEAD



AT 300 METERS
KALLIO LEADS
LANDY BY A STEP



AT 700 METERS LANDY
LEADS CHATAWAY



AT 1,250 METERS JOHN PULLS AWAY



BREATHING EASILY after the finish, Landy, who had jogged on past the timers, gets the news of his feat from Denis Johansson and Chataway. Later, as his friends celebrated, Landy said, "I think I can run a faster mile."



3:58

GREATEST MILE RACE IN HISTORY

[Life International September 6 1954]

In the history of Man, that pudgy short-winded old clod, only two runners have done a mile in less than four minutes. When England's Roger Bannister ran it in 3:59.4 last May (i, sportswriters thought his record might endure for years. It lasted six weeks; on June 21 Australia's John Landy did it in 3:58 flat.

From that instant, a race between Bannister and Landy loomed as the greatest individual contest of the 20th Century

Last month at the British Empire Games in Vancouver, British Columbia, the two great runners met. There were many other events and much spectacle, as there always is when English voices call the fantastic roll of Empire.

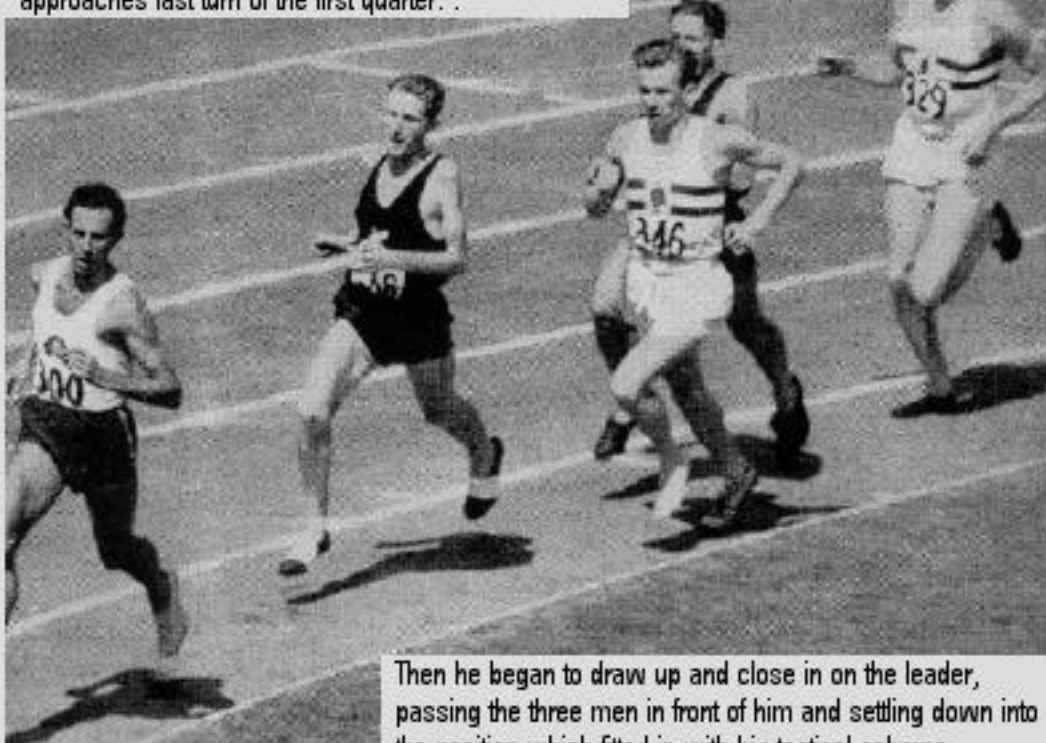
There were swarms of timekeepers (right) to average out the ultimate tick and there were six other tough milers in the field. But it became a two-man race soon after the starting gun (left) and it was an absolutely magnificent effort.

The bodies and spirits of men have rarely if ever surpassed it. Valiant spirits and strong bodies do not always win, as the ordeal of Runner James Peters (pp. 18, 19) sadly shows; but sometimes they do, and it is then that man, drowning in flesh, creeping along the ground and gulping air, may yet be proud of what he is.



A CASE OF SNIFFLES plagued Bannister for a week before the race, an ailment which would have worried most runners, dismayed him not at all.

CHOOSING TO FOLLOW rather than set the pace, Bannister runs fifth as the field approaches last turn of the first quarter.



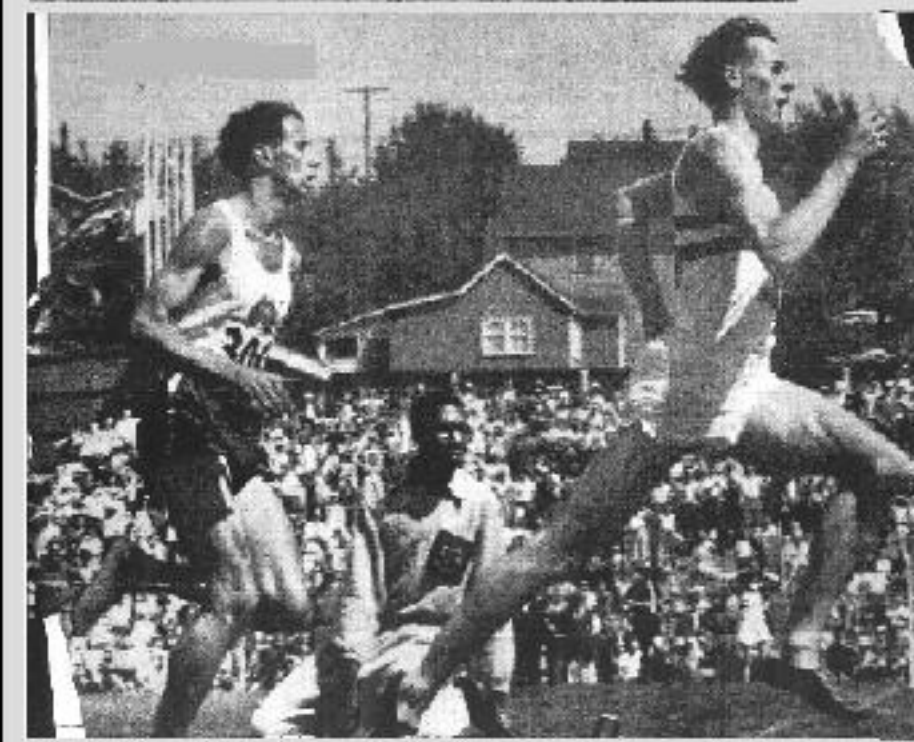
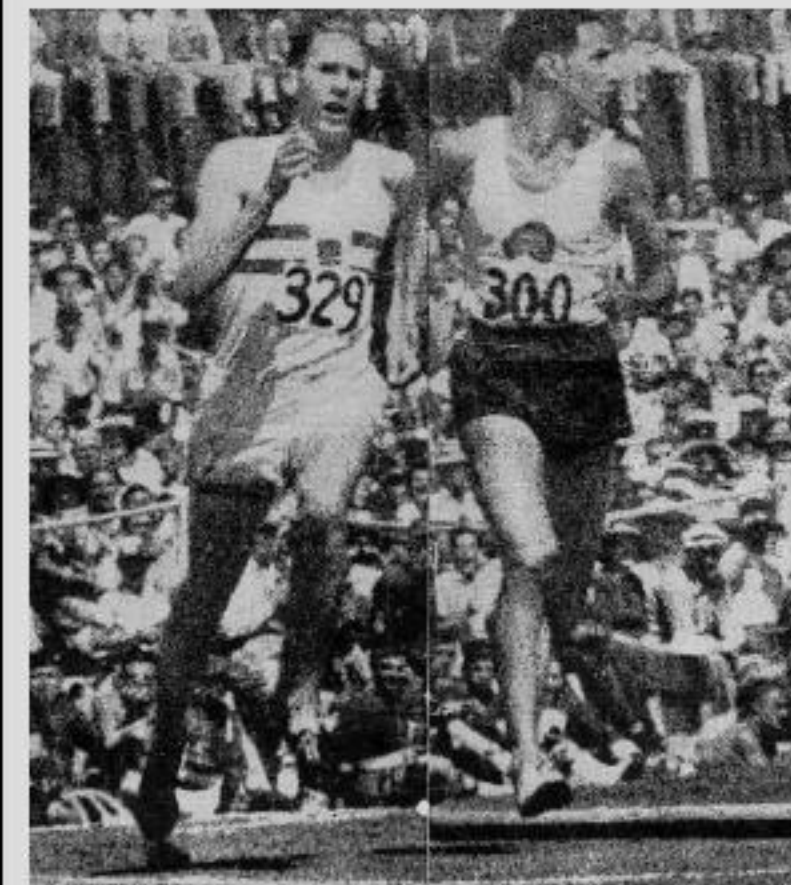
Then he began to draw up and close in on the leader, passing the three men in front of him and settling down into the position which fitted in with his tactical scheme.



ACCORDING TO PLAN, Bannister deliberately used Landy as a pacemaker while the latter had no choice but to fall in with his strategy. Landy knew that his only chance lay in forcing such a fast pace that he would somehow take the drive out of Bannister's finishing spurt. In the middle of the back stretch on the second lap (left) and again in the third (center) Bannister was holding his own while at the start of last lap (right) he pulled himself up smoothly to Landy's heels.



PUTTING ON STEAM, Bannister starts sprint on turn into stretch. Landy said later that he looked around but saw no one and next thing he knew Bannister was passing him.



BANNISTER'S POWER sweeps him in enormous smooth strides beyond the dogged Landy, who never slowed down but simply could not make his legs move fast enough.

When he crossed the finish line in 3:58.8 and collapsed into the arms of the British team's manager Leslie Truelove, Bannister had opened up 8 full six yards on Landy, who took another eight-tenths of a second to travel the distance and finished in 3:59.6. (En route, both incidentally broke the recognized world's record for 1,500 meters, their times were not as fast as Landy's still pending record of 3:41.8, set during his 3:58 mile.) Bannister's famous collapses, like the one below, are the result of extremely premature budgeting of energy—he delivers his final sprint at full throttle, then runs completely out of gas just as he hits the tape.

His cold did not appear to bother him during the race and he remarked afterward, "If that [the mile] didn't sweat it out, I don't know what will."



After complete but brief collapse and some fast nose blowing. He recovers and gets cooled off by jogging around the infield with Landy.