



The Perfect Mile: Three Athletes, One Goal, and Less Than Four Minutes to Achieve It

By Neal Bascomb

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There was a time when running the mile in four minutes was believed to be entirely beyond the limits of human foot speed. And in all of sport it was the elusive holy grail. In 1952, after suffering defeat at the Helsinki Olympics, three world-class runners set out individually to break this formidable barrier. Roger Bannister was a young English medical student who epitomized the ideal of the amateur -- still driven not just by winning but by the nobility of the pursuit. John Landy was the privileged son of a genteel Australian family, who as a boy preferred butterfly collecting to running but who trained relentlessly in an almost spiritual attempt to shape his mind and body to this singular task. Then there was Wes Santee, the swaggering American, a Kansas farm boy and natural athlete who believed he was just plain better than everybody else.

Santee was the first to throw down the gauntlet in what would become a three-way race of body, heart, and soul. Each young man endured thousands of hours of training, bore the weight of his nation's expectations on his shoulders, and still dared to push to the very limit. Their collective quest captivated the world and stole headlines from the Korean War, the atomic race, and such legendary figures as Edmund Hillary, Willie Mays, Native Dancer, and Ben Hogan. Who would be the first to achieve the unachievable? And who among them would be the best when they raced head to head? In the answer came the perfect mile.

In the tradition of Seabiscuit and Chariots of Fire, Neal Bascomb delivers a breathtaking story of unlikely heroes and leaves us with a lasting portrait of the twilight years of the golden age of sport.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The attempt by three men in the 1950s to become the first to run the mile in less than four minutes is a classic 20th-century sports story. Bascomb's excellent account captures all of the human drama and competitive excitement of this legendary racing event. It helps that the story and its characters are so engaging to begin with. The three rivals span the globe: England's Roger Bannister, who combines the rigors of athletic training with the "grueling life of a medical student"; Australia's John Landy, "driven by a demand to push himself to the limit"; and Wes Santee from the U.S., a brilliant strategic runner who became the "victim" of the "[h]ypocrisy and unchecked power" of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU). Although Bannister broke the record before Landy, Landy soon broke Bannister's record, and the climax of the book is a long and superb account of the race between the two men at the Empire Games in Vancouver on August 7, 1954. Bascomb provides the essential details of this "Dream Race" which was heard over the radio by 100 million people while Santee, who may have been able to beat both of them, was forced by AAU restrictions to participate only as a broadcast announcer. Bascomb definitively shows how this perfect race not only was a "defining moment in the history of the mile" and of sport as well, but also how it reveals "a sporting world in transition" from amateurism to professionalism.

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From [The New Yorker](#)

On May 6, 1954, Roger Bannister, a British medical student who squeezed in track workouts between hospital rounds, became the first man to run a mile in less than four minutes. It was a feat that had widely been thought impossible, but within seven weeks an even faster time was posted by the Australian John Landy, setting up a showdown later that year in a race that was billed as the "Mile of the Century." In masterly fashion, Bascomb re-creates the battle of the milers, embellishing his account with fascinating forays into runner's lore. (In the seventeenth century, athletes had their spleens excised to boost speed; in the nineteenth, they were advised to rest in bed at noon naked.) It's a mark of Bascomb's skill that, although the outcome of the race is well known, he keeps us in suspense, rendering in graphic detail the runners' agony down the final stretch.

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Review

The Perfect Mile returns the reader to a time when a sporting ideal was not an oxymoron . . . Enthralling.
The New York Times Book Review

A rare literary win... Bascomb has penned a sports tribute book that transcends the genre.
The Oregonian

A splendid book... Well-written, suspenseful.
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

A vivid human-interest story... Engrossing, excruciating, and exhilarating.
Boston Herald

A fine, gripping book.

The Chicago Sun-Times

A marvelous book.
Kansas City Star

A thriller.... This being an Olympic year, The Perfect Mile comes just in time to remind us what being an athlete can, and should, be about.
Newsday

The Perfect Mile captures the awe-inspiring quality of ordinary men who achieve what had been thought impossible.
TimeOut New York

Captivating.... Much joy and inspiration to be found here.
Entertainment Weekly

Compelling human drama. [Bascomb's] crisp, detailed narrative helps readers step into the milers' spikes. A resplendent story of an epic event in sports history.
Christian Science Monitor

Bascomb delivers, with stylish and swift prose well matched to the subject... This is an agile and informative read, and we should compare Hillebrand's "Seabiscuit" to it, not the other way around.
MSNBC.com

In masterly fashion, Bascomb re-creates the battle of the milers, embellishing his account with fascinating forays into runner's lore... It's a mark of Bascomb's skill that, although the outcome of the race is well known, he keeps us in suspense, rendering in graphic detail the runners' agony down the final stretch.
The New Yorker

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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