

Southington Sports Hall of Fame

My way... Mike Ryan blazed his own path to the NFL sidelines

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SPORTS WRITER

Irv Black's voice crackled through the speakers at Hartford Public in 1980 as the legendary track official called the play-by-play for the 1500m race at the Colonial Conference Championship. His voice melted into rhythm with the frontrunner's steps.

Newcomer Mike Ryan matched Black's voice step by step as it rose in pitch. He sped up as the voice rose in crescendo at the finish, but his voice shrieked as Ryan continued past the finish.

"Stop!" croaked Black, but Ryan kept going toward his coach, Wayne Nakoneczny at the far end of the track with a stopwatch.

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"I figured that I might as well go for the school record in the mile, so Coach Nak stood at the finish line and timed me," he said with a laugh. "Everyone finished the race, but I just kept going. Irv Black had one of those voices that you could hear a mile away. He was yelling at me to stop, but I kept going and met coach at the far turn."

"And he had plenty left at the end," the coach said to *The Observer*. "We just might keep him in that event."

In just his second 1500m race, Ryan placed second in the conference with a time that broke the school's record, but his time in the mile was a new standard as well... even if it was unofficial. Coach Nak had finally found his distance runner, and fans were introduced to Ryan's penchant for charting his own course. It was the start of a journey that carried him to the NFL sidelines.

"I love challenges. It's one of the reasons that I still run now," said Ryan, the head trainer for the Jacksonville Jaguars. "I like to challenge myself and see what I'm made of. That's one of the nice things about sports. You can say all you want, but when it comes to competing against others, you really find out where you stand. I really like that challenge."

Ryan grew up as was always a competitor, growing up as a three-sport athlete in a small town in Massachusetts, but it was the move to Southington in his junior year that really excited the youngster. It wasn't the chance to compete in one of the biggest programs in Connecticut. It was the opportunities off the field that excited him.

"I knew by the time I was in eighth grade that I wanted to be a trainer in the NFL, so I was just so excited to get down here," he said. "I knew what a strong athletic program they had and all the athletic opportunities that they had at the high school and in the town. It was like going to Disney World to me."

Ryan soon discarded his football career when he failed to make Southington's starting lineup. He didn't dare to throw his hat into a baseball program that made his former high school team look like a farm league. Instead, he began to follow around the trainer, Bob Mastrianni, peppering him with questions about physical training.

The only reason he went out for track was because of an encounter with future Blue Knight

coach Bill Thomson in the high school cafeteria.

"He came and sat down on the table in the lunch room and said, 'So you're an 800m guy?' I was thinking who is this guy that's coming up to me in the lunchroom?" he said. "I didn't realize that there was such a strong fraternity of runners in the school, but they all ended up becoming great friends and great runners."

It was in track that Ryan finally learned the discipline that would carry him to the NFL. He wanted to be a decathlete, but coaches forced him to choose one discipline and train in it. Ryan wanted to be a sprinter, but Coach Nak pushed him into the distance races. He wanted to try the different events, but coaches kept him focused on one thing. At first, Ryan fought it.

"I was a sprinter, a pole vaulter, and a javelin thrower, but my coach told me that my best event was going to be the mile," he said. "I sort of laughed at him. I didn't want to run a mile in a week, let alone be a miler. But he was very steady about it. I guess he saw something in me."

"He had the quality of speed plus endurance, and that's where you get your half-mile and mile runners," said the former Blue Knight coach. "He was one of the most diligent workers that we've ever had. He was always there. He was always doing the workouts. He always gave 100 percent."

Eventually Ryan came around. He had already qualified for states in the 800m as a junior, and that's when his coach rewarded him with a chance to try something else. Ryan ran the 1500m in the season finale and qualified for states. He broke the record at the conference meet, again at the Class LL meet, and a third time at the state open.

"I had the school record in the mile, and it was only the second time that I ran the race. It was pretty funny," he said. "I finished 4th at the state championship and finished 6th at the state open. I was an all-state 1500m guy, and I only ran it a total of three or four times."

Ryan was hooked, and scouts took notice. As a senior, he placed third at the Class LL meet but fell apart at the state open when he overheated during a long delay at the start of his race. That devastating loss sparked the next step in his unlikely journey to the NFL.

"I know that, if I finished in the top 3, it would have changed everything," he said. "Would that have diverted me from my dream of being an athletic trainer in the NFL? I don't know. The fact that it was less than ideal, it was probably my best bad race that I've ever had."

The big programs stopped showing interest, and Ryan turned his attention to Central CT State University to study under CCSU trainer Karl Klein. Klein had contacts at the Olympics and the NFL, and Ryan leapt into his studies.

"I had a lot of guys tell me that, if I went to a smaller school, there was no way that I was going to get to the NFL," he said. "There were only 28 NFL teams, but I've never been one to listen to people and their negative views. Someone said that it doesn't matter where you are and what you do. If you're good at it, people will find you."

Ryan continued to run track



but added cross country to train with the best runners. A fractured ankle slowed him for a while with a surgery that required three pins and reattached tendons. Ryan took up swimming to stay in shape, and that led him on a path that culminated in six Ironman Triathlons. He ran with the bulls in Pamplona. He raced up the stairs at the Empire State Building and the Boston Marathon with three Escape From Alcatraz triathlons.

"I'm always looking for different kinds of challenges," he said. "I love running, but if that's all I did I'd be very bored."

That commitment drove his career, too. In the mid-1980s, he joined the NY Giants in the preseason and eventually was promoted to assistant trainer for six years. When the league expanded to 32 teams in 1994, Ryan earned the head trainer position for the Jacksonville Jaguars and continues to be the only one to hold that job.

"Mike has earned the respect and trust of countless peers and athletes throughout his career," said Dan Edwards, a spokesman for the Jaguars. "He has always kept ahead of changing technology and treatments...As the only head trainer/physical therapist the Jaguars have had, he has had the opportunity to teach and train many others in the profession and has seen many go on to productive careers of their own. Mike Ryan is an example of what a pro is and a great representative of the Jacksonville Jaguars."

Ryan was an easy choice to be inducted into the Southington Sports Hall of Fame after almost 40 decades of athletics on and off the field. On Thursday, Nov. 14, Ryan was honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf.

"Mike's an outstanding distance runner. He's been a very successful trainer. He's represented our town very well, and he's an outstanding human being," said Mastrianni. "He hasn't forgotten where he's come from, and there aren't a lot of people that have attained what he's attained that have that sort of memory."

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Inside the Numbers

SHS Track & Field

- All-Conference in the 1500m (1980, 1981).
- All-State in the 1500m (1980).
- 2 Varsity Letters (1980, 1981)
- Captain (1981)
- 4th in the 1500m at Class LL (4:08.19 in 1980).
- 3rd in the 1500m at Class LL (4:05.12 in 1981).
- 6th in the 1500m at State Open (4:08.1 in 1980).
- Set a school record in the 1500m (4:05.12) at the time of his graduation.

Central CT State University/UConn

- Bachelor's degree in athletic training (1985)
- Degree in physical therapy from UConn (1988)
- Cross country & miler in indoor and outdoor track.
- CCSU Kaiser Alumni Service Award (2010)

Athletic Trainer/PT (NFL)

- Trainer intern for NY Giants preseason (1984-86)
- Giants asst. trainer and phys. therapist (1988-1994)
- Jaguars head trainer and physical therapist (1994-Present)
- Ed Block Courage Award's NFL Athletic Training Staff of the Year (2003).
- ATAF Athletic Trainer of the Year Award (2007)
- Trainer/therapist at US Olympic Training Ctr (2008)
- SE Athletic Trainers Association's Professional Athletic Trainer of the Year Award (2008)
- President of the Professional Football Athletic Trainers' Society Research & Education Foundation.
- NFL Foot & Ankle Committee.
- Chairman, NFL Collegiate Athl. Trainers Committee.
- Sports Concussion Medical Advisory Board.
- Korey Stringer Inst. Med. & Science Advisory Board.
- Advisor/co-author of the National Athletic Trainers Assoc. Position Statement on Lightning Safety for Athletics and Recreation.
- On-line sports medicine author and consultant.

Other

- Competed in 6 Ironman Triathlons: Hawaii (1994), New Zealand (1996), Canary Island (1998), Brazil (2000), Idaho (2004) and Austria (2009).
- 3 Escape from Alcatraz Triathlons
- World Championship Duathlon (2002).
- Running with the Bulls in Pamplona, Spain,
- Run-Up the Empire State Building in NYC.
- Boston Marathon.