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40 Years and 4 Minutes Away From History

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In 1954, Roger Bannister, then an English medical student, ran a mile outdoors in 3 minutes 59.4 seconds, the first sub-four-minute mile. At the time, at the University of North Carolina, Jim Beatty was becoming a 4:06 miler with a future.

That future made him, as it did Bannister, a track and field icon. Forty years ago this month, Beatty ran the first sub-four-minute mile indoors, 3:58.9 at the Los Angeles Times meet.

"Forty years?" Beatty, 67, said in an interview last week. "It seems like it happened last night. I still feel it so much internally. A friend asked me if I remembered that race, and I said when I go to bed at night I know I did it and when I wake up in the morning I know I did it."

American track officials remember, too. On Friday night, at the national indoor championships at the Armory Track and Field Center in Upper Manhattan, they will honor Beatty.

He was born in Manhattan and lived on East 19th Street until his family moved to Charlotte, N.C., before he started first grade. He has lived in Charlotte since, and for the last 27 years has run an executive search and recruiting business. He is a popular public speaker, and if his audiences want to see the "ABC Wide World of Sports" tape of his breakthrough mile, as they usually do, he is happy to oblige.

In those days, the sport had no superfast 200-meter indoor ovals with friendly banked turns. Instead, American indoor races were run on smaller, worn wooden tracks in basketball and hockey arenas like the old Madison Square Garden and the Los Angeles Sports Arena.

So in the eight years since Bannister's breakthrough, the four-minute barrier had survived indoors. By 1962, Beatty felt it was ready to fall to one of four men: Michel Jazy of France, and the Americans Dyrol Burleson, Jim Grelle and himself.

The Los Angeles meet invited five milers: Beatty, Grelle, Laszlo Tabori and David Martin, all of whom trained together with the Los Angeles Track Club, and Pete Close, a marine formerly of St. John's.

"I was in four-minute shape," Beatty said. "That was my goal. You know how in life the time comes for something to happen? For four months, every workout was designed for that race."

The plan was for Tabori to lead for the first quarter, Beatty for the second and Grelle for the third, and then it was anyone's race. Tabori ran the first quarter in 59 seconds, Beatty, all 5 feet 6 inches and 130 pounds of him, finished the second quarter in 1:59 and, as he said, "The crowd started going crazy." But in the third quarter, when the pace slackened, Beatty made a quick decision.

"I told myself I had to take control right then and push the pace," he said. "But I couldn't hear the timers give the time at three-quarters and I couldn't hear the P.A. because the crowd was so loud. It scared the daylights out of me. I just ran the last quarter with every ounce of energy I had."

When the race ended, Beatty ran back to the timers.

"How fast was it?" he said, yelling over the crowd noise.

A timer shouted, "Three. . . ."

"I didn't hear the rest," Beatty said. "That's all I needed to know."

In those days before professional track, runners held full-time jobs. Beatty was a public-affairs executive for an insurance company. He received no congratulatory call from the White House, but when he returned to work on Monday he got a standing ovation from his co-workers.

That mile was the first big race of Beatty's career year. In a 16-day stretch in August, he broke American records at five distances: 1,500 meters, mile, 3,000 meters, 3 miles and 5,000 meters. During the year, he set a world record of 8:29.8 for two miles. He won the Sullivan Award as America's outstanding amateur athlete.

In the fall of 1964, he was taking garbage out in the rain when he stepped on a sharp piece of rusty metal. It gashed the ball of the foot and required 27 stitches.

"I knew it was over," he said, and the next year he ran his final race.

He settled down to real life. He has been chairman of many charitable organizations. He served six years in the North Carolina General Assembly, and in 1972 he was an unsuccessful Democratic candidate for Congress in a traditionally Republican district. He sounds happy with

life.

"If you feel a certain energy in yourself, if you believe in yourself, you can do all things," he said. "I've had an opportunity to give back to society in various ways. I'm grateful I've been able to do that."