

Joan Benoit

You need to blame Fran for the next few minutes because he took Tony and me to a fun luncheon a couple of weeks ago, but didn't issue any marching orders describing what our unifying theme would be.

Since he and I sometimes swap sports stories, I'm going to share tonight my profoundly meaningful and life-time associations with two iconic athletes, even though I won't pretend to be their close friends. The second story has a fascinating Cincinnati twist.

Years ago, my family rented a summer cottage on the ocean in a little town called Biddeford Pool, Maine, which was literally washed out to sea in a blizzard one winter. We couldn't rebuild because of the state's increasingly stringent regulations protecting threatened shorelines.

During a couple of those summers, a petite pre-teen girl from nearby Cape Elizabeth began running weekends on our beach, and I began setting out a couple of chairs and soft drinks so we could learn who she was. It turned out that her running was becoming an obsession, and she was sick of having to explain to neighbors why she was doing it, so her parents began driving her to Biddeford Pool, where she wouldn't be so self-conscious.

Several years passed, and I had moved to northern Ohio, and was shaving and watching the news one morning when it was reported that a totally unknown Bowdoin College student who hadn't even been placed with the elite runners at the start had won the women's Boston Marathon in a record time of 2 hours and 35 minutes, or 8 minutes faster than the previous record. And, to my astonishment, I realized this was the young girl who had run past my house in Maine on summer weekends.

Four years later, in 1983, by now a household word, while beginning to train for an upcoming Olympics in Los Angeles, Joan Benoit lowered that Boston record to 2 hours and 22 minutes, a record that stood for 28 years.

What I learned was that the Bowdoin track coach had come to the Benoit family during Joan's sophomore year, and said she needed to get world-class coaching with a man he knew at North Carolina State University, --and you have to know Maine to understand this-- and Joan had said OK, but only if I can graduate with my Bowdoin class. And this somehow worked out.

Not surprisingly, she later married another Bowdoin grad, and sent her kids to Bowdoin, and now serves on the College's governing Board.

It is crucial to understand here that the Boston Marathon was still the most important distance race for women in the world in 1983, because the International Olympic Committee had ruled for years that women shouldn't be allowed to compete at distances longer than 3,000 meters. Los Angeles in 1984 would be the first ever women's Olympic or world championship marathon.

The trials for the three American women to run in Los Angeles in August would take place in April, and Joan Benoit would surely qualify.

17 days before those trials the NYT reported on its front page that "Joan Benoit has suffered a severe injury to her knee during a 20 mile training run."

The word "arthroscopic" was not familiar to many people in 1984, including me, and I have talked with several friends in Boston who know the surgeon at Mass General who performed her surgery, and who says that it never occurred to him that she would try to run in the trials. But she did, and she won, in a time of 2 hours and 31 minutes, and several of my Mass General friends still don't understand how she did it.

It was at that moment that I decided to fly to Los Angeles for the race, and got ripped off by a scalper when I bought a ticket close to the finish line in a packed Coliseum of over 100,000 spectators. Olympic marathon records are not kept because the courses vary so much in difficulty, but Joan Benoit's winning time of 2 hours and 24 minutes in any of the seven women's Olympic marathons that have been subsequently run.

And the single most moving athletic moment of my life remains when she emerged from a dark tunnel into the bright sunshine of that Coliseum to thunderous applause, and made her two laps around the track wearing a Red Sox cap and waving a Bowdoin scarf in flagrant violation of the rules.

Joan Benoit is now 57 years old, and has moved all the way from Cape Elizabeth to Freeport. Just to prove she could, she completed a regional marathon last year in a time of 2 hours and 52 minutes, wearing a Boston Tall t-shirt every step of the way.

Several years ago, when someone told me she would be running in Boston on Patriot's Day, where a million spectators would be lining the course, I returned to the spot in Wellesley, at the intersection of Rte. 16 and Croton St., where I sold lemonade in paper cups as a kid during WW2. Standers-by couldn't believe it.

And I found myself wondering how many millions Joan Benoit would have made in this era of commercialized competition.

Right after the Athens Olympics, Joan Benoit and her family flew very quietly to Greece so they could jog as a family along part of the same terrain where Phidippedes (sp) had run. Somehow, the word got out, and the International Herald Tribune reported that hundreds of thousands of Greeks turned out and hailed her like royalty.

If you ever near Portland in August, ask when and where Joan Benoit's 10 K shoreline amateur run is taking place, and look for the 3 or 4 women's marathon and world champions who slip in and out of town every year and run beside her to her homage, champions from Kenya and Ethiopia and Scandinavia and elsewhere.

And, finally, when a bunch of active and retired school heads had a summer meeting at Bowdoin three years ago, and Joan Benoit and Sen. Angus King were the keynote speakers, she asked at the end "Is a Mr. Briggs perhaps here?", and remembered when she shared soft drinks and rests on the beach with a guy who had told her he was a private school head, and she was a little girl.

Arthur Ashe

Not surprisingly, Arthur Ashe's path to glory was a difficult one.

He grew up in a city park in Richmond that his father's job was to care for, and there was an ill-tended tennis court there, and an old african-american guy who had played the game, and kept some rackets and balls around, and gave beginners' lessons to interested kids.

And, when, Arthur showed some promise, a well-to-do African-American dropped by to have a look, and invited Arthur to practice on his private court at his expense with a highly qualified local pro. Since there were no black teams in the local public schools, however, and no inter-racial tournaments, by the age of 15, Arthur had progressed as far as he could, already the best black player in the city.

So the doctor called a friend from Medical School in St. Louis, and arranged for Arthur to move there, a lonely and tough decision, attend a strong college-preparatory high school, and join the elite junior program in the state, including, for you seniors who are students of the game, Butch

Buchholz and Chuck McKinley.

And, to the surprise of even the two doctors, Arthur excelled academically, and progressed at age 17 to the point where he was ranked by every polling group among the top five junior boys in the country. He was awarded scholarship by the big three eastern colleges, but finally decided to attend UCLA because the tennis would be more rigorous there, and it had a good program in Architecture, even though he almost transferred after the coach told him he couldn't play on the team and pursue such a time-consuming major.

There was one other step he needed to take at age 18 if he wanted to become an international star, which was to have a place on the USTA's seven man junior Davis Cup team, which was being led by a legendary West side of Cincinnati sports star named Tom Price, and was a position that was almost every year held by the USTA Board member who was in line to be the USTA President the following year. Being on the junior Davis Cup team was in that era the way the country's top seven boys could get top coaching, and equipment, and transportation to international grand slams, and on and on. And the USTA Board's approval of each year's seven highest ranked boys was a pro forma vote. But not that year.

It needs to be understood that Tom Price was a tough, sometimes irascible, very conservative, wonderful guy, and he was astonished to read in his morning paper one day that Arthur Ashe's name was not on his recommended roster. And, when he called the President to inquire, after observing how deeply southern the membership of the governing board was at that time, he was curtly told that no mistake had been made.

So Tom distributed his own news release stating that, in exceptional circumstances, there would be eight team members next year, and that Arthur Ashe was the addition. What he did not report was that he would pay all of Arthur's expenses, a fact Arthur didn't learn about for years. And Tom's name never again came up for any office before the USTA's nominating committee.

When Arthur Ashe came to Cincinnati to play in what is now our wonderful Western Southern Masters, he always found time to visit Tom Price in his home

I was chairing a little organization called the Queen City Foundation at that time that recruited impoverished African American students for six local independent schools, Country Day, Seven Hills, St. Ursula, St. X., Summit and Ursulin--The Christian Academy didn't exist yet--and he spent an evening every year with Paul Flory and me and those 40 or 50 kids, and those graduates remember it as one of the most inspiring moments in their lives. Paul and he and I sometimes shared a late dinner after those events, and I will never forget them.

We live in a different world today, and, when Paul gave me a pass one year to go in the locker room and ask James Blake if he might resume the tradition, he dismissed me abruptly, only asking what was in it for him, and telling me to contact his agent. Needless to say, I never heard from the agent.

One last story from when Arthur told our QCF kids about the importance of his parents, and he writes about this in his wonderful autobiography.

He was haunted all his life by the fact that he had only one memory of ever seeing his mother, when he was six, and she stood in a blue bathrobe on the porch smiling at him as he played in the back yard, and she was holding a book she would read to him that night, and he always remembered those readings, but had only the one memory of her face and her smile.

And that was the night when his father rushed her to the hospital, and she died at the age of 27. He told that story, among other places, when he addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations, and responded to an invitation to speak from the doctors graduating from the Harvard Medical School shortly before his own heartbreaking death at the age of 49.

And, strangely, when I was working on an interim school headship in Norfolk ten years ago, and seeing a lot of some friends from Richmond, they thought Arthur's last simple decision on earth may have made an enormous difference in improving race relations there. His extended family's repeated experiences of injustice in this home town, and his fame throughout the world notwithstanding, he quietly asked his wife to have him buried beside his mother in a the family's very humble cemetery in Richmond.