

Three Tributes and a Touch of Hubris
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If you participate in any activity long enough, it can't help but become part of who you are, whether this is occupation, sport or hobby. Long time swimmers, expert bridge players, even seasoned literarians share language, culture and their own mythology. The same must be true for college football coaches vying for a national championship – but no one here is interested in that!

I have been running for more than 45 years. To be more precise I have been running competitively for most of 45 years. I have no great talent nor will you see my picture in the newspaper for any athletic accomplishments. But I don't just run to stay fit, nor do I enter events just to participate. No, I have purposefully trained for most of those 45 years to run as fast as I can and to finish ahead of as many people as I can. This sustained level of effort and dedication strongly influences how I perceive and deal with the world. It also has resulted in a number of character traits, most of which I tell myself, are positive. You may have a different opinion.

A variety of individuals have been influential in this 45 year journey. I've logged thousands of miles with Jim Murray and Richard Gass, members of this club. And I've been blessed to know many of the men and women who have been integral to the Cincinnati running community. While sharing stories of triumphs and failure, this paper pays tribute to three specific individuals who have had particular influence on my running and personality. My tributes will be incomplete; others who have had a more sustained relationship with these men could tell a better, fuller story. Nonetheless I am pleased to offer my tribute to three fine men.

Robert Lawson

I grew up in the countryside outside of Gallipolis, Ohio. Gallipolis is a river town of about 10,000 residents if you included the 1,000 or so patients at the state mental facility located in the city limits. The local celebrity was Bob Evans who lived about two miles from our house. You could run into him around town or at the golf course. He also sponsored the local 4-H Club; these clubs were fixtures in rural Ohio. Gallia Academy High School, which I attended, was not all male nor was it a military academy as many seem to think. And while it was not an academic powerhouse it was the best high school in the county – of course there were only two high schools in the county. As you might expect, there was not much diversity in the school; I knew one Jewish family and 3-4 African American families.

I first ran competitively in the spring of 1973 when I was in eighth grade. Our rural school did not have a junior high track team but my older brother was a freshman and running on the high school team. My father, who understood well that boys who were idle would usually find mischief, had asked the track coach if I could come to practice with my brother. Coaches are always hopeful to develop talent so he was more than agreeable as long as I would listen and – well not get into mischief. Now it turns out that my older brother has many talents, languages and music among them, but he was not fast. He worked hard, followed instructions well, and was an encourager to his teammates – he was an asset to the team but rarely scored points.

I had no idea what type of events to participate in so coach had me try various distances and it became clear that I had decent speed but more notably a sense of pace and good perseverance. I worked out with the distance runners that year and competed in the track meets as a red-shirt, meaning I could run but I scored no points for the team regardless of what place I finished. Although I could not contribute to the team's success I was still motivated to work hard so that I could beat my older teammates and the poorer performers from the other teams. As an eighth grader there is a lot of satisfaction in kicking the butt of a junior. Now Gallia Academy High School was no hot bed of distance running so getting anyone to run the two mile race was a chore. The track team did not cut anyone who showed up regularly and at least attempted the prescribed workouts. The distance runners, particularly those relegated to the two mile run, were often those who could not sprint, jump, or throw. In the best case scenario, boys with little talent but who persisted in the sport over multiple years could develop some strength and some stamina and leave the team as a better runner than when they joined.

In my last meet as an eighth grader I set a goal of running 90 seconds for each quarter mile lap. It was a dual meet so there were three of my teammates and three runners from the other team participating. I was on pace through the first six laps and found myself with two laps to go ahead of all but one of the high school runners. What I remember is our coach yelling at the high schoolers "if a red-shirt beats you, you will not get a varsity letter." It turns out you could motivate those boys – they found some speed all of a sudden and passed me. I held to my pace and thus met my goal for the race. I like to think that by setting the early pace I enabled several people to break 12:00 for the two mile. I don't recall that anyone thanked me though.

In the fall of 1973, the school hired a new English teacher who would also become the track coach. Robert Lawson was a recent graduate of nearby Rio Grande College (now University). He was also black and as best I can recall the only African American teacher in the school. I don't have any memory of this being an issue at the school. However it is certainly true that this would be my first meaningful relationship with a black man. I observe that our first experiences with someone who is "other than we are" can disproportionately affect how we view those "others." I didn't realize at the time how fortunate I was to have this relationship

with Coach Lawson. We spent many hours together through many formative experiences and I am a better person because of that time.

Some of you will remember the third “Rocky” movie that featured Sylvester Stallone as Rocky Balboa and Mr. T as Clubber Lang. The line used to describe Mr. T’s character was “he has the eye of the tiger”, a fierce competitiveness that was evident on his countenance. Mr. T demonstrated that characteristic through snarls and insults. Robert Lawson also had the fierce competitive spirit that you could see in his face and in his demeanor, but his was expressed with a broad grin and words of encouragement, yet with fierce determination underlying it all. He was young and fit with a 70’s afro and he carried himself with poise and confidence.

Compared with the coach we had the prior year, Coach Lawson raised the bar in many ways. If you were willing to work, he was ready and capable of helping you become a better athlete. He had high expectations and then helped us to see we could meet those expectations if we were disciplined, pushed ourselves, and gave the time on task needed. I did not learn discipline from Coach Lawson – I was fortunate enough to learn that at an early age from my family – but I did learn how to apply discipline to something I wanted to achieve. I also was beginning to learn how to deal with pain and learning that pain was not the same thing as suffering. Running a set of 440 repeats on a hot May afternoon causes a great deal of pain, if you run the workout as it is meant to be run. But this pain builds speed and leads to greater perseverance; it is not suffering.

I also learned a lesson as valuable as any I had yet learned in life – sometimes you fail to reach your goals. Academics came easily to me and, well, I wasn’t pushed in the small town high school in a rural county. So the only real goal I had as a high school senior was to make it to the state championship meet in the mile or two mile. The track season in the spring of 1977 started on a high note. Now, prior to that year, if you competed in the two mile race you could not compete in any other running events. The thinking was that doing more than two miles would be damaging to young bodies. However, beginning that year the restriction was lifted and you could compete in up to four running events even if you ran the two mile race. Coach Lawson asked me if I wanted to run the mile, the half-mile and the two mile in the first meet. Since no one had ever done that before it seemed a bit much to me so I opted for the mile (it is the third event of a track meet) and the two mile (it is the second to last event). This was a meet with two other teams competing and each team entered three runners in these events. The mile started as it often does, with runners using the first lap to feel out the competition – will someone take it out hard, are runners holding back? Coach Lawson was good at having us prepared for the early meets and I had done more running than ever before during the off season so I found the early pace to be too slow. Just before the half mile I picked up the pace considerably and the top runner from each of the other two teams came with me. As we

finished the third lap however, it was clear they had nothing in reserve so when I dropped the pace a little more they just let me go and I won my first race of the season by a comfortable 20 yards.

About an hour after the mile we had progressed in the meet to the running of the two mile. Again 9 boys came to the line as the starter yelled “third call, two mile run.” I was the only one to have raced in the mile, the rest of the runners had not yet competed in any events. This was uncharted territory – no one had competed in these two events – so as the gun went off it seemed best to be conservative in my efforts. I let others go to the front to set the pace. We sorted things out during the first lap as the top two runners from the other teams pulled out ahead by 10 yards and I settled into third. The pace was OK but a bit slower than I thought it should be; I reminded myself that I was likely fairly spent so I should just stay there in third. The pack hung on through laps 2 and 3 but by the mile it was two races; one for the top three spots and a second race taking place about 100 yards back for any remaining points. The best part of the race was the comments from the other coaches, mostly directed at me: “he’ll fade – don’t worry”; “his legs are dead – you got this”. With two laps to go my patience wore out and I went to the front. My friend Keith, a hurdler and coach Lawson were both yelling “not yet, wait”. I yelled back “wait for what; it hurts my legs to run this slow”. I spent the last half mile pulling away from the other two lads and finished 40 yards ahead of the other two. It feels good to run fast ... and to hear the congratulations of the other coaches who had been cheering against me.

During my time on the high school team I watched Coach Lawson guide individuals with talent and a willingness to work and I saw how he provided the instruction and motivation for them to achieve great success. My best friend was one of those individuals, finishing 3rd in the high hurdles and 5th in the low hurdles at the state meet. I saw Coach work with just as much dedication and passion with boys with little talent, boys who might never score points at any meet. He gave each individual that broad, fierce smile, the push and encouragement to be the best runner they could be, to develop a work ethic and to learn confidence through the effort to improve.

As I alluded to earlier I had another lesson to learn. After that first meet I often doubled in the mile and two mile. There were several meets however when I only ran the two mile race in hopes of seeing my time drop significantly for that one event. It did not, my time improved only marginally. My depth of talent was not enough to earn a spot at the state meet. I spent a difficult season of life processing what it meant to be limited, what it meant to have an aspirational goal that I could not achieve. It was a difficult lesson. I didn’t appreciate until years later how fortunate I was to learn the lesson early and how important it is to develop a process for dealing with those lessons.

Coach Lawson spoke honestly and dealt with issues head on; he spoke with both compassion and passion. There were runners with great talent but no desire, those with great desire but little talent, and everything in between. I watched him work with all of these individuals with grace and integrity. I learned from Robert Lawson how to work hard for a goal I wanted to achieve; I learned to achieve success; and I learned that success is not always how we define it. I owe him a debt of gratitude for showing me that how we treat others does not depend on their talent, their color, or their education. Each person deserves to be treated with respect and can be treated with respect.

John Blakely

After high school I did not run competitively for a couple of years. I did not have the talent to run at a Division I college and if truth be told, I have the mindset of the classic nerd engineer so even if I had the talent I probably would not have competed so as to have more time to study differential equations, heat transfer and neutron transport (you know, like most college boys). I ran occasionally in college and during the early years of my career but did not train for any events. Around the summer of 1985 I entered a few local 5K races, not doing particularly well but reigniting my interest in racing.

In 1986 I went to work for GE Aircraft Engines here in town and met John Blakely. GE had a well-established running group and a substantial running culture and as best I could tell it was largely due to John. John understood the value of encouragement and of investing in people. He was himself an accomplished runner and the de facto captain of “team GE” but he seemed to spend as much time building up others as he did training. There were local and national team events where GE competed and of course there were the local races where folks from GE would show up to compete as individuals. I would see John around the GE campus and he would take time to ask about my training and encourage me to join them for group workouts.

Arguably the best runner in Cincinnati in those days was part of this GE team. Andy Shepherd had left his native England and a job at Rolls Royce to come to work for GE. Andy was a fine engineer but an exceptional runner with a range from the 400 meters to the 15K. There have been “all-comers” track meets each summer in Cincinnati for years. Any person of any ability is welcome to compete; it doesn’t matter if you are 12, 32, or 82. The GE runners and many others would often come to these meets, sometimes just for a good workout, sometimes to try and run a fast race. Depending on how many runners wanted to compete in an event they might hold several heats. In the mile they often ran two heats, one for individuals who expected to run slower than 5 minutes and one for those who could go under 5:00. One hot early August evening I came out to the Anderson High School track to race. I was on the borderline of being able to run a 5 minute mile and this night I choose to run the first, slower heat. For the 2nd heat, Andy Shepherd lined up with about a dozen other athletes. Andy went

through the quarter in 60 seconds flat and the half in 2:00. He ran by himself for most of the race winning by 100 yards in 4:01 – the fastest mile I had ever witnessed; run at a meaningless event with no awards but your own satisfaction. I don't know what role if any John played in developing Andy's ability but I do know John nurtured that ability and Andy's best times were run when he was associated with John.

The largest and most interesting team competition in those days was the corporate challenge, a 5K race run at Sharon Woods. The event was split into groupings for small companies, mid-size companies and large companies. There was a women's division, a masters division (over 40) and an open division. In the mid to late 80s there was stiff competition between GE, P&G and UC for the large division races. The course was a mixed surface cross-country race over grass, gravel trails and asphalt. In the middle of the race the course follows the Gorge Trail – a half mile of steady uphill running. Five runners form a team for each race with the fastest 3 scoring points for the team. Large corporations like GE often fielded multiple teams. The "A Team" would have the fastest 5 individuals, the "B Team" the second fastest 5, etc. I had taken John up on his invitation to occasionally train with the GE team and I had also been working a bit harder on my own. John put out the call to participate in the corporate challenge and I decided to give it a try. John knew I had been training but he had not recently seen me race a 5K. He also had a stable of excellent runners who he knew well. The "A Team" consisted of Andy Shepherd, John Devitt who routinely ran right about 2:00 for the half mile, Eric Huey who had won a number of local races and two other good runners. John was a good recruiter – many took up the offer and I was placed on the "G Team".

The master's race was always run first followed by the women's race. It had rained the day before but this Saturday was bright and cool. I lined up in the grass in the middle of the pack for the open race. The fast, intimidating runners were up front, bunched together by company team. The gun went off and I got to work. The first 100 yards were over a grassy field and there was a lot of jockeying for position as we then made a sharp left hand turn and headed up a narrow path to a paved portion we would follow for some time. We turned again and crossed the same grassy area before we headed to the Gorge Trail.

There were some things John did not know about me as a runner, and in truth, I did not know them either. It turns out, compared to running races on the roads or on the track, I am good on a cross country course. We did not have cross country in high school so I had rarely run on unpaved surfaces. And it turns out I'm actually a good hill runner. Essentially the more difficult the course - terrain, surface, and hills – the better I do. On that long uphill trail portion of the course I was able to pass multiple runners. And on another steep uphill section I passed almost as many runners again, including two from GE's A Team. John had run the master's race and situated himself along the course so he could watch us pass at multiple points. As I came by

him with about a half mile to go in the race he had this great look on his face, a “you’re not supposed to be here yet” look. I held on to my position and finished the race in 10th place and was the third GE runner.

As a member of the “G Team” my place didn’t count. As it turned out though one of the members of the A Team was out sick and John was able to bump me up to the A Team. We won the large division open race that year and John and I started a new phase of our relationship.

John contributed greatly to the broader running community in Cincinnati. He created and organized events that complemented the more traditional races and provided opportunities for team competition. Two I recall were a relay meet and the ekiden. In the relay meet all events were competed as a 4 person team so winning was dependent on good contributions from all on the team. Ekidens were popular in Japan but practically unknown in the states. This is another team event but for longer distances. One event that John organized and I participated in consisted of 5 person teams. The first leg was a 5k, the second leg a 10K, the third leg a 15K, the fourth leg a 10K and the final leg a 5K. It’s a different breed of runner who enjoys participating in these longer events.

John wasn’t so much a coach as he was a cheer leader, facilitator and convener. John understood that people often need an invitation to get involved then they need encouragement and to know their efforts are appreciated (or at least noticed). John was a great example of someone who understood the significance of investing in people and who actually expended the energy to do so. We naturally invest in our own needs, work on our own success, build our own careers. John invested great amounts of time and energy in enabling others to be successful.

When I left GE in the summer of 1989 I was a good runner but John saw that I could be better. Knowing I was headed to UC he told me to seek out two individuals and encouraged me to follow their training regimen. The two individuals were Jeff Camm, a first rate runner at 5K and 10K distances, and Richard Gass a dedicated runner and fierce competitor. I had accepted a position in the Physics Department working with the high energy group on an NSF sponsored program. Finding Richard was easy since he taught in the department and he was delighted to introduce me to the UC running community; not as large as the one at GE but all serious runners.

Tom Grogan

Now it turns out that following Jeff and Richard’s training plan actually meant following a training plan created by Tom Grogan. I did not know Tom at that time and would not meet him for several years but I would soon learn to utter expletives using his name, following the

example set by all in the training group. All the long term members simply referred to “coach” whenever they brought up something about Tom or his training program. Tom was not at UC, he was at Cincinnati State and then Xavier and he was never there for our workouts so I was just perplexed who this mysterious “coach” was. For those of you who don’t know, Tom is a long time runner and marathoner and an accomplished coach. His most recognized runner is Julie Ishpording. Under Tom’s guidance Julie placed 3rd in the US Olympic trials in 1984, the first time women ran the marathon in the Olympics. Jeff Camm followed the workouts Tom created and the rest of us tagged along. To this day I do not know how regularly Tom was communicating with Jeff or Richard regarding our workouts I just knew I wanted to keep up as best I could.

Regardless, the workouts proved effective. The first change in my training was to run more miles. I went from running 4 days a week to running 6 and the long runs got longer – not faster. If we did not run at least 6 miles for a workout we would joke it wasn’t worth lacing up the shoes. After building a sufficient base, we shifted to speedwork on the track. Sometimes running 400 repeats, sometimes 800s, sometimes miles and other times some combination of distances. But always more repeats than I felt appropriate - because that’s what coach said to do and the rest of the group did them.

Then I got introduced to another facet of Tom’s training program, hills. You might recall I said I was good at running hills; with this group I got to thoroughly investigate this ability. Tom designed a hill workout for Julie that the group used religiously in its training. Hills were run to develop strength and endurance and perhaps to develop your capacity to accommodate oxygen deprivation and pain. That training route includes 7 hills in and around Mt. Adams. Our course started and ended at UC and covered 10 miles, providing time for warm-up before and cool down after the hills. The first hill climbs Mt Adams from the south along Monastery to its apex at St. Paul; it is about 1/3 of a mile and climbs 190 feet. You then run down the east side of the hill and come back up first on Paradrome, then on Parkside; these are the two easiest of the hills. You come back down Paradrome and start the next hill where Cliff Street meets Martin Drive. Overall Cliff is not as steep as the hills you have just run but it is a bit longer with as much elevation gain as Monastery. You come down Martin desperately trying to catch your breath and rest before the 5th hill and hardest climb. The fifth hill has three stages – up Hill Street to a right on St. Gregory and finally a short but punishingly steep final climb up Jerome Street. This hill climbs 230 feet over four tenths of a mile. If you run this hill properly, when you reach the top, you put your hands on your knees, stare at the ground and gasp for breath. You don’t dare close your eyes because you would likely pass out if you did. You come back down via Paradrome, then head right back up but turn left on Carney and right on Jerome to finish at the same spot as the last hill. There’s a bit more easy running before the final hill –

running up Dorchester on the way back to UC. We ran these hills almost like a workout on the track, running hard up the hills and using the downhill sections to rest.

I ran my first Grogan hill workout on a hot, humid August day at noon. I ran well but certainly not at the front of the pack. It turns out the good Lord gave Jeff Camm an extra gear that mere mortals don't possess; about half way up he'd down shift and leave the rest of us looking at his backside. Before the workout was finished my shoes and socks were saturated with the sweat that had run down my body. I finished the workout with the group but was unable to run for the next two days – I hurt too much. Hills are run in sets, you do one hill workout a week for 5-6 weeks. The workout is very effective at making you a stronger runner. They were the most significant contributor to my improved success in road racing.

So as I do to Robert and John, I owe a debt of gratitude to Tom Grogan. He took what I learned from Coach Lawson and ramped it up to an adult level. In some large measure I owe all of my fastest times – all occurring while I was in my 30s – from the mile run to the marathon to unknowingly putting myself in Tom's hands. Tom's gift is not empathy, rather it is a clear sighted knowledge that to achieve at the highest level for you as an individual you have to get out of your comfort zone early and stay out of it as long as you can. You can extend the boundaries of that zone when you've done the work, faced the demon of the workout, and come back the next day for more.

If you have ever run the heart Mini Marathon, a 15K race, there is a point in the event that best exemplifies Tom's effect on your racing. This is an out and back course mostly along Columbia parkway. But right about the 10K mark, two-thirds through the race, a cruel trick is played on the runners. Rather than just follow Columbia parkway, you turn right and run up Terrence parkway for a quarter mile. Here you are, six miles into the race and you are sent up the steepest part of the course. Yes of course you come back down but the damage to your legs is done. You make the right hand turn back on to Columbia parkway and are now looking at another half mile of uphill running. Right there, when you're struggling and now are facing more challenge, if you can reach inside and find something left to attack the hill while those around you are fading, that's the "Grogan Point" (I wanted to call it the G spot, but apparently that has another meaning). You can thank Tom for the strength to not just hang on but to actually race the last third of the event. I and many other runners in Cincinnati owe our best efforts and fastest times to Coach Grogan.

If I were to be remembered for any running exploit I hope it is for the following – which I could not have achieved without working under Tom's direction. While I never found the hill climbing gear that Jeff had I continued to train on the hills for many years, long after my peers had stopped running them. I'm woefully unscientific about my training; I do not record workouts or mileage. I do though have a record of the time it has taken me to run up the Hill Street leg of

the hill route. My first entry is from 1996 and my latest from 2016. The most notable entry on that log is from September 13, 1999. I have a runner's mentality and thus an odd approach to celebrating birthdays, I was turning 40 and I was going to run the hills. I started the run at our usual time, just past 11:00 am and ran the course as I always do, pushing hard up the hills and using the downhills for recovery. My time on Hill Street was 2:37 (for reference my time on Hill Street the year before had been 2:39). I finished the 10 mile workout and returned to the UC track where I had stowed a bottle of Gatorade and a banana. I consumed these and in my Dylan Thomas moment of raging against aging, I went back out to truly celebrate my 40th birthday by repeating the entire course. Fourteen hills and 20 miles. My time up Hill Street the second time was 2:39. I know of no other runner who has run the course twice in one go. I took the rest of the day off.

Running has taught me how to sacrifice for goals; it has taught me that the easiest path is rarely the best path; it has taught me not to confuse pain with suffering. From running and from these men I have learned that time spent investing in others yields greater dividends than time spent investing in self. It has afforded me more success than I imagined possible and helped me see that I am not defined by my success. Through running I have experienced failure, and learned I am not defined by my failure. Robert, John and Tom have taught me that whatever your station in life, whatever the color of your skin, your nationality or orientation, if you are willing to engage with life you can be a man of value.

Running does not define who I am but it contributes significantly to who I am. And these three men – Robert Lawson, John Blakely and Tom Grogan – have helped me become who I am. I thank them and I thank you for your attention.