

# The Empire Runner

## **Blast from the Past**

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### **Junior College Daze - 1978**

Tuesday was interval day at the JC track. I got there just a couple of minutes early and ducked into the gym to use the men's room. As I was walking out I sensed something very familiar, and then for just an instant I thought I saw Armand Diaz. For one brief moment, there he was, walking in as I was walking out. Still twenty years old. Still on the verge of saying something funny. Still a pretty good quarter miler and a great guy. Then he was gone. Or morphed into someone else, someone who didn't know me from Adam. For just a moment I was 24 fewer laps around the sun and 500 miles further down the coast. 1978, Cypress Junior College. Southern California. A world away in almost every sense. And then, just as quickly I was back.

Yes, I have thought about those days and the people who populate them many times. It's funny because I had for the most part much closer ties with my High School teammates than with those at CJC. I certainly enjoyed more success both as an individual and a team member in High School. So why do I flash back to those days at Cypress from time to time?

We were an odd collection of wannabe's, has been's, never were's, potheads, drunks, weirdos and two or three legitimate athletes. I guess I fit to one degree or another all of the descriptions with the exception of pothead and legitimate athlete. I had been a pretty promising sprinter, especially in my junior year of High School until I had the proverbial football injury followed by a heaping helping of reality stew. But who were all of these other guys? Some of them I only remember as shadowy figures, most without names. But others stand out through the fog of time. There was this shot-putter that looked like Peter Frampton on a high-fat diet. I think his name was Corny. I remember he was dumb as a post and spent more time with a tutor than he did at track practice. Then there was a guy we called Stick Man. He was a 400M hurdler. I remember he and I used to debate the relative merits of any Motown artist vs. the mighty Led Zeppelin. He liked music you could dance to. I liked what would be fitting background music to the apocalypse. Our whole team tended to line up in one of these two camps. Except for this crazy pole-vaulter whose name escapes me. He liked some kind of new music called "punk rock" and some band called the Ramones. Nobody admitted to liking disco, but I remember it being played at most of the parties we went to after each track meet where we would all use our drug of choice (alcohol, pot, and other mysterious substances) to dull the memory of our latest debacle. One of the guys who bordered on being legitimate was a guy named Ron. Ron was a pretty fast quarter-miler. I remember his quest to break 48 seconds. It's funny because I only remember the quest, not whether or not he ever actually made it. I also remember that he was kind of a jerk. He drove around in this old Karmann Ghia and thought he was god's gift to women and track. I also remember that he got greedy before the Mt. Sac Relays and

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challenged me for my spot on the 4x100 Relay team. And the bastard beat me in a run-off! That really hurt. Maybe that's why I don't remember if he ever accomplished his goal. Then there was Dan the Man. This guy was such a head-tripper. If anyone could psyche himself out it was Dan. He began the year as our best sprinter and over the course of a few weeks steadily got slower and slower. He was forever asking anyone who would still listen how his form looked. He was so obsessed with the mechanics of running that he became like a slow-motion robot instead of the good sprinter he should have been. But the worst thing about Dan was his propensity to blow up at key moments during any race. I can't tell you how many times he would get the baton in a relay, take about ten strides, grab his hamstring and throw the baton into the air! It finally got so bad that he was no longer allowed to run on our relay teams at all. I think this was done by our coaches to ensure that none of us actually followed through with our threats to kill him. Still, Dan was always popular because he was a rich boy and we would have parties at his parents' house in Brea. These affairs were always populated by gorgeous but aloof (at least to me) college girls. Dan always had plenty of booze and other mind-altering substances available. I remember driving home from one of these parties and my inability to decide whether or not to hit the gas or the break every time I encountered one of the 325 stop lights between Brea and my corner of Buena Park. How did I survive? As much alcohol as I was consuming I still managed to show up to most workouts with no more than a mild hangover. And I was never drunk at practice. But there was one guy; much older than the rest of us who was always drunk, getting drunk or recovering from being drunk. He was about 28 years old and had a penchant for drinking malt liquor through a straw. Because of his advanced age and malt liquor habit, we dubbed him "Uncle Malty". This guy was a very good decathlete when not wasted and actually helped us win a meet early in the year by competing in no less than four events. But as the year progressed he seldom was able to perform due to his nasty habits. Through great effort we as a team managed to keep Uncle Malty sober leading up to one of the last track meets of the year. We needed to win this meet to avoid the dubious achievement of having the worst track season in school history, and Uncle Malty would be our savior! Everything was going to plan. Then I stepped into the field-house restroom just before the start of the 110 meter hurdles. There, in the urinal I saw not one, not two, but FIVE empty cans of Schlitz Malt Liquor and the telltale plastic straw. I jumped back outside just in time to watch in horror as Uncle Malty tripped over at least four hurdles on his way to the slowest time ever recorded in a JC 110 high hurdle event. Needless to say we got the school record. We managed to win just one meet all year! To add insult to injury at our annual banquet our head coach said we were "one of the best teams he ever had the pleasure to coach". I remember we all looked at each other as if to say that the old man had finally lost his mind! Other than this, the thing I most remember about this guy were his seemingly everyday rants about how we could all just go join the AAU if we didn't like the way he ran things. This usually came in response to some unreasonable request for actual coaching. We had another coach who's main attribute was a cute daughter that occasionally came by our practices distracting us even further from our ill-conceived workouts. Strangely enough we had a former world-record holder in Dan Ripley for our pole vaulting coach. And then there was "Sparky" another coach who I remember little about other than that he had been a WWII fighter pilot and had the scars from a shattered canopy to prove it. He was always using politically incorrect (even for 1978) terms to identify members of various races, ethnic groups and sexual persuasions.

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Yes, what an odd bunch indeed! Still the year was not all bad. We actually had a lot of fun even if we did get dusted by almost all of our opponents. I managed to set a PR in the 200 meters in our last regular meet of the year running 22.8. The first and last time I ran below 23.

In the league meet as I was warming up just before the 4x100 relay, I had the strange sensation that this was all for the last time, even though I was planning to run again the following year. Maybe a premonition of some kind? At any rate it did prove to be my last meet and my last race. I was the anchor that day, receiving the baton and turning the last little curve before hitting the long straight. I remember feeling the other runners pulling away. I think we finished second to last. Track season was over. I never came back. Nobody ever asked why. Nobody ever called. I'm sure there must have been others who's dream ended the same way. Such is life. Such is growing up.

Life soon took some turns that I did not anticipate, the effects of which I would feel for many years and still do.

Maybe this is why I remember those days so vividly. We were all young, but for many of us this marked a distinct ending. The end of our childhood really. I often feel like there is still unfinished business. Like I still need to use up the second year of my eligibility at the JC. I wonder what has become of all these ghosts from my past. Where did life take them? I get the feeling that most of them probably ended up okay. I hope so. I wish them well. It's funny because back then we thought we were immortal. In a way I guess we were, because we still exist in that world somewhere back in time.

**DM Peterson**