The Man

In his 24 years at the University of Oregon, BILL BOWERMAN coached a steady line of national champions and Olympians, cofounded a little company called Nike, and kick-started the American running boom. But only his athletes felt his true genius By Kenny Moore

"A guru gives us himself and then his system; a teacher gives us his subject, and then ourselves."—ADAM GOPNIK, in his eulogy for art historian and football coach Kirk Varnedoe, in *The New Yorker*

IN THE SPRING OF 1964, Bill Bowerman gave me his subject, and stood back to see if I deserved it. Bowerman, then 53, had coached six sub-four-minute milers at the University of Oregon and had won the 1962 NCAA Track and Field Championship on the very field where he now stood, signaling me over. I was 20, a sophomore two-miler, just finishing my first training run after being out with the flu. He put two fingers to my neck, taking my pulse from my carotid artery.

"Easy day?" he said.

"Easy day. Absolutely."

"Twelve miles?" As if he were my physician, he tilted my head back so he could look me in the eye. He was 6'2" and over 200 pounds, with a powerful upper body.

"An easy twelve," I said.

We had vexed each other that year. I had never won a race in high school, had never broken 9:15 for two miles, but was determined to run the 100 miles a week his good friend Arthur Lydiard assigned his New Zealand Olympic champions.

"Are you in this simply to do mindless labor," he said, "or do you want to improve?"

"To improve."

"You can't improve if you're always sick or injured."

"I know, but Bill, it was an *easy* twel…"

He closed great, callused hands around my throat. He did not lift me off the ground. He did relieve my feet of much of their burden. He brought my forehead to his. "I'm going to ask you to take part in an experiment," he said with menacing calm. People five yards away thought we were sharing a tidbit of gossip. "For three weeks, you are not going to run a yard except in my sight. You will do a three-mile jog here every morning, and our regular afternoon workouts. If I or any of my spies see you trotting another step, you will never run for the University of Oregon again."

"Bill…"

"Are we agreed?"

"*Bill*…"

"Agreed?"

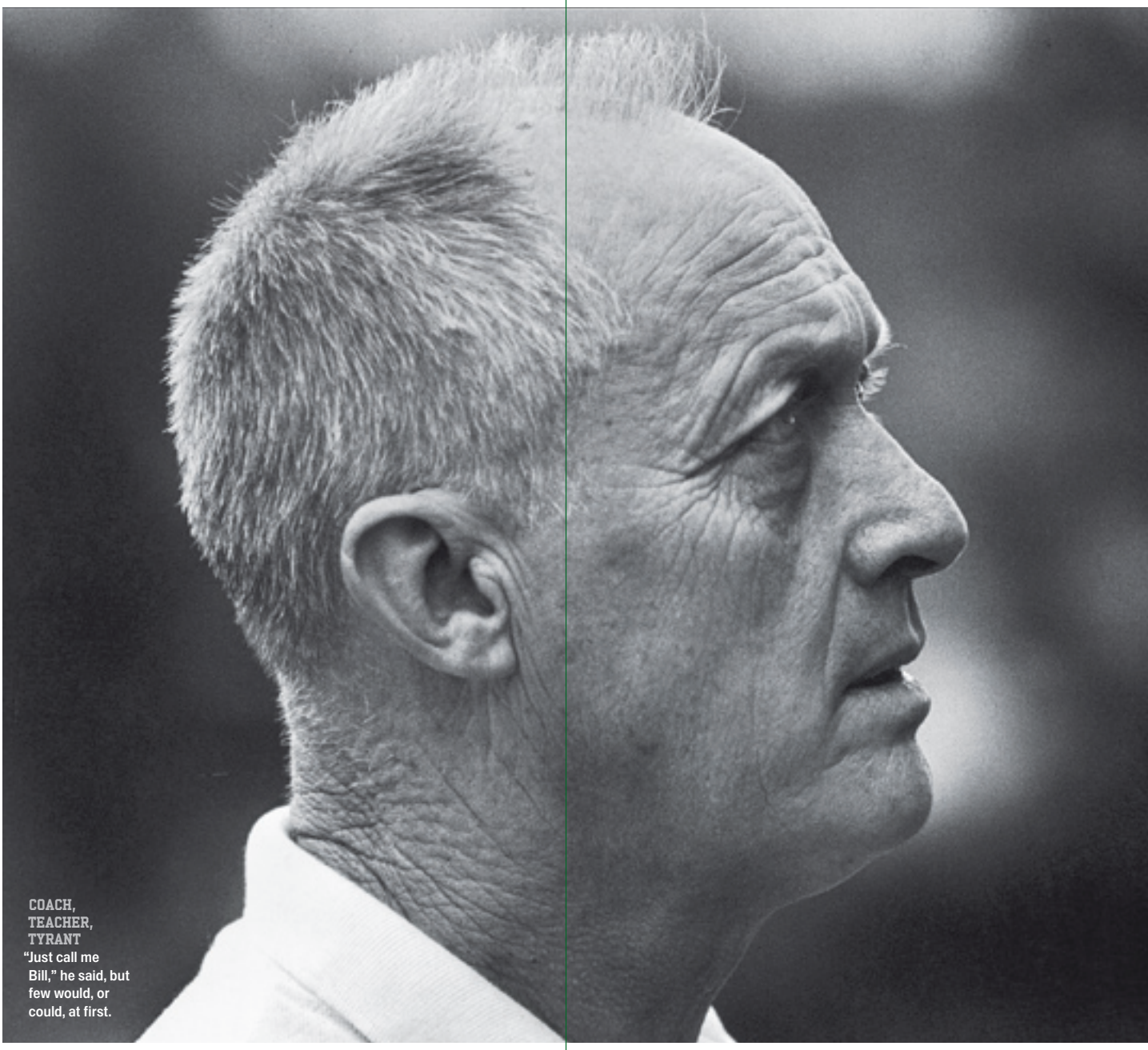
As I was feeling faint, I submitted.

SOME OF MY AFTERNOONS remained exactly the same. I was allowed our regular hard-day sessions of four three-quarter-mile repetitions at 67-second-per-lap pace, then a five-mile run through the hills and rhododendrons of nearby Hendricks Park and four fast 110-yard strides before showering.

It was the easy days that were humiliating, reporting to Bowerman morning and evening on the sawdust trail inside the hallowed old Hayward Field track, having him count my laps, barely feeling warmed up before he called, "Three miles. In. In."

I was tempted to do secret, defiant runs, but he had enlisted the rest of the team and half the town; every friend was a possible traitor. And the potential cost was too great. No one who knew me doubted that I desperately wanted to be an Oregon runner. No one who knew Bowerman doubted he would back up his ultimatum.

As I learned a season earlier, even when Bowerman went out of his way to be welcoming, as at the annual team picnic at his



COACH, TEACHER, TYRANT
"Just call me Bill," he said, but few would, or could, at first.

house in September, it wasn't safe to relax. For freshman runners, the intimidation started with his hillside view, which spread to the snowy Cascades. Below, the McKenzie River carried fishermen in boats through spangled light. Beyond lay a soft-edged shire, stretching past farms to the mill town of Springfield and the university in Eugene. We were greeted by platinum-haired, unexpectedly beautiful Barbara Bowerman, who guided us to tubs of corn, roasts of beef, wheels of pie. The sight closed our throats because standing behind them, magnanimously pouring cider, was our coach.

Bowerman seemed in leathery profile to have been through some mythic struggle. He spit when someone called him coach, because the football coach he most hated had demanded it. "Just call me Bill," he said, but few would, or could, at first.

We gathered in the living room. The house had no trophies, just varnished fir beams, high windows, and a tall, rock fireplace Bowerman built himself. There was a wood stove in the kitchen, beside Barbara's spinning wheel. Bowerman stood. The river and mountain behind him now were filtered through Barbara's bonsai and sprays of orchids. This accorded with why we were here. We were to be cultivated, refined. Bowerman was about to ask us to put aside the things of the child. Not by accident did he begin, "*Men* of Oregon…"

"Take a primitive organism," he continued, his voice oil and sweet reason, "any weak, pitiful organism. Say a freshman. Make it lift or jump or run. Let it rest. What happens? A little miracle. It gets a little better. It gets a little stronger or faster or more enduring. That's all training is. Stress. Recover. Improve. You'd think any damn fool could do it, even…"

He turned, squinted, went far away somewhere, and turned back. "But you don't. You work too hard and rest too little and

get hurt. You yield to the temptations of a liberal education and burn your candle at both ends and get mono. Every angelic, lying face I see here is poised to screw up, to overtrain, to fall in love, to flunk out, to play the guitar until three in the morning in the Pioneer Cemetery…"

There were hoots. Senior Archie San Romani reddened.

"We have no hard and fast training rules," Bowerman went on. "The vicissitudes of life usually teach an intelligent person what he can handle. It helps to have someone wise in the ways of candles to steady you as you grope toward the light. That would be me.

"But I regret to inform you," he added, his tone not the least regretful, "you cannot just tell somebody what's good for him. He won't listen. First…first you have to get his attention."

Upperclassmen nodded. Bowerman didn't have a central organizing principle. He had this, a central organizing parable.

"Farmer can't get his mule to plow," he said. "Can't even get him to eat or drink. Finally calls in a mule skinner. Guy comes out, doesn't even look at the mule. Goes in the barn, gets a two-by-four, and hits the mule as hard as he can between the ears. Mule goes to his knees. Mule skinner hits him again, between the eyes.

"Farmer drags him off. 'That's supposed to get him to plow? That's supposed to get him to drink?'

"'I can see you don't know a damn thing about mules,' says the skinner. 'First you have to get their attention.'"

In theory, as a coach, he should have been as interested in motivating the lazy as in mellowing the mad, but he wasn't. He regarded that most frustrating athlete, the gifted but casual, as beyond real help. He would juggle their roommates to give them an example of ambition, but took no further steps to inspire. He never gave a pep talk. "I'm sorry I can't make them switch brains," he said. "But I can't."

That left him free to be absorbed by the eager. He examined and reexamined what we ate. What we wore. What we did (and with whom we did it). He rethought our gifts, our goals, and the blind spots that kept us from reaching them. And yet, no matter how he permeated our lives, he always kept a kind of officer-and-troops distance, never trading intimacy for intimacy. The better you knew him, the less you could let down your guard. He confounded friend and foe alike; he was completely unreadable.

Bowerman thought of himself as an educator. He scorned recruiting and almost never gave full scholarships. "Anyone can be taught," he said. "Those who don't expect a handout best of all. I'd sure rather be teaching than blowing smoke up some spoiled brat's ass."

He loved language, and loved it if you loved it too. When he forced those easy days on me, I called him a tyrant, and he would never let me forget that. Once when I was too weak to trim some ripple soles he'd glued to my shoes, he took

Bowerman regarded that most frustrating athlete, the gifted but casual,

In the hush that followed, Bowerman's grin was not far from fiendish. This was his allegory, his rationale, his fair warning. He was our mule skinner, and all he will do to us—including booting us from the team to make a point—constitutes the two-by-four he will use to crack open our mulish skulls, that lessons might be inserted.

At the time, of course, I didn't know the details. Leaving that first meeting, I felt only baffled disquiet. Even men who had trained under him for years were edgy. "Bowerman," said Keith Forman, a 3:58.3 miler and a keen psych major, "is ruled by a need to unsettle, to disturb. The man lives to get to you."

THAT FIRST FALL, Bowerman's urges seemed to war with each other. His own competitiveness was barely containable, but anyone racing in cross-country practice found himself working out alone. He affected countrified ways ("You run like a turkey in a plowed field"), but just as often quoted Scripture, the classics, or the Epic of Gilgamesh. He was a difficult, dignified professor of kinetics, but cracked up at jokes that began, "Two guys were peeing off a bridge…" He raised funds for the Bach Festival, but when a trucker kept flattening his mailbox, he booby-trapped it to puncture the guy's tires. For 25 years, Oregon freshmen asked each other the same thing. Was Bowerman here to teach us to overcome a cold, hard world? Or was he one of its coldest, hardest terrors?

the shears and felt my hands and called them "philosopher's hands." And later he came in the sauna and put a big claw on my tender thigh and grinned that fiendish grin and said, "Now, Kenny, *this* is a horny hand. Feel a truly *horny* hand." I decline to call that "mentoring."

He didn't believe that a paternal concern for our feelings was his job. Athletes who'd depended on father-figure high school coaches were always in for a shock. When we were new, he'd assign a track workout and time us civilly enough, yet ignore us otherwise. Was our form correct? His only answer was to stonily lift his gaze to the swallows in their flight above Hayward Field.

"He speaks to us as does God," said my roommate, Bruce Mortenson. "Intermittently."

Disdainful of the leaden weight and nonexistent cushioning of running shoes in the 1950s, he had taken up cobbling and made us three-ounce spikes that lasted one race. We had no inkling that these were the beginnings of Nike's vast success, but we knew we had better shoes than anyone else. When Bowerman satisfied his academic curiosity about whether middle-aged professors and townspeople might be trained to actually trot a few miles, we had no idea jogging was about to inspire a sea change in American habits and health. But we knew there was only one man who could make both the professors and the mill foremen get out and run. Bowerman held our town together.

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His training system rested on the deceptively simple truth that all runners are different. He might forget our names (he was famous for long and sometimes futile pauses when introducing even seniors at the Monday Oregon Club lunches), but he never forgot who strengthened more after intervals and who after long runs, nor whether we showed up fresh and ready for more work the next day, or stiff and sour. In the 1950s he'd learned to tailor the nature and intensity of workouts—and especially recoveries—to individual needs, and had been rewarded with Jim Bailey's 3:58.6 mile in 1956, the first sub-four on American soil. A steady green line of national champions and Olympians followed, from Otis Davis, the 1960 Olympic 400-meter champion; through Bill Dellinger, the bronze medalist in the 1964 Tokyo Olympics 5000 meters; to Steve Prefontaine, holder of all seven American distance records, from 2000 to 10,000 meters, at the time of his death in 1975. In the sprints, jumps, and throws, Bowerman was just as good. He coached NCAA champions in 15 of college track's 17 individual events.

OUR DESIRE TO JOIN that lineage was almost demented. I, for one, was so wild to remake myself into a champion that I rolled my eyes at Bowerman's patient studies of our strides and metabolism, and especially his damn easy days. It felt demeaning to just rest. Work was righteous; rest was weak-willed, ignoble.

And so I rammed into a classic paradox. "To run a world record," said Australia's Herb Elliott, world record holder and 1960 Olympic 1500-meter champion, "you have to have the absolute arrogance to think you can run a mile faster than anyone who's ever lived; and then you have to have the absolute humility to actually do it." Elliott was a god to me then. I took him as an example of maniacal effort. But if that sentence urges anything, it urges balance. You must balance the arrogance of your ambition with the humility of your training. If that was a hint to rest more, I ignored it.

Bowerman understood that very paradox—the need for both abandoned effort and ironclad control—because it was his own. He told us of being turned from youthful rebellion by Ercel Hedrick, the Medford School superintendent, who terrified him into channeling his energies. Bowerman knew and loved and distrusted us as he had been known and loved and distrusted himself.

When he talked with us about goals and hopes, he asked us, though never in so many words, to balance the hunger that is in all runners with some grasp of what our predecessors had achieved. The thing was not to blindly disregard limits but to understand the odds, even as one refused to accept them. He asked us, therefore, to leave open a tiny window of possibility. "If you go out to race," he said, "and know you'll lose, there's no probability involved. You'll lose. But if you go out knowing you will never give up, you'll still lose most of the time, but you'll be in the best position to kick on that rare day when everything breaks right."

HE SAID THAT ON MAY 4, 1964, when my three weeks of tyranny were over and he sent me out to run the two-mile in a meet against Oregon State. He said to begin no faster than 4:30 for the first mile and not chase after their animal, Dale Story, the NCAA cross-country champion, who ran barefoot and was 30 seconds better.

Stripping down, our filmy, Bowerman-designed racing shirts and shorts made me feel battle naked. My sharpened steel spikes sank into the cinders with a gnash that evoked Jim Bailey years before. On the starting line, Story's shirt looked heavy, almost like wool, and something hit me of the care with which Bowerman had prepared me. I gave myself completely to his plan. I hit 4:30 for the first mile. Story ran 4:19 and led by 70 yards. Bowerman, on the infield, said, "He won't hold it. See what you can do."

I began to gain, and the crowd, Bowerman's crowd, ten thousand strong, saw me coming and got up and called. With half a mile to go, I had no real will left. All control had passed to that thunder that would not let me slow. Into the last turn, Story still had 10 yards. Then he looked back, his shoulders tightened, and I experienced for the first time the full savagery of my competitive heart.

I outkicked him by a second in 8:48.1, ripping 27 seconds from my best, finishing in bedlam, crowd and teammates pressing the air out of me, shouting that everything was possible now, the Olympics were possible now.

Bowerman was there with wild blue eyes and a fiendish grin, and I knew what he would say. "See!" he'd crow. "I told you! You just needed rest!"

But he didn't. He whispered in my ear as he had when he strangled me. "Even I didn't think you could run that fast, Kenny," he said. "Even I."

He had given me his subject. I had found myself. It finally began to penetrate my thick skull that I had to rise above the world's fixation with sheer work. I had to attend to my own eccentric physiology. I accepted easy days into my life. I stopped counting miles. Over the next eight years, the one long run he permitted me every 10 days would turn me into the fourth-place finisher in the 1972 Olympic Marathon. It was the lesson of my life and forces me now to consider—with a shiver—whether anyone besides Bowerman could have gotten through to me. RW

as beyond help. "I'm sorry I can't make them switch brains. But I can't."

Excerpt reprinted with permission from the upcoming book *Bowerman,* by Kenny Moore (Rodale, April 2006).