

Ryun's story of perseverance

Running legend coming to Middletown

By Ken McMillan
Times Herald-Record

The greatest high school miler in American history, Jim Ryun, got into running almost by accident. As a young adult, he was cut from baseball, basketball and track and field teams in his native Kansas. He turned to running cross country.

Inspired by his coach and his religious faith, Ryun became the first high school miler to break 4 minutes and did so four times. Ryun qualified for three Olympics and won a silver medal in 1968. He held the American high school mile record for 36 years and was the former world record holder. He was named Sports Illustrated magazine's Sportsman of the Year and won the James E. Sullivan Award as the nation's top amateur athlete. He later served in the House of Representatives.

Ryun is still held in high esteem inside the running community, and on Wednesday he will speak at Kuhl's Highland House. Ryun's talk, put on by the Orange Runners Club and Crystal Run Healthcare to help promote The Classic 10K in June, will benefit the Mental Health Association in Orange County, Inc.

Ryun, who runs the Ryun Running Camps, shared some of his thoughts recently.

THR: Are you looking forward to your visit to Middletown?

Ryun: It's always great fun and a pleasure to be with running enthusiasts. (Classic organizer) Frank Giannino has worked very hard on this. I am looking forward to sharing experiences but also hearing their experiences as well.

THR: What will your general theme be?

Ryun: It's going to be about failure doesn't have to keep you from excelling and becoming whatever God has given you the talent for. I will share that story with them from the standpoint of my early days. I was cut from a church

baseball team, the junior high basketball team. I couldn't make the junior high track and field team. Really, as an answered prayer, so to speak, I went out for the cross country team at East High School not understanding what cross country was all about. The story will be more in depth when I speak but it will highlight some of the experiences that have happened along the way. If I hadn't failed in those areas I would never have become a miler, so failure is a teacher if we allow it to be. It will help us find what our talents are.

THR: Your career was remarkable. Are you amazed at how people are still excited to meet you and talk about it 50 years later, including younger generations?

Ryun: I am. I go back to all those early failures. When I was not able to make a team, I would go to bed during my junior high days and have a simple prayer like this: "Dear God, I am not doing well. I don't have a good resume. I really hope it would show up in sports." I would say that prayer every night. When it happened and as it began to develop and it had such longevity, it amazes me. It's really quite something as I look back on it.

THR: When you broke into track, it was kind of the dark ages of track as far as the science goes. There wasn't the shoe technology and the track technology and training technique studies as there are today. How did you manage to succeed without all that?

Ryun: Technology can be a tremendous asset but it can also be something that holds you back from accomplishing your best. ... In those days we had to learn through experience, so to speak, to get the feel of running, how to train. We made some mistakes in training and often we over-trained, but we gained a great sensitivity to what was necessary to run well. I think sometimes today we depend so much on technology that we forget it's more than technology that gets you there. In fact, I think of Ryan

Hall, who is one of our campers and great marathoners who recently retired. He spoke late in his career about how he needed to put the watch away and run the race that was there to run, as opposed to being concerned by technology. Technology is an asset if you allow it to be, but it should not be the greatest determining factor in your ability to run well.

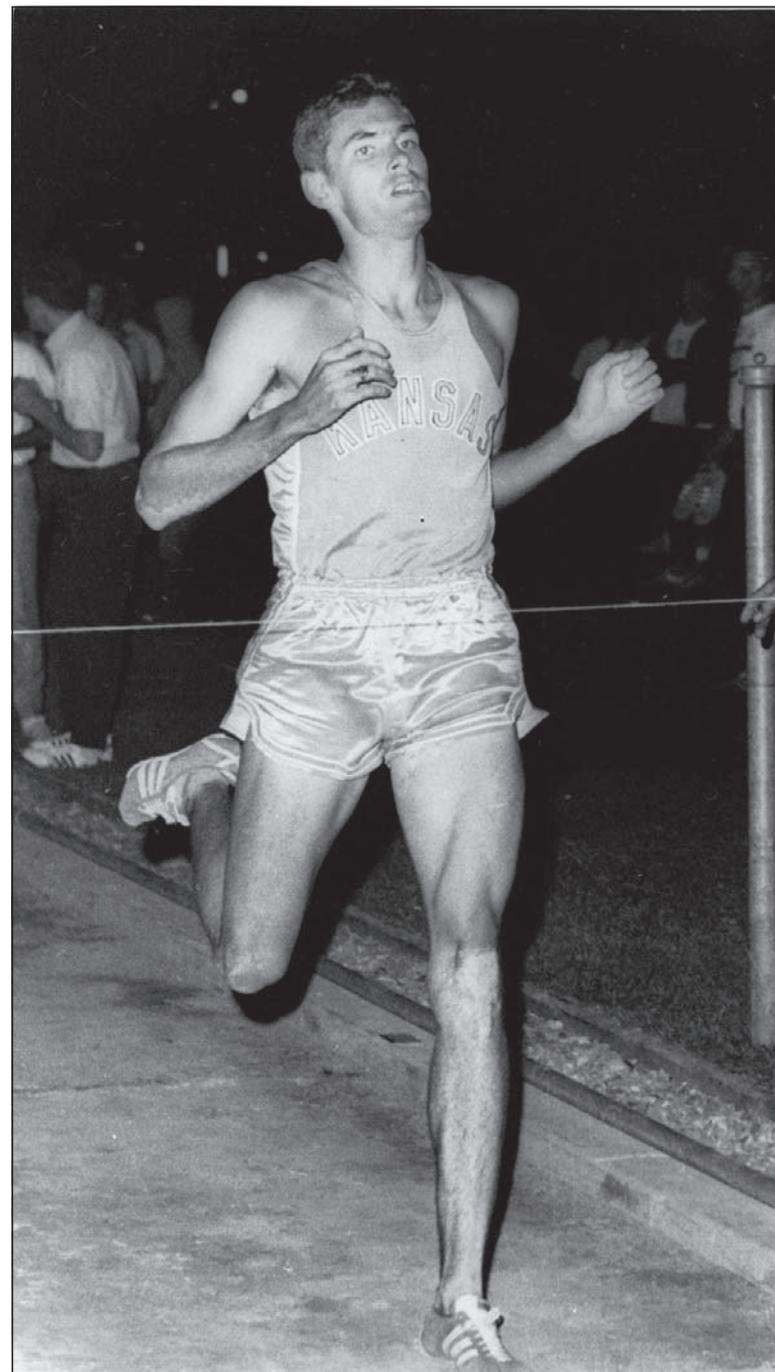
THR: You were named Sports Illustrated athlete of the year, and Track and Field Athlete of the Year. You won the Sullivan Award. How did you manage all the fame?

Ryun: By God's grace, quite honestly. When you have those early failures as a young boy ... they give you that perspective that whoever is on that starting line has earned the right to be there. That gives you the perspective that while you are running well, there could be another Jim Ryun or somebody else coming along and accomplish just what you achieved. There is that respect for what it takes to get to the starting line.

THR: You broke the four-minute mile five times in high school. What was it like to finally break that mark?

Ryun: The first one was in 1964. It was a real struggle just to get to the finish line. I say that in the sense that it was the hardest race of my life. I got bumped during the race about 600 yards into it. I got back on the track, hung on to the guys who were in front of me and with 100 yards to go, I wasn't sure I would make it to the finish line, I was so tight and tired. But when I crossed the finish line I was elated that I finished, and when they announced that it was the first time ever eight runners had been under four minutes and I was number eight, there was that sense of, wow, God answers prayers and here's this wonderful experience. That was the first high school four-minute mile and I think that was June 4, 1964.

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Jim Ryun, seen here in 1968, became the first high school miler to break 4 minutes and did so four times. Ryun qualified for three Olympics and won a silver medal in 1968. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

At a glance

Who: Jim Ryun, the greatest miler in U.S. history

What: Speaking engagement

When: Wednesday — 5:30 p.m. cocktails; 6 p.m. dinner; 6:45 p.m. introductions; 7 p.m. Ryun's presentation and book signing

Where: Kuhl's Highland House, Middletown

Cost: \$35

Information and/or tickets: Contact Frank Giannino at 551-8270.

A Q&A transcript of Ken McMillan's full interview with Jim Ryun is at recordonline.com/sports.