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FIRST BLOOD OF A CLASSIC DUEL

MIDDLE-DISTANCE STARS DAVE PATRICK OF VILLANOVA AND JIM RYUN OF KANSAS MET AT A HALF MILE. PATRICK WON GOING AWAY, BUT RYUN REACTED TO HIS FIRST LOSS IN ALMOST TWO YEARS BY COMING UP WITH A RECORD MILE

SI STAFF •

Most mortals are spooked by fears—of snakes or of the dark or height or tight places. For Jim Ryun of Kansas, who before last weekend was beginning to be regarded as something more than mortal, the phobia is simply of losing. The haunting thought that he could lose a race at a half mile, a mile or two miles has helped make him the world's best middle-distance runner, but it has also become a worrisome thing. "I hate to lose so much," he said recently, "that I think it's turning into something of a mental problem."

For many months he has known how defeat would come. Tired from a hard earlier race, he has imagined, he would meet a freshly rested, top-class runner, and a chain of major race victories that extends all the way back to August 1965 suddenly would be snapped.

But when this moment began to unfold last Friday night at the NCAA indoor half-mile final in Detroit the act itself was so convincing, so shocking, that a bellowing pro-Ryun crowd of 9,551 at the Cobo Arena could hardly believe it was happening. Even Ryun himself was incredulous. Far out in the lead was blond, sturdy Dave Patrick of Villanova (SI, March 13), sprinting tirelessly around the 160-yard board track as if the finish line were always just a step ahead, his lips moving silently as he counted off the laps that clattered by at a world-record pace. Far behind pounded Ryun, his head wobbling from side to side, his face contorted with desperate pain as he worked to reduce a margin that had grown to an amazing 35 yards by midrace. Then it was over—a good, old-fashioned rout. Patrick, with a broad grin splitting his craggy face, was the winner by 15 yards in the indoor-world-record time of 1:48.9.

If the finish to the eagerly awaited confrontation between Ryun and Patrick seemed unbelievable to some, no one can any longer doubt that young Patrick has emerged as something substantially more than just another challenger to the once unbeatable Jim Ryun. It is true that two hours before this race, while Patrick rested in his hotel room, Ryun had been pushed to a fast 4:08 effort in winning his mile trial heat. The run had certainly drained some of his deep reserves. But even with a fresh Ryun in the half mile the final result would probably have been the same, although the race itself must have been far more competitive.

"I really felt happy, not just because I won," said the exhilarated 20-year-old Villanova junior after the race, "but also because I had so much energy left. I could have run faster."

"Maybe it's all for the best," said the chagrined 19-year-old Kansas sophomore, attempting to pluck some consolation from his rare defeat. "Maybe it will prove to people that I'm human after all, that I can suffer pain, that I can be beaten. Maybe now some of the pressure will be off."

So far as this race was concerned, the pressure had been on since the middle of February when Patrick won the New York AC mile in 3:59.3, at that time the fastest mile run indoors in the U.S. since 1964. The pressure hardened when both runners ran record-breaking half miles a week later, and reached the explosive stage two weeks ago when Patrick ran four races to help Villanova win the IC4A championship while Ryun was winning three, including a 3:58.8 mile, to help Kansas thoroughly dominate the Big Eight title meet.

Ryun, who has been conditioning himself carefully with an eye toward the outdoor season, seemed to be ready, but Patrick's coach, Jumbo Elliott, oozed confidence. "My fella's going to win this race," he announced exuberantly one night while buying drinks for friends and well-wishers at Danny's Gin Mill and Chop House in downtown Detroit. "But we've got other problems to worry about. You know that I'm never about to say anything that's going to give Dave Patrick an inferiority complex, but this week he's just another one of 13 or 14 guys who are trying to win a team title." Yeah, Jumbo.

Fortunately for Patrick, he felt in as fine fettle as his coach. He had taken two tough hour exams in managerial economics and principles of promotion and had a slight cold, but the cold cleared up late in the week and Patrick felt thoroughly rested, if somewhat excited. "I found it awfully hard to concentrate on my exams," said Patrick, a talkative extrovert who belies his dour looks. "Every time I thought about running against Ryun I'd get so tense I had to go and lie down."

Ryun's state of mind was not the picture of somnambulant ease, either. He was contemplating, with a good deal of apprehension, a day that would see him run a half-mile heat at 4 p.m. (Patrick had to run one, too), a mile heat at 8 p.m. and the big race with his determined challenger at a little after 10 p.m. He floated easily through the first heat, but when he finished the mile trial his first thought was a bit frightening. "I think I'm in trouble," he said. "I don't know why, but I feel terrible."

Patrick's race tactics were born of a winter's experience that had seen him run two dozen races indoors and of the certainty that Ryun would have less than his usual finishing sting. Patrick's plan was to draw the sting out altogether. From his position on the outside of the six-man field he bolted across to the front as if Coach Elliott had prodded him with a dueling rapier. Suddenly he was leading Ryun by five yards, and the lead was growing longer.

"The plan was to try and get in front right away and then really burn the fifth lap," said Patrick, "but when I heard the first quarter time was 52.4 I decided just to keep going at the same pace."

The same pace looked like a sprint to Ryun and, relatively inexperienced in the rough-and-tumble sport of board running, he made a serious tactical mistake. "He was going so fast," said Ryun after the race, "that I decided to wait, hoping that he might tie up. Suddenly, while I was holding back, three guys went by me. I don't know that I could have beaten him, but by the time I got back around them Dave was too far ahead."

He was indeed. During the last lap Patrick took a quick peek over his left shoulder to see what was keeping Ryun, saw how far back he actually was and at that moment began to believe he had won the big race of the winter.

Dramatic match-ups of this sort have been all too rare during the long indoor season that has now drawn to a close. Inevitably, the excitement created by the Ryun-Patrick duel muffled the impact of some very fine performances in the year's best track meet. Cool Charlie Greene won the 60-yard dash for the third consecutive year, despite a sore hamstring muscle in his right leg. "I was not able to get my usual explosive start," cracked the not exactly demure Nebraska senior, "but you've got to say something nice about three for three."

Plucky Gerry Lindgren ran in front all the way to score a meet-record victory in the two-mile run (8:34.7), his fifth consecutive NCAA title of one distance or another indoors or out, and Southern California, getting three first places that included another 17-foot pole vault by Bob Seagren, won a solid team victory.

Certainly Ryun and Patrick, in spite of a remarkable mile by Ryun on Saturday, found it tough to top their act in the 880. Ryun, taking out his frustration on the clock, charged impatiently through a front-running race in the mile final. With two laps to go he dislodged the sticky figure of Kent State's little Sam Bair, the recent AAU mile champion, and chalked up the fastest mile time he has ever made indoors, 3:58.6. Patrick, still soaring on a euphoric cloud, grabbed the baton for his mile stint as anchorman on Villanova's distance medley relay team and flew through his opening quarter in 54.2 seconds as if barriers of flesh, blood, bone and the oxygen debt no longer existed for him. Then, after seeming to fade, he came on fast again to secure second place for his team with a 4:00.6 mile. Thirty minutes later, now brought to earth, Patrick was back once more to run his half-mile leg in the two-mile-relay final. For an agonizing two minutes six seconds he wobbled courageously around the track, before collapsing on the infield.

True hero of the 1967 NCAA indoor track championships, Dave Patrick was half carried, half dragged by two trainers to the medical room, where perhaps he began to dwell on some phobias of his own. The duel that may someday become a classic in American track had only begun.

PHOTO

Blazing home to a world indoor half-mile record, Patrick is far up the track ahead of Ryun and third-place finisher Pete Farrell of Notre Dame.