

Early Running Childhood Roots



Me with older brother and sister

Where did my running ability come from? I was born to two parents with good athletic ability. My late mother wrote about her childhood in El Paso, Texas: “We had testing in various athletic skills in grade school – broad jump, running, basketball throwing, pushups etc. I loved these tests because I could outdo all the girls in the school each year. I would wait until the last girl did the pushups and do one more when I was ten. I did 42 pushups. I would do so many that I had a hard time feeding myself the next day. I’m not bragging but I could always out-jump all the girls in grade school and high school in the broad jump. My father was always setting up a contest with me against the boy scouts in the neighborhood. They never liked me for that.”

My father died when I was two years old so I never was able to witness his abilities, but growing up he was on basketball and football teams. He played tennis for Brigham Young University and was truly a gifted athlete. Hopefully I inherited some of

my athletic ability from these good parents. Clearly I inherited my mother’s intense competitive nature.



My mother at age 11

At an early age, I discovered that I had good hand-eye coordination and thrived at competition. As a third-grader in Salt Lake City, our grade school held a big marble tournament. My competitive juices became to boil. I beat boy after boy and reached the finals for my grade against my best friend. I had a nice lead in our match but time ran out and our match



was suspended to be picked up again the next week. My friend asked me if I could help him practice. I agreed and that weekend I gave him tips. We worked together improving our skills. When we continued our match the next week, I discovered that I had trained him too well. He caught up and won the match. I was devastated. He went on to the multi-grade tournament and won it all.

In my schools we also had those physical fitness tests. Like my mother, the broad jump was my best event and I could jump the furthest of everyone in my classes. In junior high each year we would run long distance test. I can’t recall the exact distance but it was about a half mile. It seemed grueling and I didn’t like it, but I performed OK.

My first love in sports was basketball. I would spend hours in the backyard shooting. I would play on the church’s youth basketball team but my confidence was always weak and the coach intimidated me. In games I never shot the ball well. I recall in one particular game I received a pass near the free-throw line and I was open. I heard my step-father yell, “that is your shot!” Indeed it was. I had shot thousands of those shots in the backyard including 28 makes in a row. I missed the shot in that game but it made me realize that my problem with athletics was mostly confidence.

While in high school, I was viewed by my classmates as a non-athlete. In PE I was usually picked near the last when teams were chosen. Once we had a basketball tournament of PE teams and on one day the

team we were assigned to play had too few players, so my team needed to give them a player. I was given the boot over to the other team. It didn't really bother me since my team rarely passed the ball to me, but this other team wasn't very good and needed help so I just went for it. I lit up the score board and when I made shots my original team shook their heads. We beat them largely because of my efforts and after the game I apologized to the leader of my original team but he said nothing in reply. But I was happy about that experience. In later years, confidence wasn't a problem and I was frequently the leading scorer on my teams. Shooting too much was probably the new problem.

In 5th Grade, now living in Washington State, I joined the swim team at our neighborhood pool. I had very quickly progressed through all the swim lessons provided at the pool and my instructor encouraged my mom to get me on the swim team. The idea scared me and I was intimidated at my first practice. No one else in my family was on the team but other friends were, so I soon enjoyed the experience. I watched my friends win ribbons and awards at the swim meets but I never did. At one meet I won my slow heat and was certain that I would finally place in the top eight and get a ribbon. I stood near the awards tent in great anticipation.



Marine Hills Pool

My mom told me something about “a watched kettle never boils.” She was right, I didn't get the ribbon. Toward the

end of my second year I swam at a big city-wide event for summer-only swimmers. I qualified in the final eight and would surely finally get my ribbon. In the finals it appeared that I tied for seventh, but no ribbon came because I was disqualified for an illegal kick. I quit after two years but established a family involvement in competitive swimming by all my younger siblings and all my children in the years to come.

As a boy in the 1960s and 70s when we visited Utah, we would spend several days at a cabin my stepdad had built up Millcreek Canyon, in Porter Fork. I loved going on hikes into the high mountains. Of my siblings, I would always go the furthest. I eventually made it to the top of the ridge (near Mount Raymond) and it felt like I had entered a new world, a quiet world of nature where I could go to be alone to think and not be distracted. I loved my times up there. I persuaded my dad to lead us on a hike all the way over the ridge and down into Big Cottonwood Canyon. We made it a family hike and my mom would pick us up at the finish. However, without a map in those days, we went the wrong way. We descended over the ridge and hiked for a very long and painful 12 miles, which would be my furthest hike for almost 30 years, but we ended up at Church Fork in Millcreek Canyon. My dad quickly hiked back up to the cabin, retrieved another car and went to find my worried mom waiting somewhere in Big Cottonwood Canyon.

In 8th Grade, my best friend, Mike, persuaded me to join the track team. This was my first exposure to true running. He ran the low hurdles so I joined him in learning that event. The workouts were rough on me. I recall one day the coach made us run “continuous 220s.” We would run a 220 and if we didn't make a certain time, we had to quickly walk across the track field to the other side and run it again. This continued on and on until there were just a few of us slow runners who were left. I knew if I ran just one more, I would pass out and made some comment to the coach as he was about to blow the whistle again. He blew it and I took off again but then he blew the whistle again and said that was enough. I was in agony. This wasn't fun.



On another track practice, the coach again had a few of us run a 220. He had the fastest guy on the team start about 30 yards or more behind us. Away we went. As we rounded the corner at the halfway mark I watched this tall runner go past me like I was hardly moving. The coach yelled out laughing that we were his “rabbits.” I was very impressed by this boy’s speed, but it made me realize that I no ability as a sprinter. As the season went on, I ran in some meets but never did very well. In training at times we would run two or three miles and I didn’t like the long runs. Finally I developed foot pain, probably planter’s fasciitis, and I used that as an excuse to quit the team. I had soured on running.

Biking was also part of my life. Somehow I persuaded my mom to let me ride with two other friends all the way to Mount Rainier, about 70 miles away, to camp for a couple days and then return. It was a huge undertaking especially with heavy packs on our backs but we made it and had an amazing time on our own on the mountain. My bike was my connection to going long distances on my own away from home. I would go further and further. I would ride up to Lake Washington and watch the hydroplane boat races. I put in my head a goal to ride my bike from home all the way around Lake Washington and back, a trip of about 80 miles. It was an amazing urban long-distance bike ride that showed to me that I had pretty tough endurance. After making it all the way around the lake, I got a flat tire five miles from home at the bottom of the highest hill, and called my dad to come bring me home.



Me and my buddies on our bikes

In high school, still viewed as a non-athlete, for PE one day we were playing softball. I was in the outfield alongside one of the star football players. A fly ball was hit toward us and we both went for it and collided hard. When the dust cleared, I was standing with the ball in my mit and the star football player was on the ground in pain. I’ll never forget the look of shock on his face when he looked up to me and realized that some non-athletic nerd blew him to the ground. I apologized but he said nothing as he struggled to get up, clearly embarrassed.

Snow skiing and waterskiing became a passion in my teens and I excelled in both. I joined a ski school and went up skiing every Saturday for a few months. At the end of the season we held a competition doing slalom skiing. Here was my chance to finally win a trophy. I did well, but finished with the second fastest time. The boy who beat me confided that he had missed a gate. I had really won. When they awarded the trophies on the bus, this boy accepted the first-place trophy and I couldn’t resist saying, “But he missed a gate!” The instructor was surprised at my comment, asked the boy, who denied, and I backed down feeling very embarrassed. But I did get the second place trophy and I knew it was actually first place.

My Path to Ultrarunning – Davy Crockett

While in high school we bought a trampoline for the backyard, a rare item in those days in Washington. I spent hours jumping on that thing, getting strong legs and perfecting difficult tricks. As a senior, in PE for gymnastics we were able to use a full-size trampoline. I'll never forget the deep respect I saw in the eyes of my class mates as they saw me jump and flip for the first time. As part of the program, we were to pass off a simple, medium, or advanced routine. I was the only one in the class to pass off that advanced routine that even the instructor could not perform.

What about running? I observed that my step-father started to do some running to manage his weight, going a mile or two a day. I followed his example a little but did nothing serious. At a church activity with my best friend, we decided that we would mark off a mile in a campground and then race it. Without serious training I ran like crazy and I beat him, running a 5:41 mile. There were signs that I had running talent but I didn't do anything to develop it...yet.