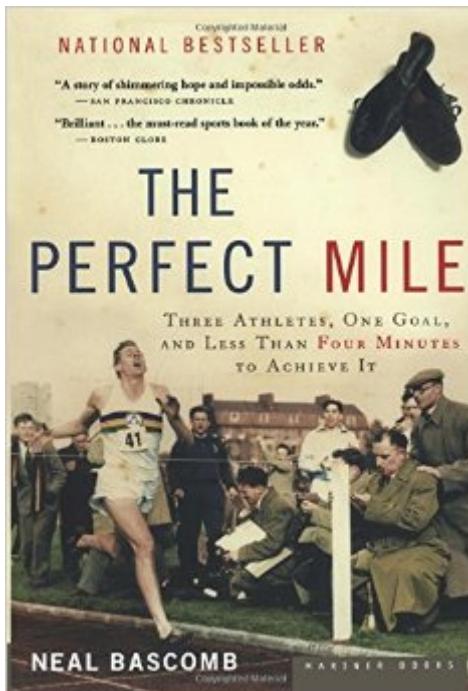


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The Perfect Mile: Three Athletes, One Goal, And Less Than Four Minutes To Achieve It



Synopsis

There was a time when running the mile in four minutes was believed to be 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 each set out to break this 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 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. Spanning three continents and defying the odds, 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. 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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Customer Reviews

Based on ample first-hand details gleaned from interviewing Roger Bannister, John Landy and Wes Santee, "The Perfect Mile" provides a nuanced character study of what drives these three great men toward breaking the most elusive of athletic goals: the four-minute-mile. While serious students of the sport will know the outcome of this tale before reading it, Neal Bascomb is able to create and maintain a fair amount of suspense by allowing the reader to experience events leading up to the

1954 Empire Games showdown from three very different perspectives. Roger Bannister is the thinking man's runner, with the classic middle distance athlete's long stride and finishing kick as well as insights into the scientific principles that underlie cardiovascular exertion. These strengths, however, are offset by the demanding medical studies that severely limit his training time and by his tendency to become overwrought before big races. John Landy is the workhorse of the trio, logging more miles than the others and able to bring a single-minded focus to the task. But he lacks the closing speed and power of the classic milers, forcing him to run the legs out of his competitors from the front. Wes Santee, the least famous and accomplished of the three, may well be the most talented. Yet the demands of his University of Kansas track schedule, military commitments, and confrontations with track and field's governing body are impediments that prove too difficult to overcome. For me, the best part of this book was the fact that these three men pursued this historic goal in a noble and dignified fashion that made you really pull for each of them somehow to be the first.

The Perfect Mile is about the conquest of the four-minute mile, which like the ascent of Mt. Everest, stood in the early 50s as one of the last great frontiers of human endeavor. Three runners emerged as candidates to be the first to break through this barrier. One, Roger Bannister, was British. A full-time medical student and intern, he approached sport of track as the last of the consummate amateurs in the traditional mold. He had little coaching and devised his own training methods. Perceived by many in England as the potential resurrection of British athletics, in a sad state at the time, he carried the heavy load of hopeful expectations thrust upon him by a grim British nation suffering through post-war shortages and austerity. Considered aloof by his enemies in the British press, he possessed two powerful secret weapons: an advanced medical knowledge of the causes of and the techniques to combat fatigue and muscle failure, and an incredible capacity to ignore pain in the late stages of a race and unleash an extraordinary kick. The Australian, John Landy, competed by seeing to it that he was the best conditioned athlete on the track. In the early 50s Australia was an athletic backwater. After returning home to Australia from the disappointment of failing to even make the semifinal qualifying heat in the mile at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, Landy embarked on a brutal training regimen, inspired by the physical fitness guru and great Czech runner Emil Zatopek who won gold at Helsinki in the 5000 meter, 10,000 meter and marathon events, and who Landy humbly approached as an acolyte near the close of the games.

I found the climax of this story-Bannister and Landy's race in Vancouver in 1955-to be almost

impossibly gripping. This whole book is just about perfect. It is about a particular athletic quest, and it is also about a key transition period in sport. There were two related aspects to change at this time in track and field (and by extension other already professional sports). The more obvious was the glaring contradiction between the old, 100% pure amateur model on the one hand, and the growing business and media phenomenon we know today on the other. This subtext is brought out in the second part of the story, and especially in the sad tale of the straight-talking American, Wes Santee. But this was also a period of radical change in training methods. Emil Zatopek, the Czech runner who won the 5,000 meter, 10,000 meter, AND marathon runs at the 1952 Olympics, is the key figure at the outset of the book. His successes taught runners like Bannister, Landy, and Santee that more training, and harder training, would yield faster times. The author outlines older ideas of conditioning that look ridiculously precious and half-hearted by modern standards. As a masters athlete I was especially struck by this phase of the story, and the author does a good job of recapping the sorts of training the runners did throughout. The three are so characteristic of their countries, they could almost be fictional types. American Wes Santee is brash and outspoken. It is he who calls the financial bluff of the Neanderthal-like powers that ruled amateur athletics in his day, and it is he who is most severely victimized in the process. (In a kind of entrapment scenario, he was given extra money by one set of AAU officials, and then banned for life by others.

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