

1974 Distance Medley Relay 80th Edition of the Penn Relays Carnival

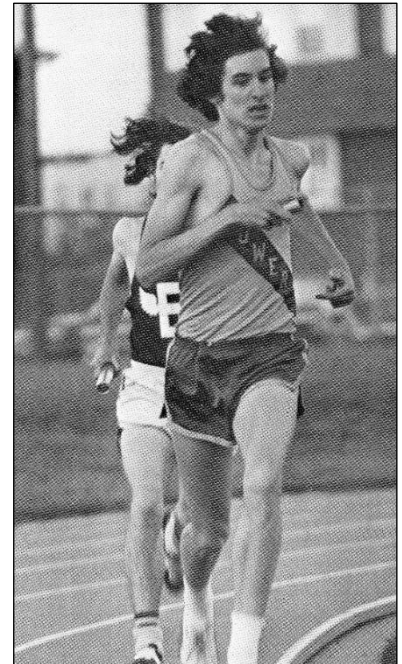


Franklin Field

Thousands of athletes. Grade schoolers, High Schoolers. Collegians and Olympians. Stars and unknowns. And what a great crowd! Memories are in the making. The date is April 26, 1974. It's a sunny, mild spring afternoon in Philadelphia, terrific weather for racing at the 80th edition of the Penn Relays Carnival.

There was a call over the loudspeaker, **“HIGH SCHOOL BOYS CHAMPIONSHIP DISTANCE MEDLEY. REPORT TO THE CHECK-IN AREA.”** It was time to assemble.

Just a few hours earlier, Brian Johnston was



Brian Johnston

sitting in a mid-town Manhattan classroom at Power Memorial Academy. He and his teammates were impatiently waiting for 10:30AM to arrive. This race had been on Johnston's mind for about a year. With a 4:22 mile time as a junior, he knew there was a chance he could run the anchor DMR mile leg at the big relays the following year.

Brian was totally unflappable. Whether he was racing or training, he was always loose, always happy. It was hard to understand how anyone could be that loose and that focused at the same time.



Gerry Centrowitz

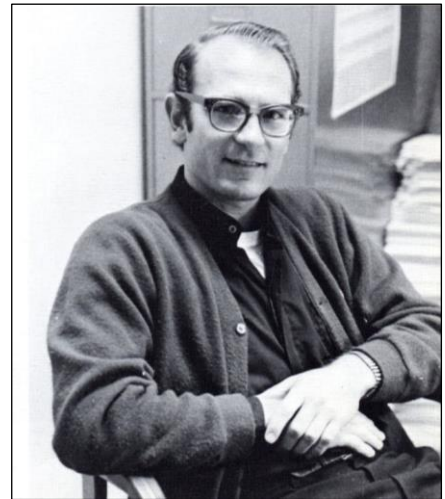
Everyone knew the school's Penn Relays lore. In 1960, Power won the Distance Medley Relay in a then record time. Mike Radov, Alex Winogradoff, John Doran, and Ed Duchini, still revered for their win. Andy Walsh, Tony Colon and the Lovett brothers, Peter and John had a record-breaking two-mile relay win in 1969. John Jakimetz, Armando Vera, Ray Naudain and Tony Colon etched their names in history with a Penn Relays DMR victory at Penn in 1970. And everyone in the current group remembered the previous year, 1973. Matt Centrowitz ran a 4:08.7 anchor but it was not enough to catch Paramus Catholic and their anchorman Tim Conheaney.

Matt's brother, Gerry, would run on this 1974 edition of Power Memorial's Distance Medley. A broken foot in September sidelined Gerry for nearly the entire cross-country season. But he came back, worked hard, making progress throughout the year. And now here he was, preparing for his half mile lead-off leg at the Penn Relays.

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10:30AM arrived, starting an orderly procession of happy, Carnival bound athletes from their classrooms. Down the staircase they went, going round and round the schools circa-1854 semi-exposed elevator shaft. A left turn at the bottom of the staircase, through the cafeteria and then next door to the Gold Star Gym. Everyone gathered in the 3rd floor locker room. Maurice Weaver was in the underclassman's area. Maurice had shown great potential as a freshman. Now a sophomore, his talent continued to blossom. Although limited to light training for three weeks while he dealt with pain from a growth spurt, "Mo" would be handling the ¾ mile leg at Penn. Over in the Senior section of the locker room was Greg Little, the CHSAA Indoor 440-yard champion. He'd be handling that distance on the 2nd leg at Penn. And of course, Brian Johnston, known to his friends as "BJ". He kept his teammates loose and their mood light. Maybe that's why Brian was sometimes underestimated. But Johnston had something beyond talent. He had grit, he had grind, he was a competitor. Those intangibles helped him become one of the area's top runners during the cross-country season and on the track at the mile and two-mile distances. "BJ" had already anchored many big relays this year. Here at Penn, he would once again handle the anchor mile leg.

Teammates, running on the mile and two-mile relay teams, were in the locker room too. There was Daryl Everett, Al Fiorentino, Pablo Maseda, Julio Rivera, and Sean Ryan. Everyone grabbed their gear filled bags before heading to the dead-end at 61st Street and Amsterdam Ave. Their coach, Brother John G. Bielen, was waiting for them there in the school van. Mr. James McGarry, the field team coach, was there with his car too. At about 11:30 the athletes, and their hopes, piled into the two vehicles beginning a two-hour journey down the NJ Turnpike to the City of Brotherly Love. Shortly after checking into the Sheraton Hotel, it was time to go to Franklin Field.



Brother John G. Bielen

At Franklin Field, all the Championship Distance Medley Relay teams were in a holding area now. To keep the meet on time there is a highly organized, choreographed movement of athletes coordinated by the track officials. They get teams to holding areas, moving them around in groups, so they are ready at the start time of each race. This edition of the Carnival was running about 15 minutes ahead of schedule.

It was warm but very breezy down by the track. Maurice Weaver was soaking it all in. Just a sophomore, he was elated just to be a part of this relay, running with the seniors. It was a beautiful, sunny day and "Mo" was totally enamored with the spectacle of Penn. Weaver knew who his competitors were, he knew what they were capable of. But "Mo" was also confident in his teammates and himself. Just as his talent had blossomed that year, so did his confidence. He felt he could compete with anybody and never felt intimidated by the big names on the big teams Power would be competing against.

The time had come for runner's warm-up sweats to come off and spiked racing flats to be put on. Brian was tying his spiked shoes when disaster struck. SNAP! Johnston was holding a good portion of his shoelace in one hand, the rest dangling from his shoe. He froze for a moment, there was a momentary sinking sensation in his stomach as he processed what had just occurred as race time drew near. Brian could hear his heartbeat and the heartbeats of those around him. Quick thinking Greg Little got down on his knees, began to pray, then furiously re-laced Brian's racing shoe with what material remained. It was an eyelet short of the top, but it would have to do.

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Gary Conroy & Mark Ogden

There were 14 teams in the field. This was their shot at the title. Favorites, contenders, and dark horses, all vying for a Distance Medley Relay Championship of America. A week earlier, Monsignor Farrell with Bill Oehm, Bob McBride, John Daly, and Joe Walsh won the Queens-Iona Relays DMR. Just a few tenths of a second behind them was Bishop Loughlin with a line-up including Chris Scotto Di Vetta, Tim Behr, and Al Paris. Archbishop Molloy, starring Mark Ogden and Garry Conroy, won the DMR at the West NY Relays. All Hallows featured Ian Suite and the CHSAA's top miler, Gene McCarthy, who were DMR victors at the CHSAA relays. St. Joe's of Buffalo, a perennial track powerhouse, was in the field. St. Joe's of Metuchen was there too. Dark horses included St. John the Baptist (LI) and Williamstown HS (NJ). Power Memorial had the US#1 Indoor DMR time until St. Anthony's, also running today, knocked them out of the top spot. And there was a team everyone would be watching. The Pirates out of Bellmore, Long Island. Dressed in all black uniforms, except for the large, white, arched capital letters emblazoned across the singlet with their school's name: M E P H A M. Mepham's squad consisted of Norm Goldwire, Ernie Perrin, Gary Lindquist and 1974's premier HS middle-distance runner, Mark Belger. Lindquist, a junior, had an undefeated cross-country season, setting three course records, culminating in a record-breaking victory at the state intersectional championships. Indoors he had a 4:20 mile on his resume. Belger had previously set age group world records at 880 yards for 15-year-olds (1:53.6) and 16-year-olds (1:50.6), which also tied him with Jim Ryun for the high school Junior class world record. Now a 17-year-old senior, the Mepham ace seemingly set a record of some kind each time he stepped on the track. And the CHSAA contingent was well aware he had defeated their league's top miler, Gene McCarthy, at the inaugural Millrose Games High School mile.



Gary Lindquist

"DISTANCE MEDLEY RUNNERS! GET ON THE TRACK!"

The time arrived for runners to take their positions on the starting line and in the queue just off the track. It was a California start. The starters pistol fired. The race had begun. From the trackside queue it was hard to see the action on the track. Only the conga-line movement of the awaiting quarter milers provided insight into who was leading and where your team was in the race. Loughlin's Chris Scotto Di Vetta gave his team the lead with a 1:58.2 opening leg. St. Joe's of Buffalo and Archbishop Molloy were near the front too on the strength of Mike Wyatt and Frank Averill's two lappers.



Chris Scotto Di Vetta

The showcase was now on the quarter-milers. Receiving the baton from Gerry Centrowitz (2:01.2), and with the 440-yard legs fastest split, Power Memorial's Greg Little (51.1) zig-zagged around several runners bringing his team to 5th, closing the gap on the leaders.

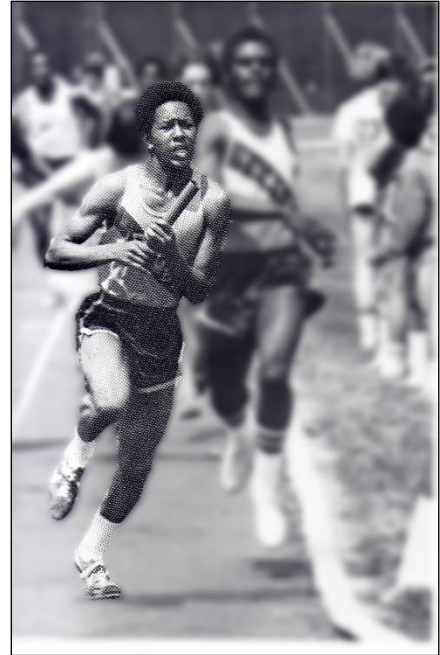
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Five to ten yards ahead of Little, were Loughlin, Molloy, and Farrell. Little passed the baton to Maurice Weaver. Weaver had been given simple instructions by his coach, Brother John Bielen. "Stay with the leaders!" Simple to say, not so simple to do. Ahead were Al Paris



Maurice Weaver

(Loughlin), John Daly (Farrell) and Mark Ogden (Molloy). Maurice stayed with them for nearly 3 laps but was totally gassed for the last 100 yards. Ogden gave the stick to Gary Conroy in the lead with his 3:04.3 leg. Farrell's John Daly (3:04.7) handed off to Joe Walsh right behind. Walsh immediately went ahead of Conroy for a short-lived lead as Conroy quickly moved back in front. Loughlin's Al Paris (3:07.4) gave the stick to their anchor Tim Behr in 3rd but Power's Weaver (3:06.4) had done his job passing the baton to Brian Johnston in 4th, in contact with the leaders, before collapsing in the infield.



Greg Little

Johnston had great confidence at this point. He had competed against these runners for a few years. All were familiar with each other's capabilities. Johnston said to himself, "We got this."

Touching off in 7th place, well behind, was Mark Belger. When he got the stick all eyes in the stands turned to him as he got underway. Could he catch the leaders? Would there be a fantastic finish? Fans would not be disappointed. While newspaper accounts vary on the distance (Belger was reported to be 40, 50, 60, or 70 yards back depending on the paper) all agreed: he had a lot of ground to make up.

Belger blazed through the first quarter in 58.2 seconds. Coming through the half-mile mark in 2:03.3, he had moved Mepham to fifth. With each stride he moved ever closer to the quartet of CHSAA milers ahead of him. At the $\frac{3}{4}$ mark he clocked 3:08.6 and was now a close 4th.

But Belger was not the only one making up ground on the leaders. On this final leg Brian Johnston was both the hunted and a hunter. He too was making up ground on Behr (Loughlin), Walsh (Farrell) and Conroy (Molloy).

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With 200 yards to go, Belger let loose, moving past Johnston. Johnston felt contact, responding with a thwack of the baton. Belger, now third, had the inside lane. Johnston stutter-stepped, found another gear and gave chase to the man in black. There's a hundred yards to go.

Maurice Weaver is watching the climax of the race from the finish line area. With all the tenacity he can muster, Johnston moves just off Belger's outside shoulder. With Johnston hanging on, Belger passes Loughlin's Behr, then Farrell's Walsh. One runner to go.

Belger takes the lead, moving past Molloy's Gary Conroy, but he can't shake Power's Johnston.

Conroy summons his last reserve of energy, making a valiant effort to keep pace. Looking on, Maurice Weaver is going through a gamut of thoughts and emotions. "Is Brian going to outkick Mark Belger? I hope he does. I don't think he can. Can anyone? I don't expect him to. Is this really happening?" The crowd wildly cheers the theater on the track, watching the drama with their mouths agape. Three runners are approaching the finish. It's Belger, Johnston, Conroy. With five yards to go the Power senior presses to the front. Weaver is in disbelief, "Why is Brian Johnston raising his arms?" Johnston crosses the line first, two feet ahead of Mephham's Mark Belger, with Molloy's Conroy a close 3rd. Power Memorial had won the 1974 Penn Relays Distance Medley in a thrilling, memorable finish!

Shortly after the race, Belger, who ran the leg in 4:12.2, his fastest mile to date said, "I thought I had it when I went by Conroy. But then I heard Johnston on my outside shoulder and knew it would be a struggle to the tape." Brian Johnston, who also had a mile PR with his 4:18.1 effort, was ecstatic after the race, celebrating with his teammates.



(left to right) Brian Johnston, Mark Belger, Tim Behr



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1974 Penn Relays Distance Medley Champions
Coach Br. John Bielen, Gerry Centrowitz, Greg Little, Maurice Weaver, Brian Johnston

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Addendum: Upon seeing the 1974 Penn DMR finish line photo many years later, Belger commented that was “the best second place ever.”

After graduating from Mephram, Mark Belger never lost another race at the Penn Relay’s. Running for Villanova from 1974 to 1978, Belger won a record 10 Championship of America races. He was twice named the meet’s most outstanding athlete (1977 & 1978). He was part of a relay world record as well: on February 7, 1976, Belger ran the opening 1200-meter leg of Villanova's world record Distance Medley Relay. Belger, Glenn Bogue, Phil "Tiny" Kane, and Eamonn Coghlan ran 9:38.4 at the Mason-Dixon Games in Louisville, Kentucky. Individually Belger won two NCAA championships (1000i yards in 1976 and 880i yards in 1978) and was a 4-time NCAA finalist outdoors in the 800 meters (finishing 2nd in 1977 and 3rd in 1976). He left Villanova in 1978 as the school record holder over 800 meters with a 1:45.85 PR. Belger finished in the dreaded 4th spot at the 1976 USA Olympic Trials at that distance in 1:46.36, a mere .08 seconds out of third. During his post-collegiate professional

career, Belger at one point or another beat every major 800-meter runner in the world -- except Olympic gold medalists Steve Ovett and John Walker.

1974 Championship Distance Medley Relay - Order of Finish

1) Power Memorial	10:16.8	(Centrowitz, Little, Weaver, Johnston)
2) Mephram	10:17.0	(Goldwire, Perrin, Lindquist, Belger)
3) Molloy	10:17.2	(Averill, Cody, Ogden, Conroy)
4) Farrell	10:19.8	(Oehm, McBride, Daly, Walsh)
5) Loughlin	10:20.2	(Scotto Di Vetta, Harper, Paris, Behr)
6) St. Joe’s (Metuchen)	10:30.8	(Finley, Johnston, Kelly, Stianchi)
7) West Babylon	10:31.0	(?? ?? ?? ??)
8) All Hallows	10:34.0	(Miller, D’Arco, Suite, McCarthy)
9) St. Joe’s (Buffalo)	10:38.2	(Wyatt, ??, ??, Mistretta)
10) St. John the Baptist	10:47.2	(McNiff, Guinessey, McDonough, Gardner)
11) St. Anthony’s	10:55.2	(Mullady, Folan, P. Crooke, S. Crooke)
Williamstown HS (NJ)		(Flannagan, Uzadavines, Leydon, Marino)

Acknowledgements: My thanks to Brian and Maurice for sharing their stories.

Sources: NY Newsday, NY Times, CHSAA Newsletter, Bellmore Life, Buffalo Evening News, NY State Scholastic Track & Field Yearbook, Asbury Park Press, Philadelphia Inquirer, Courier-Post, Msgr. Farrell & Mephram HS Yearbooks, Villanova Running blog.

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Leg	Power Memorial (1)	Mepham (2)	Archbishop Molloy (3)	Monsignor Farrell (4)	Bishop Loughlin (5)	St. Joe's of Metuchen (6)	West Babylon (7)
880	Centrowitz 2:01.2 (+3.0)	Goldwire 2:01.8 (+3.6)	Averill 1:58.5 (+0.3)	Oehm 1:59.6 (+1.4)	Scotto Di Vetta 1:58.2 (0.00)	Finley	-
440	Little 51.1 (+1.5)	Perrin 52.9 (+3.9)	Cody 52.6 (+0.4)	McBride 52.5 (+1.3)	Harper 52.6 (0.00)	Johnston	-
3/4	Weaver 3:06.4 (+3.3)	Lindquist 3:10.1 (+12.4)	Ogden 3:04.3 (+0.0)	Daly 3:04.7 (+1.4)	Paris 3:07.4 (2.8)	Kelly	-
Mile	Johnston 4:18.1 (0.0)	Belger 4:12.2 (+0.2)	Conroy 4:21.8 (+0.4)	Walsh 4:23.3 (+3.0)	Behr 4:22.0 (3.4)	Stianchi	-
Total	10:16.8	10:17.0	10:17.2	10:19.8	10:20.2	10:30.8	10:31.0

Leg	All Hallows (8)	St. Joe's of Buffalo (9)	St. John The Baptist (10)	St. Anthony's (11)	Williamstown (NJ)	-	-
880	Miller 2:00.5	Wyatt	McNiff 2:04.3	Mullady	Flannagan	-	-
440	D'Arco	-	Guinnessy 51.4	Folan 51.4	Uzadavines	-	-
3/4	Suite	-	McDonough	S. Croke	Leydon 3:07.1	-	-
Mile	McCarthy 4:18.1	Mistretta 4:25.8	Gardner	P. Croke	Marino 4:32.0	-	-
Total	10:34.0	10:38.2	10:47.2	10:55.2	-	-	-