

MEMORIES OF A COACH NAMED TIM BRANCHEAU

J. David Rogers

In every student's life there are teachers that leave lasting marks; that shape our character; that give us hope; that stimulate us to believe in ourselves. Without these mentors we would be cast adrift in a sea of mediocrity, wondering what might have been...



Coach Tim Brancheau as he appeared when I was under his tutelage, 1969-72. Brancheau came to West Covina High School in the eastern San Gabriel Valley of Los Angeles County in 1962 and assumed the duties of head track coach in 1967. He was a graduate of New Mexico Western College in Silver City, NM in 1959, where his father Ray coached football from 1935-73. Ray had been the most valuable player on the 1933 Notre Dame Football team. Ray and Tim are the only father-son duo to be inducted into Western's Athletic Hall of Fame. The Brancheaus were of French Canadian descent, having immigrated to Monroe, Michigan in the 1880s.

Freshman Year (1969)

During my freshman year (1968-69) I ran cross country in the fall and track and field in the spring. I had an unusual combination of good sprint speed and distance running experience, so I chose the 660 yard run, which was one-and-a-half laps around the school's quarter-mile dirt track. I was assigned to the Cee Track Team, the lowest level of prep competition. Record rains in January and February 1969 prevented our using the track that year. During that soggy season Brancheau

compensated for the loss of the track by having us run wind sprints in the school's covered main hallway, which was shaped like a big horseshoe. It was about 270 yards around one leg and I loved "running the halls" because you really felt the sensation of speed, blasting by the walls, doorways and bystanders in the cramped corridors. I felt powerful, like someone running 60 miles an hour. As running in the halls was also a forbidden activity, we felt like we were getting away with something unusual.

Many of our school's teachers officiated the various events at all our home meets. I'll never forget watching my geography teacher Carl Garnet guess the distances everyone jumped in the long jump pit. He had been working that same pit for so many years; he would guess the exact distance after every jump, and then wait for the measuring tape to confirm his visual estimate. He was never off by more than an inch, ever.

Brancheau's Philosophy on Life

Tim Brancheau was the guiding light of West Covina's track and field program between 1967-98. He was an unusual person with an unusual background. In high school and college he had been a standout quarterback in football, but in track and field he ran the quarter, half mile, and mile races! He had been the 1955 New Mexico state champion in the mile, running 4:27. Having been a successful distance runner he chose to coach the middle and long distance runners, which included me.

Each practice would commence with Brancheau delivering a motivational speech, filled with active verbs, descriptive adjectives, and some occasional sex education. Like George Patton, his speeches were colorful and full of swearing. Those motivational lectures were the highlight of most school days and none of the boys went to sleep.

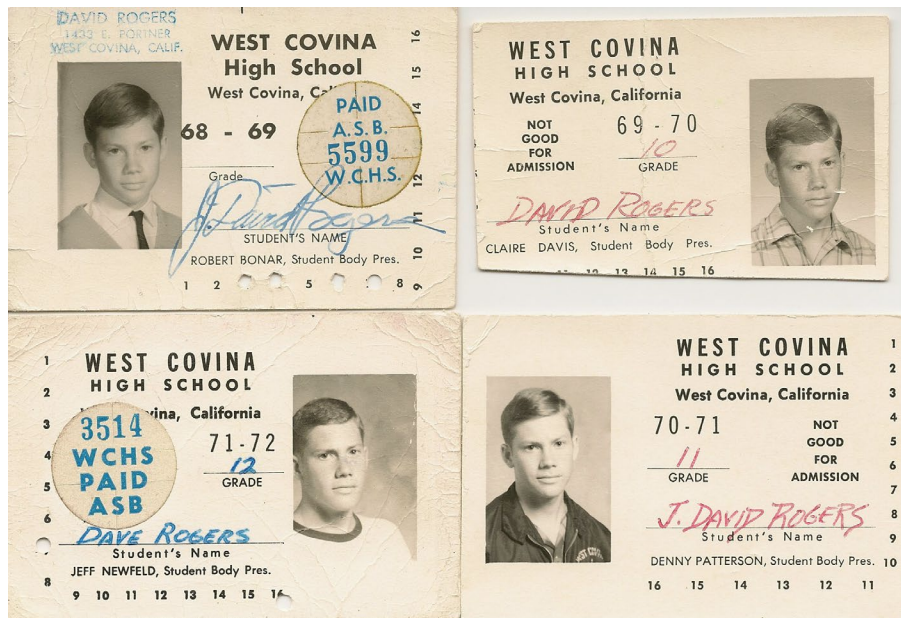
The overarching subject matter of these talks was usually **winners versus losers**. He did a good job of teaching us how to recognize losers, and provided many anecdotes that later rang true, when we were all older and wiser. One of his recurring themes was about how losers are attracted to one another. A loser can spot another loser out of a crowd of 100 people in about 60 seconds. They scan the horizon for other people with dissatisfied looks; the rebels, the chronic complainers, the people who tell "oh poor-me" stories. He warned us that they were out there, lurking in the shadows, behind every corner, beckoning us to quit the track team, lie to our parents, and to go out and "have some fun." One afternoon after one of these pep talks my teammate Kim Callis whispered "*that's exactly what happened to Pinocchio!*" Kimball had a keen and sophisticated sense of humor.

Coach Brancheau referred to us boys as his "lads." He had an old school philosophy about God and competition. Like most coaches, he understood that the biggest challenges young athletes face are psychological. He told us that winners were those who developed a positive and confident attitude about competing; insofar that competing did not scare them. Brancheau believed that if he could inculcate us to believe in ourselves, only then would we perform to our fullest potential.

The operative terms he used to describe an athlete's mental outlook were "*psyched up*" or "*psyched out*." The goal of every athlete was to be psyched up, expecting to win. Most adolescent males enter high school being out-manned in every respect; they are smaller, slower, dumber, less attractive, can't drive cars, nor date the more mature girls in their midst. As a consequence, they are terribly unsure of themselves. Add a few losses in athletic competitions, and you get a very discouraged kid. The most common defense mechanism is to become "psyched out;" conjuring up convenient excuses for why they aren't winning. Brancheau maintained that races were won and lost at the starting line in the mental expectations of the competitors. He couldn't have been more on target.

In Brancheau's playbook, losers ended up across the street from our track stadium in Cameron Park. Here they engaged in loitering, drinking, illicit drugs, general vagrancy; often driving vans, within the confines of which, they engaged in debauchery of the female gender. One afternoon the school track was muddy and he dispatched us to Cameron Park to get in some running on the grass. As we started to race around the park's perimeter we stumbled upon the very people Brancheau had been describing; young vagrants, a number of them rolled up tightly in blankets and involved in coitus interruptus. Several of us got an eye full as we whizzed by the wiggling forms, who were shocked to see us, and vice versa. For me, Coach's speeches were beginning to ring true: here were the losers, out in the park screwing around, with no cogent plan for their future.

Brancheau was a do-as-I-say, not-as-I-do kind of fellow, who used a wooden swat board to maintain discipline. When he was nervous he would sneak a cigarette, ostensibly, out of our view. These occasional slips were always noted and widely reported among the male students; as if to say "hey, he's human, guess what I saw him doing..." If he heard a student curse, even a little one, you got a swat. One day we were running wind sprints on the infield and I was laboring under the mistaken impression that we'd be finished after running a certain number. To my surprise, Brancheau informed us we had 10 more sprints! Tired, winded, and discouraged, I bent over and softly said "Oh, shit." Coach heard me and told me to report to his office after practice, for a swat. I didn't enjoy any part of that experience, and it was the only swat I received in high school. Some of the masochists among us would avail themselves to dozens of swats, which they took as a mark of manhood.



Rites of passage. From upper left clockwise are the author's Associated Student Body identification cards from West Covina High School that reveal a significant metamorphosis from timid adolescence to confident student athlete. The good or bad transformations that occur during 45 months of high school can shape our destiny.

Believing you are going to win

As one might expect, Brancheau's motivational speeches impressed the freshman and sophomores more than the upper classmen. During my freshman year the distance runners were running an 11-mile cross country circuit to Mt. San Antonio College and back, which was standard fare for a Monday practice. While we jogged along there was a continuous banter of conversation and one-liners, which helped pass the time. Our team captain was senior Mark Aiassa, the team's only four year varsity letterman. On our return leg the subject of us winning a league championship arose and

Mark bluntly informed us younger boys that "*Brancheau always says we were gonna win the league championship, but we never do.*" To us younger boys it seemed that Mark had "*cached in his chips,*" giving up before the season even commenced. The freshmen and sophomores had our hearts set on winning so his remarks were taken as discouraging and defeatist. It is a simple axiom: **belief has to come before performance.** The younger distance runners were determined to win, and we worked hard to make that dream a reality. During the 1969 season our Bee and Cee teams went undefeated and we were poised to carry this winning tradition forward; nobody was going to beat us!

Witnessing the impossible

The most memorable event of my freshman year was the brief, but brilliant career of walk-on Billy Evans, two years older than myself. In the regular PE classes our school's coaches required all the boys to run a 3-lap "endurance run" (3/4 mile) for time. This was one of several methods Brancheau employed to identify potential talent for the Spartan track team. A slender junior named Billy Evans impressed the coaches in those endurance runs, so they began lobbying him to come out for the track team. We heard that he acquiesced because his father promised him a car if he participated in an organized sport. He soon announced that he would be "running the mile." He had never run with any of us previously, but quickly demonstrated that he was a fierce competitor. Bill was a coach's dream: he performed the prescribed workouts and improved markedly each week. By the end of the season he was one of the best milers in the Sierra League; unprecedented for someone without any prior experience.

Each season culminated with an all-conference track meet, in which every athlete competes to qualify for the State Championship meets (the California Interscholastic Federation, or CIF, has so many schools and athletes they employed a four levels of state meets, each increasingly competitive). Bill was pitted against the most talented distance runner in the Sierra League Conference: a senior from South Hills Hill School named Don Riggs. Riggs hadn't lost a dual meet race in cross country or track that entire season. The boys took their places on the track, the gun went off, and Billy Evans surprised everyone in the Citrus College stadium by immediately assuming the lead and taking the post position as the runners came around on their first lap. A surprised Don Riggs stayed right with him, but slightly behind. Everyone expected Billy to tire and Riggs to assume his accustomed place, winning the contest.

Every time Riggs attempted to pass Billy, he would speed up, like a determined machine. The horse race between the two of them came to the bell lap, and what race it was!!! Everyone stood up, cheering wildly. Don Riggs gave it everything he had, picking up the pace the entire lap. When they crossed the finish line both boys were sprinting, but Billy was still in the lead, by a good two steps. That day Billy Evans achieved the impossible, beating the most talented distance runner in the conference. **He did it by sheer willpower** and he collapsed afterwards, looking like a man who had seen God and might not live to tell about it! His teammates were ecstatic; we felt as though we had just witnessed a miracle. Our quiet teammate had done the unthinkable. For other runners in the league it was simply an aberration, they figured Don Riggs must have had an "off day."

Watching that race forever changed my view of track and field competition. There was no escaping its dramatic lesson: Billy Evans had dug deep into his soul and had succeeded in putting mind over muscle. He commanded his body to go beyond its normal capabilities and do the impossible, the unthinkable. Do you suppose he could have beaten world record holder Jim Ryan if he had been out on the track? We looked at Billy's crumpled body and we looked at one another, and we thought any of us could beat anyone, if we *REALLY* wanted to. The battle was over seeing if we could dig deep enough into our soul to muster up the courage. Anyone who could do that could 'perform miracles.'

Sophomore Year (1970)

The Spartan track team came of age in 1970, even though our season began with a sobering loss. Brancheau finagled us into a three-year deal running non-league meets against track and field powerhouse Long Beach Millikan High School. I remember being intimidated by their school, which looked more like a college campus than any of the high schools in the urban suburbs of Los Angeles County. Millikan was a CIF AAAA school with large brick buildings and a brick track and field stadium! They even had an ROTC program with uniformed students carrying polished rifles drilling behind their gym! We broke an unprecedented number of varsity records that day, but still lost convincingly. It was a humbling experience, but most of us were determined to work hard each week in an effort to improve ourselves. Back in the Sierra League everything went according to plan during the balance of that season and we were undefeated going into the last dual meet of the season with our arch-rival, Glendora High School.

The Great Upset

The 1970 season had a storybook ending. It came down to the last event of our last dual meet of the season, against Glendora High School at their track. Both squads were undefeated. The concluding event of every meet was the Varsity Mile Relay, with each runner sprinting a quarter mile, or single lap around the track. Glendora had the real talent in that contest with big Mike Heinzen anchoring. Mike and his younger brother Bill were in a 'league of their own' as prep middle-distance runners, clocking college times each week in the quarter and half mile races. No one in Southern California had ever beaten them, ever. With such overwhelming odds, Craig Pearce, Ted Fuhrman, Mark Smith, and Dick Pangburn stepped onto the track and determined to give a good showing of themselves. No one, not even Coach Brancheau, expected them to prevail against such a talented team as the Heinzen brothers. The foursome's goal was to simply put in a credible performance – nothing more, nothing less. Each Spartan runner had a personal best performance that day, posting their best times of their respective careers in each quarter-mile spilt. Our break came on the third leg when Mark Smith pulled ahead of Glendora's runner and passed off the baton to anchor man Dick Pangburn with a commanding lead. Everyone expected Glendora's anchor man Michael Heinzen to make up the difference, pass Dick, and win the race. But, Dick somehow, unimaginably, held on, running the race of his life and crossing the finish line first.



My 1970 varsity letter for track and field (at left) and Chenille patch proclaiming us as Sierra League Champs for the first time (at right).

Our team erupted in a spontaneous demonstration of glee, screaming and cheering while our opponents stood there, shell-shocked in disbelief. It was one of those upsets that only occur in the movies. Tim Brancheau's dream of a league championship arrived unexpectedly that afternoon, with a dramatic punch. He had been at the helm of the Spartan track team exactly four years. Little did we imagine what the future held for him and the West Covina Spartan team!

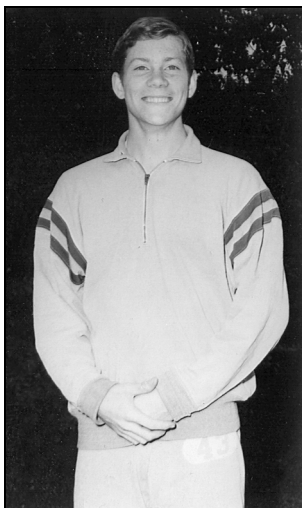
Varsity letter

In the 1970 league meet Brancheau moved me up to run the Varsity 880-yard run, telling me if I placed in the top five finishers, I would earn sufficient points to get my varsity letter! I got this opportunity because Mark Smith was small of stature, so he was able to compete in the Bee 660, my regular event. I ran my heart out and managed a respectable time of 2:02.4, which was the 4th fastest in the conference that evening.

There's no doubting my time was influenced by the stiffer competition and my inward desire to letter. I won my second varsity letter on a league championship team the same way I had garnered my first – in a single post-season appearance, by the hair of my chin. My buddy Mark Smith ("Smitty") would spend the next year rubbing the white chenille league championship patch on my Letterman's Jacket and say "You'se one lucky ducky Davey." He knew I hadn't run a single race on the varsity squad till the league meet. My running future looked bright and my stock high with my coaches.

Junior Year (1971)

My junior year of track was one of highs and lows. I was one of the varsity middle distance runners, usually running the 880 (half mile) behind senior teammates Mark Smith and Ted Fuhrmann. But, that year we were without Smitty the entire season because of a stress fracture, so I was the only junior on the Mile Relay team, running one of the quarter mile legs in the last event of each dual meet. I was usually the lead-off runner because I had good sprint speed to take the pole position (I could run the 100-yard dash in 10.4 seconds). My times averaged about 53 seconds flat most of that season. Ted was the star, running the 880, 440, and Mile Relay each week, something we called "tripling," for running three events. I never tried it until my senior year and found I just couldn't recover sufficiently from the 880 to run two 440s that soon afterwards. Ted was a true "ironman."



Having the time of my life being part of a championship team in 1971.

When a team is on the winning track, performances improve each week. So, we weren't surprised when we crushed Long Beach Millikan by a score of 79-39 in our first outing. More records fell that day, including our mile relay team, of which I was a part, which clocked a record time of 3:29.5. It was starting to seem like every time we had a big meet, more records would be broken.

For me the high point of our season was being the only junior on record-setting One Mile and Two-Mile Relay teams at the Bishop Amat Relays in late March. In the Two-Mile Relay Ted Fuhrmann, myself, Louie Mejia, and Tom Spurney ran four 880's in a combined time of 8:06.9, establishing a new Bishop Amat Relays Record. The other Relays Record that fell that day was when Dwight Stones of Glendale high jumped 6 feet 11 inches. He would go on to international stardom in the Olympics, then etch a new career as one of the premier track and field television commentators. That afternoon we also eclipsed our own team record with a time of 3:27.4 in the mile relay.

Rogers

GLENDDORA SCOUTING REPORT

A	B	C
<u>A 120 HH</u>	<u>B 120 HH</u>	<u>C 1320</u>
GORDENEIR-14.5	OSBORNE-18.0	ROSER-3:35.7
CONNER -16.3	HERMAN -18.7	WUIZ -3:44.7
RAY -17.2		
<u>A 440 RELAY</u>	<u>B 100</u>	<u>C 100</u>
W/ARREDONDO-43.9	JACKSON -11.0	JACKSON-10.5
	MITCHELL-11.0	POLENA -10.6
	MANDES -11.3	
	MORRELL -10.1	
<u>A 880</u>	<u>C 560</u>	
HEINZEN-1:53.8	MURKE-1:32.7	
<u>KRAKE -2:02.1</u>	MATO-1:35.4	
MADDOCK-2:08.8		
	<u>C 120 LH</u>	
	NEED -14.8	
	FUCHS-15.3	
	-16.3	
<u>A 100</u>	<u>B 120 LH</u>	<u>C 180</u>
ARREDONDO-10.0	HERMAN -14.4	POLENA -18.8
MORRELL -10.1	OSBORNE-14.5	JACKSON-18.8
BAZELMAN-10.4		
<u>B 440</u>	<u>C 120</u>	
HEINZEN-43.9	JACKSON-11.0	
CONNER -40.7		

must beat Krake

Excerpt of Coach Brancheau's scouting report for our dual meet with Glendora High School in April 1971, which decided the Sierra League championship. Brancheau scribbled my name at upper right then circled Paul Krake's name, demanding "must beat Krake."

A Heartbreaking Race

As mentioned above, our emergence as the Sierra League Champs the previous year came with the stunning defeat of Glendora's mile relay team on their home track. This year we knew we would be facing another shoot-out, with the Tartans looking to even the score. Unlike any previous meet, Brancheau gave us "assignments" when we hosted Glendora for our last dual meet of the season (see image above). I was given the task of beating Glendora's number-two half miler, a senior named Paul Krake, whom I knew from cross country. Krake's best time was about the same as mine, around 2:02 flat. Ted Fuhrman routinely ran 1:59, while Glendora's Bill Heinzen's best time of 1:53.8 put him in a league of his own (he went onto considerable stardom as an All American at UCLA). We had no illusions about beating Heinzen, but Coach Brancheau knew that we had to capture the Number 2 and 3 spots to pick up badly needed points (5 points were awarded for first place, 3 points for second, and 1 point for third).

During the days preceding this epic showdown, Brancheau drove the school's old Army Jeep around the track, smoothing out the ruts with a large pile of chain link he dragged behind the Jeep. We could see and feel the pressure he was under. On those days he would relapse and smoke a pack of cigarettes, out of our view. You could feel the tension in the air, and, like many of the boys, I was facing the greatest mental and physical challenge of my young life.

Event #5 was the 880-yard (half mile) run. The gun cracked and off we went, it was do-or-die time. I surprised myself by going into a dead sprint during the last 220 yards, passing Ted Fuhrmann and gaining the number two position behind Bill Heinzen heading into the stretch, well ahead of where anyone thought I would be, including myself. I was experiencing an adrenaline rush. But, Paul Krake must have been given similar instructions (to beat Rogers), because he stayed right on my tail as I passed all the other runners. When we got to within 30 yards of the tape Krake's spikes caught my right ankle from behind and I tumbled onto the track with an

enormous smash and a bloodied foot. Krake quickly passed me, followed by Ted, who placed a distant third, earning us just one point. I was devastated by this unexpected happenstance. Here I had the best race of my life, *securely in my hands*, my time would have been about 1:56 or 1:57, and *whoosh*, it was all swept away in an instant, and our team was almost skunked.

The field judge didn't cite Krake for tripping me, accidental or otherwise, but it was very clear in the 8 mm film one of the fathers shot of the meet, which we all viewed the following week. It was the only time I ever tripped or fell during my running career. The coaches never chided me for it, but I knew Coach Brancheau must have been terribly disappointed. I gave a credible performance running the #3 leg in the Mile Relay against Paul Krake, but we lost that as well. We presumed ourselves to have lost the meet, and with that, our chances for another league championship. But, providence proved otherwise when our #2 pole vaulter Chester Slemboski picked up the slack and vaulted 13'-6" to capture first place, after our star vaulter Al Sandoval fouled out without placing. We could have kissed Chester on the lips! His courage showed what teamwork was all about: it's when someone comes out of nowhere, takes up the slack, and puts in an unprecedented performance. Teamwork is what makes championship teams.

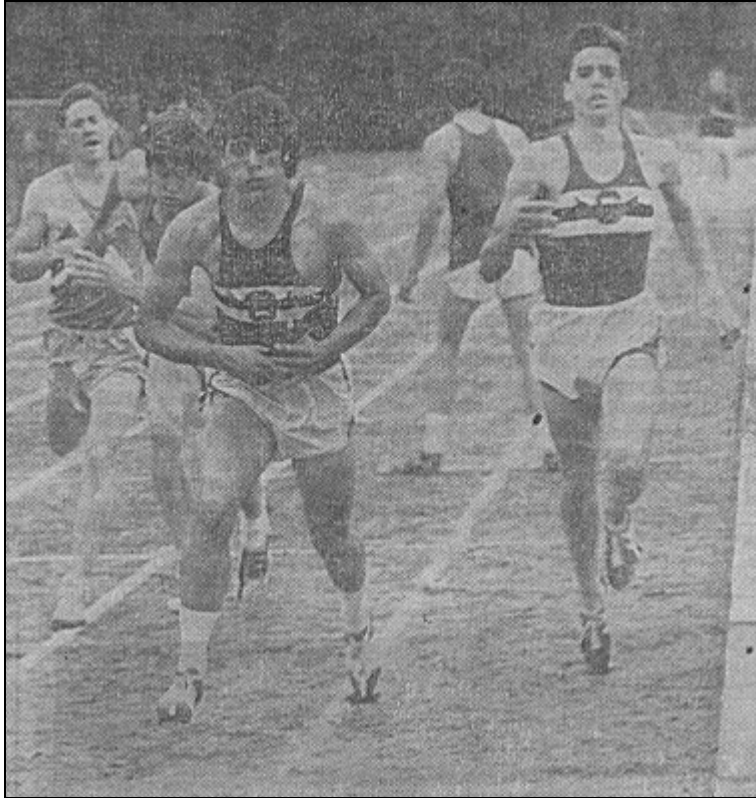
A Big Life Lesson

I learned an enormous life lesson that day: ***like it or not, most of us perform best when under some modicum of pressure.*** Learning how to handle pressure is a tremendous talent to acquire because life is filled with stress. Brancheau's vision of a winner wasn't someone who ALWAYS won EVERY race. Winners are simply those individuals who compete against themselves; they strive to DO THEIR BEST each time out, and leave the results to fall where they may. Losers psych themselves out long before the gun cracks. I know, because I used to think like a loser. It is easy to win, but much more "character-building" to lose. The healthy consolation we have in losing is to know deep in our heart that we gave it everything we POSSIBLY could have. That is the key to success, when it is combined with "second efforts." Tim Brancheau told us if you can't know in your heart that you gave it your best shot, you'll likely end up "handicapped" by the "crutches" of alcohol, drugs, injuries, sickness; anything that removes personal responsibility for disappointing behavior or performance. I recovered from the tripping incident because I knew in my heart that I had done my best; in fact, I had exceeded my own expectations by a wide margin. I came away from the incident knowing I was capable of running a half mile in 1:56 or 1:57 if I really wanted to. This gave me enormous confidence going into my senior year.

1971 League Meet

During the 1971 Sierra League Conference Meet I tried hard to amend for my fall in the Glendora dual meet. Glendora's Bill Heinzen had been suffering from a bronchial condition, but still managed to win the 440 and 880 races, with Ted Fuhrman coming in second and me placing 4th. We had another shot at Glendora in the Mile Relay, and the meet was on our home track, in front of our fans. Our relay team was the same foursome of Ted Fuhrman, Dick Pangburn, myself and Tom Spurney. Teddy provided a 10 yard lead on the opening lap, but Heinzen ran the Tartan's second leg, and not only managed to close the gap, but opened up a commanding 12 yard lead when he passed the baton to teammate Paul Krake and I received our baton from a very discouraged Dick Pangburn. I ran like never before, determined to close the gap, or die trying.

The separation was reduced to about two yards when I passed the baton to Tom Spurney for the final lap, before Gary Gladd took the Tartan baton from Krake (see photo above). Tom quickly jumped into the lead on the basis of our superior handoff. On the back side of the track Spurney told Glendora anchor man Gary Gladd "*not this time,*" meaning he wasn't intending to be passed like he was in the dual meet a week earlier.



Local newspaper photo of my baton handoff to Tom Spurney (far left) and that between Paul Krake (far right) and Gary Gladd (center) between the third and final legs of the Varsity Mile Relay in the 1971 league meet. I had just run the fastest quarter of my high school career in a losing effort. Glendora placed first in 3:27.0, while West Covina clocked 3:28.1.

But Gary Gladd was a superb sprinter, who had run the quarter in 50.6 seconds (better than 99.9% of all high school runners). He drafted off Tom all the way round the track until they came into the stretch, then kicked hard, passing Tom, who suddenly faded. My split of 50.8 seconds bested our school record by one tenth of a second but did not count because it was in a relay with a running start. Despite this, Coach Brancheau seemed pleased, telling me *“good job Rog, next season will be your year.”*

Humility brings honor and respect

The most memorable speech Coach Brancheau gave was in the Varsity Locker Room one afternoon just before one of our dual meets in the spring of 1971. As usual, he was discoursing on winners and losers when he landed on the phrase *“otherwise, you might find yourself walking door to door, selling insurance.”* With that remark, two of our African American brothers, Don Taylor and Hilliard Davis, started giggling, and Coach Brancheau came unglued. He berated these fellows for not taking their responsibilities more seriously, that he had just about had enough of their blah blah blah behavior and their mocking everything he had to say, and so forth. You could hear a pin drop after his angry outburst, and we suffered a long, quiet walk out to the school track. Along the way, someone had the courage to whisper into coach’s ear that Don Taylor’s father WAS an insurance salesman and that’s why they had started giggling.

To his undying credit, Brancheau grasped the irony...and the humor of the situation, and he recovered quickly. As soon as we got to the track, he called us all together on the infield grass and publicly apologized to Hilliard and Don. It was the only time I ever recall that he laughed at himself! Our team erupted in a spontaneous cacophony of laughter. His example of sincere humility that

afternoon brought us together as a team and patched up what otherwise could have become a racial tear that might have destroyed us. We jelled and crushed our opponents that day and **I learned that if you want to stand tall in the eyes of young people, humble yourself and apologize when the situation warrants.** After that day there wasn't anything I wouldn't do for Tim Brancheau. I think most of the other boys felt the same way. I never felt anything but mutual respect for my African American teammates and we came to love and respect each another as teammates should.

The film that changed my life



Vince Lombardi while coaching the Green Bay Packers from 1959-67.

During my junior year Coach Brancheau showed us a film in the Varsity Locker Room. It was the only time we ever watched a motivational presentation (we often viewed films of our football games or track meets a few days after these events, to be critiqued by the coaching staff). The film starred Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi and was aptly titled "*Second Effort*," and it was outstanding. It profiled a young man starting out in the insurance business. He goes to the door of someone's home and attempts to pay a "cold call," and is abruptly rebuffed, with the door being slammed in his face. Lombardi then begins talking about what it means to make a "second effort;" to go back to whatever it was that knocked us down and try harder the second time. Lombardi asserted that ***the fundamental difference between a winner and a loser came down to how easily we are discouraged by our own shortcomings.***

Wow! What pearls of wisdom! Lombardi then described how in team sports, and, life in general, we tend to do the *minimum* of what's required of us, then stand by and *watch the outcome*. Lombardi's message was clear: winners never quit, they come back and try again, again, and again, even if they don't prevail. The film is posted on You Tube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfPc2VW2Mtl>

There were several neatly scribed signs in the Varsity Locker Room which I favored. One read "*Luck is when preparation meets opportunity*," while another proclaimed "*If you need a helping hand, look at the end of your arm*" (both of these were placed there by Coach Mal Eaton, the school's Varsity Football Head Coach between 1958-71). In other words, you make your own breaks in life. You can expect to be knocked down, but **the real measure of a man is how many times he gets back up and tries again. This is the truest measure of maturity.** This realization had an enormous impact on me when I was struggling with calculus and differential equations courses during college. I got through them by dogged determination, not by talent.

Brancheau's philosophies gradually shifted my own outlook on life. Like many adolescents, I was "psyched out" much of the time during high school and didn't mature into a real winner till my senior year, when it was "my turn" to "carry the load" for my teammates. I could easily have choked under the pressure instead of rising to the occasion. Some people assume that Coach Brancheau imbibed me with the "work ethic;" but it was more than that. His lectures and his life actions convinced me that virtually every aspect of our lives is akin to a race: you get down on the starting line; you look the other fellas over; they have two arms and two legs, just like you have. And so, you ask yourself, "*who's gonna win here, me or one of them?*" Brancheau would assert that every race is decided there on the starting line, by the **mental decisions** each runner makes just before the starter's pistol

cracks. If you allow yourself to THINK about losing or quitting; it is just a matter of time before you will give up.

My Senior Year (1972)

TRACK SCHEDULE			
WEST COVINA HIGH SCHOOL 1972			
Feb. 24	Alhambra	There	3:15
Mar. 2	Long Beach Millikan	Here	3:15
Mar. 9	Glendora	There	3:15
Mar. 16	Edgewood	Here	3:15
Mar. 23	La Puente	Here	3:15
Apr. 6	South Hills	There	3:15
Apr. 8	Arroyo Relays	There	10:00
Apr. 13	Azusa	There	3:15
Apr. 15	Upland Relays	There	10:00
Apr. 19	Covina	There	3:15
Apr. 28-29	Mt. Sac. Relays	There	3:00
May 27	Los Altos	Here	3:15
League Prelims - May 3		Mt. Sac.	3:15
League Finals - May 6		Mt. Sac.	12:30
CIF PRELIMS		May 13	
CIF Semis		May 19	
CIF Finals		May 26	
State Meet		June 2-3	

The 1972 track schedule was typical of Brancheau's visioning techniques; boldly proclaiming the dates of all the California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) meets, even though we'd never had an athlete make it all the way to the State Meet.

Two years later Ray Wicksell became the first Spartan runner to compete in the State Meet, placing third in the mile with a time of 4:08. Soon afterward, he accepted a track scholarship to Arizona State.

One of the downsides of becoming a winning team with considerable depth was the cancellations. Long Beach Millikan cancelled their meet with us and we were disingenuously un-invited from participating in the Upland Relays, so we entered the Bishop Amat Relays instead, which convened the same day. We figured their loss was our gain.

I was elected one of the team captains my senior year. The highlight of our season was Al Sandoval pole vaulting 15'-7" for national best mark at the Arroyo Relays in El Monte on Saturday April 8th. Al's accomplishment brought us national exposure and was a harbinger of things to come. Our first meet was in late February against non-league rival Alhambra High School. I was delighted to be a part of our 440-yard relay team, but it was a humiliating debut. The fellow I was paired up against in the #3 slot was Alan Gin, whom I recognized from the Explorer Olympics at Citrus College the previous two seasons. Shortly before the relay, Alan told me he was going to *kick my ass* in this race, successfully unnerving me. I wanted to *dust his clock* so I took off like a jet, leaving teammate Chuck Taylor behind. I had to put on the brakes to get the baton before we were out of our passing zone, so we lost the race. I was angry and embarrassed, but I learned an enormous lesson about psychological warfare, and never allowed another competitor to provoke me after that.

By this time in my career I knew that my biggest challenges were psychological, so I determined to place mind-over-matter that season. I put everything I had into my races and soon found myself vomiting afterwards, because I was asking my body to perform as never before. I solved the dilemma by warming down carefully after each race, walking about a mile as fast as I could, so my pulse would subside more gradually. This seemed to solve the nausea problems. My initial times during that '72 season were 52.2 seconds in the 440 and 2:00.5 in the 880. I always ran my fastest quarter in the mile relay at the end of each dual meet, because I wasn't warming up properly the first time out (I figured that out years later, while competing for my own enjoyment during grad school at Berkeley).



Some of the returning letterman for the 1972 track season included: first row, left to right: John Arsenault, Dave Lazarin, Ray Wicksell and Mike Kable; back row, left to right: Dave Rogers, Joe Hickey, Bob Trudeau, Chet Slemboski, Terry Smith, Al Sandoval, and Dan Hayes. Sandoval became the nation's top ranked prep pole vaulter when he soared to 15'-7" at mid season. Ray Wicksell went on to become one of the world's premier sub 4-minute milers. Dave Lazarin is still running the Los Angeles Marathon each year, now along side his son.

Our streak ends, but a dynasty begins

Our first league dual meet was against arch-rival Glendora High School Tartans on Thursday March 9th. They had all the talent in Bill Heinzen and Gary Gladd, neither of whom had even been beaten in league competition. It looked like a toss-up that would come down to individual performances, and, true to form, the two teams went neck-and-neck, right down to the last race, the Varsity Mile Relay. I led our foursome, followed by Rick Mejia, Dave Lazarin, and Mark Bergman. We made a valiant effort but lost convincingly to Heinzen on the last lap. That loss narrowed our team's margin to just five points, leading Glendora by a score of 57-52, with only the high jump remaining undecided. Everyone descended on the high jump pit and quietly awaited the outcome. Hilliard Davis was our premier high jumper and a four-year varsity letterman. But, that afternoon he succumbed to the enormous pressure, which allowed the Tartans to take the 1st and 2nd places, and we lost the meet by a score of 60-58. We were disappointed, but we couldn't blame it on Hilliard; all of us had our chances and we just fell short as a team. It was of some consolation that we later thumped Glendora in the conference finals, on May 6th.

The loss to Glendora in the 1972 season opener broke a streak of 28 consecutive victories, which included 43 of 47 dual meets since Tim Brancheau took over the reigns as head track coach in 1967.

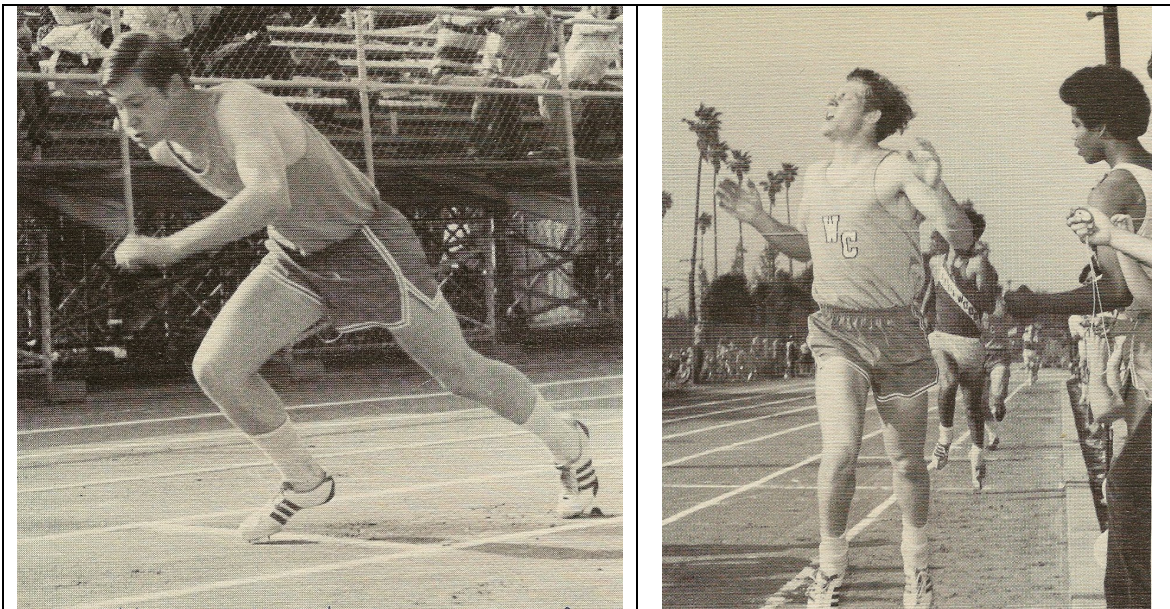
None of us dreamed it would be the last time West Covina would lose a dual meet for many years to come. The Spartan streak eventually stretched to 81 consecutive dual meet victories without a loss, and by 1986, Tim Brancheau was a prep track and field legend. Between 1986 and 1998, when Brancheau retired, the Spartans lost only four league meets! ***Their dominance was no accident, it came from the effective mentoring of a seasoned coach who knew how to motivate young men to realize their potential.***

Brancheau went on to coach athletes that excelled far beyond anything we imagined in those early days, with four Spartans making the U.S. Olympic Teams in 1980 and '84. But those early years were an exciting time because Tim was young, we were young, and we shared a common vision for succeeding, together. He was like a father to all of us; our bond was real and each practice was filled with light hearted banter, optimism, and fun. Few things in life get any better than that.

My favorite prep race

My favorite race was early in my senior year against cross-town rival Edgewood High. They had some talented athletes and had shared the conference crown with us in football the previous fall. Their coach devised a scheme on paper to beat us by shifting runners around and encouraging his most talented athletes to win key races. They really came after us believing they would upset us. Little did we imagine that history would be made that afternoon, as the longest winning streak in prep track and field history began, which would continue for the next 14 years.

It was the first time I ran the 880 (half mile) that season, which was event number 3. When I stepped onto the track that day I was determined to win; no butterflies, no flutters, and most of all, no doubts. When the gun cracked I took off like a man-on-a-mission, running a constant pace, which saw me pull away from the field over the last 220 yards, as the other runners began to tire. I broke the tape all by myself with a time of 2:00.5, which was the best half mile time in the San Gabriel Valley that afternoon. I was on top of my game, at last.



Yearbook photos taken by Bud Kundrath showing me starting and finishing the fastest half mile race in the San Gabriel Valley on Thursday March 16, 1972, against our cross-town rival, Edgewood High School.

My bubble of confidence lasted exactly one week. The following meet I went up against a more talented runner from La Puente High. On the backstretch of the second lap my jock strap broke! This unexpected complication unnerved just enough to lose my concentration and I allowed myself to be beaten, placing second. I was too embarrassed to tell anyone what had actually happened. It did embolden me to do better from there on out, and I won all my remaining races during the dual meet season.

Closing out my running career

During my senior year I was the “utility man,” running wherever I was needed that particular day: the 440 Relay, the 440 dash, the 880 run, occasionally the long jump, and always, the Mile Relay. I never improved my 880 (half mile) time significantly, running 2 minutes flat with only a few sub 2-minute efforts the entire season. We repeated our victory in the Two-Mile Relay at the Bishop Amat Relays on Saturday April 15th at Mt. San Antonio College. My split was a credible 1:59.4. Our mile relay team established a new varsity record of 3:26.7. My split was 51.6 seconds. At the Mt. Sac Relays I enjoyed leading off in the 880 relay and the Distance Medley, where we set a new varsity record of 10:36.

My last race came at the Sierra League Finals at Mt. San Antonio College on May 6th. I managed a career best of 51.1 seconds in the 440, missing the school record of 50.9 by two tenths of a second. It had been one of my principal goals of high school to break or tie that record. There wasn't a kid among us who didn't want to see his name etched among those (my name was on the record board more than any other individual, as a member of four varsity relay team records, in the 880, Mile, Two Mile, and Distance Medley). That evening I also ran the first leg of our 440 Relay and the anchor leg of the Mile Relay, both of which brought us medals.

As the season closed so did an important chapter in my life. I'd finally crossed the threshold of becoming a winner. I focused on running my heart out regardless of the competition, or the outcome. Though we failed to repeat as the Sierra League dual meet champions (having lost to Glendora in our first league meet), the win the following week against Edgewood on March 16, 1972 began a streak of dual meet victories that would continue unbroken for the next 14 years. None of us even imagined such a streak beginning at the time.

Unexpected morale boost

On the eve of my high school graduation Coach Brancheau saw me walking across campus after school and asked to have a word with me. He related to me that I had been nominated for the Bank of America Scholastic Award in Social Studies but lost to a classmate who was a scholar with a respectable GPA. I had taken U.S. History from Brancheau during my junior year and had received straight A's in all my social studies courses during my four years of high school. Coach told me I had “*come of age*” that season and thanked me for my willingness to run different events each week, without complaining. He said that in his eyes I had “*become a winner*.” No greater praise could be heaped on a young man by Tim Brancheau than to be singled out and recognized as a “*winner*.” I thanked him for his encouraging remarks and expressed my appreciation for his allowing me to miss the Covina track meet the previous year so I could climb the east face of Mt. Whitney in the wintertime. He then asked me what my future plans were. I responded that I was “*just going to the local community college*,” like many of my classmates. He replied that ***I could be anything I wanted to be, if I just set my sights on it.***

Coach's words empowered me to believe in myself as I never had before. They had a kind of magic in them that carried me through 10 years of college, far more than I ever dreamed I'd complete when I was 18. Telling a young person that they are special, that they are somehow destined for greatness; such words can catapult a mediocre student into stardom. Words from mentors carry inestimable power.

Avoiding idle time and distractions

My ability to establish training goals emanated from the coaching I received from Tim Brancheau. Through his strict training regimen, I came to realize that I could only handle so many activities and expect to succeed in each of them. My competitive running eliminated wasted time: I had to balance school, homework, running, and work. Every day was a minute-by-minute schedule, negating the typical *“pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain”* philosophy that became the national credo of many of my generation.

Were my high school days all work and no play? Curiously, no, they were not. I saw the work outs and the camaraderie of teamwork as sheer fun. **There is nothing greater for us to experience in life than to serve something larger than ourselves, to be part of a winning team or winning organization.** In high school I learned that I couldn't excel in track and field unless I was willing to work out every day, without letup, so I probably missed a lot of carefree days at the beach. **The most important lesson I took away from it all was learning that I could lose or fail at something, so long as I knew I had done my very best.** That realization allowed me to compete on the 'playing field of life' without becoming overly discouraged. If I lost here or there, I got back up, dusted myself off, and went back to try again.

Winners don't allow themselves to think about losing

The morning I began college in September 1972 I vowed that I would either succeed or die trying. I never, not even for an instant, contemplated dropping out. I told myself *“I have two arms and two legs; the other students have two arms and two legs. I may not be as smart as some of them, but I am going to work harder than them.”* I saw college as simply another race, nothing more. I now realize that this viewpoint was the classic Brancheau *“no excuses philosophy.”*

I developed a plan for my “race” in life, then worked to make it happen. That's probably the same old tried-and-tested formula used by countless generations since the beginning of time. But, getting a young person to see life's challenges realistically, and believe in their own ability to 'ascend the mountain,' is where the real battle lies in most people's lives, between their ears. It's just like preparing for a race.

My father used to say: ***“Success is not about being smart, it's about being disciplined. People generally KNOW what they NEED to do to attain whatever dream they aspire to, they just aren't willing to make the sacrifices necessary to make it happen.”*** Dad found that in Proverbs 25:28, which says: *“Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control.”*

I was determined to succeed, whatever the cost. If it took me longer to get through college, then I was resolved to take longer. If I had to repeat a course, I would just do it, without grumbling or complaining. Coach Brancheau had prepared me for the trials of life in a way that few other experiences can – by passing through the fire of stress and competition and surviving.

No one is born a winner, they must be mentored

My winning attitude and abject determination to succeed in college emanated from the mentoring I received from a few dedicated teachers in high school. I can never repay the debt I owe them. We should never underestimate the potential vested in our teachers. They shape tomorrow's leaders; in their hands lays the destiny of our great nation. A society's moral fabric is imparted by its parents and teachers. These values are embedded for a lifetime. *Thank you Tim Brancheau, and May God Bless You. Your influence on my life has been of inestimable value.*

About the Author



Dave Rogers graduated from West Covina High School in 1972, the only member of his family to ever participate in organized sports. He surprised everyone by graduating at the top of his class in geology from Cal Poly Pomona in June 1976. He continued his studies at Cal Berkeley, earning master's and doctorate degrees in civil and geological engineering. Along the way he founded three consulting engineering firms with offices in San Francisco and Los Angeles before returning to Berkeley to teach civil engineering in 1994. Since 2001 he has served as Professor and Karl F. Hasselmann Chair in Geological Engineering at the Missouri University of Science & Technology Website: www.mst.edu/~rogersda

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