

Dead Heat: The Race Jim DeMoss Engineered

by Curtis C. Morgan

I didn't know it yet, but in the spring of 1961 I was about to get a lesson in coaching strategy that would take me sixty years to fully digest. I was a college runner at Butler University in Indianapolis—in shape, I thought, real shape—and I had returned to my old high school, Northwood in the D.C. suburbs, where I had finished fourth in the state 880 yards the previous year. Coach Jim DeMoss was running his team through spring practice, and he spotted me standing at the edge of the track.

“Why don't you run an 880 with Buzz and Tom?” he said.

Buzz Lawlor and Tom Rabenhorst were sophomores. I was a college runner on a track scholarship. I said sure.

Overconfidence was about to bite me on the hind parts. More precisely, I didn't know what Jim DeMoss had already seen in those two boys—and what he was about to show them about themselves.

Northwood was briefly, brilliantly one of the finest track programs in Maryland. From the school's opening in 1956 through 1965, the Northwood Indians won two state championships and finished runner-up three times. Jim DeMoss built that program with demanding methods that would raise eyebrows today—his first practice of the season famously began with an instruction to go run five miles—and an eye for talent that bordered on the prophetic. He rarely raised his voice. He didn't need to. He had a way of letting you know, without quite saying so, that he had already seen the outcome of something you didn't yet believe was possible. He may have already been ill when the principal stepped in to coach the 1965 state championship team, and he was to die at age fifty-four of cancer. In the sixty years since, Northwood has not returned to those heights.

But in the spring of 1961, he still had his eye. And he had been watching Buzz and Tom.

I had noticed DeMoss's particular attention to effort when I was his athlete. Once, standing with the team before practice, he looked us over and said quietly: "Only one of you is really trying." A teammate immediately asked: "Is it Ricky?" Ricky was the obvious choice—the most naturally gifted runner on the team, the one everyone assumed was the hardest worker. "No," DeMoss said. "It isn't Ricky." He said nothing more. He didn't need to. Before the season had even started that year, I had been running five miles in the evenings on my own. In 1960, kids didn't do that sort of thing. DeMoss had noticed. He never told me he had noticed. He simply waited to see what I would do once I understood that someone was watching that closely.

Now, two years later, he had two sophomores he wanted to test—and he had me. The race went out fast. I jumped out into an easy lead, as was my wont, and through the first lap I held it comfortably—ten yards, then fifteen. Sophomores did not pass college runners on track scholarships. That was simply how things worked, and I had no particular reason to think otherwise. I was fit from college training, and I expected to control the race. But Tom Rabenhorst had other ideas. With three hundred yards remaining, Tom passed me. Not edged past—passed. A high school sophomore, running away from a college runner who had placed fourth in the state. I dug in. My lungs were burning in a way they had no business burning against a sixteen-year-old, and I closed the gap stride by stride down the home straight, refusing to let the arithmetic of the thing work out any way but the way it was supposed to. I was certain I could reel in this youngster with my final sprint. The finish was close enough that DeMoss, watching from the infield, called out: "Dead heat!" I believe I nipped Tom by about five inches—I have believed this for sixty years and I am sticking with it—with Buzz Lawlor right behind us both.

I drove home shaken. I had nearly been beaten by two high school sophomores.

It took me years to fully understand what Jim DeMoss had done that afternoon. He never explained what he had done. Coaches like him didn't explain—they arranged situations and let the situations do the teaching. He was not running that race for me. I was the instrument, not the subject. He had a college runner with a known credential and he used me as a measuring stick for what he suspected he had in two young boys. If they had been badly beaten, there was no shame in it for them. But if they ran with me—if they nearly beat me, if they passed me and made a college runner sprint for his life at the

tape—well. Doesn't that change something? Doesn't that dissolve a ceiling a boy didn't even know he had?

I am certain that Buzz Lawlor and Tom Rabenhorst each went home that evening and told their families something extraordinary had happened to them at practice. I am certain they lay awake that night with a new understanding of what they might be capable of.

The subsequent record confirms what DeMoss had seen. Buzz Lawlor went on to set the Maryland state mile record in 1962 as a junior. He took his talent to the United States Naval Academy, where he won the Thompson Trophy Cup, the award given to the midshipman who best exemplifies leadership, inspiration, and athletic excellence, the same award Roger Staubach had won before him. He retired as a Naval Captain and lives in Florida. I hear from him occasionally.

Tom Rabenhorst went on to teach geography and thematic cartography at the University of Maryland Baltimore County for forty years, quietly mapping the world for generations of students who had no idea their professor had once made a college runner sprint for his life on a spring afternoon in Silver Spring. Tom died in 2014.

Northwood High School was demolished last year. The 1956 building where those athletes dressed for practice, where DeMoss paced the infield watching his runners with that quiet evaluating eye, is gone. The original cinder track where Buzz set his mile record, where Tom passed me in the homestretch, where a dying coach built something briefly magnificent—gone.

But I am still competing in track and field, even if I can no longer actually run with any authority. At eighty-three, I entered two throwing events at the USATF Indoor Championships. Last week I stood on a podium, twice actually, in New Mexico. My feet are eighty percent numb from peripheral neuropathy. I do one hundred squats every other day because I read somewhere it might help, and it does.

Some evenings I think about a spring afternoon in 1961, and a coach who said “dead heat” with a small smile, and two boys who went home that night not quite the same as they had been that morning.

Jim DeMoss knew what he had. He always knew.



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