



ULTRARUNNING HISTORY

Podcast and Stories

- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [American Ultrarunning Hall of Fame](#)
 - [Subscribe to Podcast](#)
 - [History Links](#)
 - [Contact Me](#)
 - [Give Support](#)

Search for:

The Passing of Ultrarunning Legend, Tom Osler

March 26, 2023

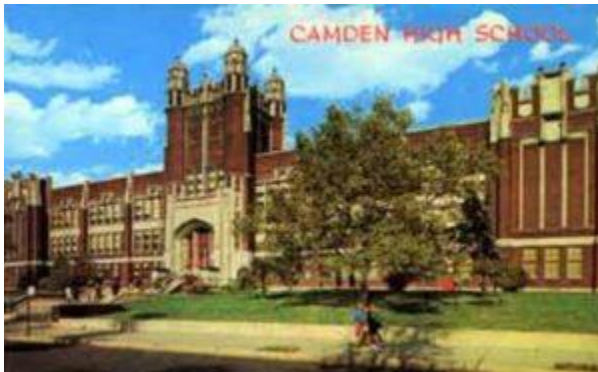


Thomas Joseph Osler (1940-2023) of Camden, New Jersey, passed away on March 26, 2023. He was a mathematician, former national champion distance runner, and author. He published his training theories in his 1967 booklet for the ages, *The Conditioning of Distance Runners*. His pioneer 1976 24-hour run in New Jersey, brought renewed focus on the 24-

hour run in America. In 1979, together with Ed Dodd, he co-authored *Ultra-Marathon: The Next Challenge*. He is a member of the Road Runners Club of America Hall of Fame.

Of his youth, Osler said, "I was a sickly little kid at 12 or 13 and didn't have many friends. This annoyed me, so I decided to leap head-first into every sport there was. I was terrible. I came home night after night looking like an ad for the Blue Cross."

Osler was an excellent student, but purposely lowered his grades for a while in order to fit in as a "regular guy." Then the gang in his neighborhood picked distance running as "that day's form of athletic torture." Osler jumped in head-first and started to run. When he was fourteen years old, he had dreams that he would be the first person to break the four-minute mile. He said, "When you are young, you have dreams that seem very attainable." He did a test mile run and finished in 6:30.



In 1954, England's **Roger Bannister** was the first to break the four-minute mile barrier and Osler's dream was crushed. He started to train hard and at Camden High School was on the track team. His best mile was 4:54 which was disappointing to him, but he was one of the best high school milers in Camden. He finished his first marathon when he was 16 years old with a time of 3:27. In high school, he excelled in his classes, especially in the sciences. His father was a plumbing contractor and sacrificed to make sure Osler went to college.

College Years

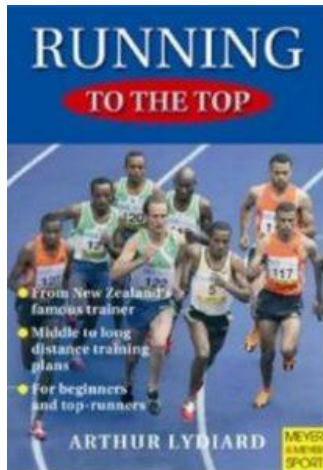


Drexel

In 1957, Osler went to Drexel Institute of Technology in Philadelphia where he studied physics and won many academic awards. Osler loved running and found time during his busy college life to also be deeply involved with road running. In 1959 he helped found the Road Runners Club of America and was its first co-secretary. He raced multiple times a month in many shorter races put on by Browning Ross (1924-1998) in Philadelphia and throughout New Jersey.

Osler said, "At the time you only ran in a proper athletic setting. You ran in a park or on a track. You certainly never ran on the streets. If you did, you were stared at by everyone." Yes, he ran on the roads. "Other runners would ask me, 'how do you stand the ridicule?' My answer was that I simply ignored it." Frequently he was stopped and questioned by police while running, thinking he was running to try to get away after doing some crime. Once he was even pulled into a patrol car. Osler said, "He popped out of his car like a jack-in-the box and tackled me. Before I knew what was happening, I was in the car beside him." For his first six years of serious running, he raced at every opportunity. In a field of about 50 runners he would finish about 15th to 20th.

But over training started to plague him. He said, "I had a sciatic nerve condition that left me unable to walk. I still remember going out to train and going so slowly due to hip pain that even the dogs looked at me puzzled. They couldn't decide if I was running or not and were confused as to whether to chase me." He soon figured out that rest and healing was just as important as training.



In 1963 after reading *Running to the Top* by **Arthur Lydiard**, he adopted the method of slow training and took his first “great leap forward.” He started to run steady miles, often reaching 70-75 miles a week, much of it on the road. As he coached himself, some wins started to come and he finished the 1964 Boston Marathon in 2:47.

After graduating from Drexel, Osler won a fellowship to graduate school at the Courant Institute of Mathematics at New York University where he received his PhD.

Becoming an Elite Runner

Osler became life-long friends with future ultrarunning legend, **Ed Dodd**, in the early 1960’s when Dodd was still in high school. They would do long training runs together. In 1965 at the age of 25, Osler was “beaten soundly” by Dodd, age 19, who became captain of St. Joseph University cross-country team. This increased Osler’s motivation and “the old competitive zeal was put into high gear.”



In July 1965, Osler went to Falls Church, Virginia to compete in a one-hour track run against a highly competitive national field. He hoped to finish in the top ten. He ran away from the field, lapping them, and won with 11.3 miles. He became highly ranked in the nation for 1965 and won the 25 km national championship. He raced nearly every weekend and won about 30 races in 1965 for distances from 3-15 miles, both on roads and cross-country.



Osler was instrumental in bringing course measurement up to the standards in the Middle Atlantic area outlined by Ted Corbitt. Prior to Tom's initiative, courses were measured with someone's car. In November 1965, Osler put on the first William Ruthruff marathon in Philadelphia in

Fairmont Park. After a number of years this turned into what became The Philadelphia Marathon.

In 1966 Osler became a math instructor at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia and continued his prolific racing and winning. In 1967 he set his marathon personal best at Boston, finishing 16th with a time of 2:29:04. That year he also won the National 30 km Championship.

Ultrarunning

In 1967 Osler was inspired by Ted Corbitt to give ultramarathons a try. With running buddies, **Neil Weygandt** and **Ed Dodd**, he began doing 50-mile training runs from Collingwood to Atlantic City, New Jersey. On August 13, 1967, Osler won a club 40-mile fun-run in Egg Harbor, New Jersey. Confident that he could do well, he began preparing to run in the 50-mile national championship to be held in November 1967. He worked up his runs to 55 miles. He ran every afternoon after classes covering 75 to 80 miles a week and averaged 7.5 minutes per mile.





The start

The first modern-era American 50-mile championship was part of the YMCA Thanksgiving Day Road Race, held in Poughkeepsie, New York. There were 13 starters, including legendary and future 100-mile world record holder, John Tarrant, "the ghost runner," who came from England to run. ([see episode 63](#))

50 Mile Results

Runner	Time
1. Tom Osler, Unattached	5:52:33
2. Al Meehan, Unattached	6:29:42
3. Fred Hurd, Unattached	6:45:59
4. Vince Chiappetta, N.Y. Athletic Club	6:52:30
5. William Shannahan, Millrose AA	7:09:11
6. Harry Berkowitz, South Jersey TC	7:15:00
7. Nat Cirulnick, United AA	7:29:07

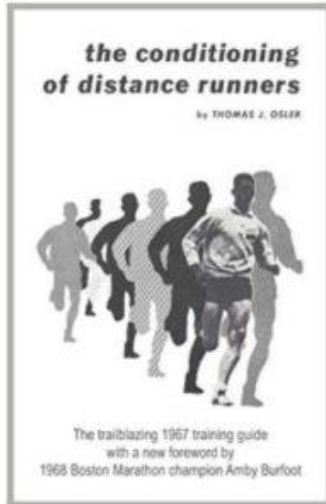
On race day, Osler, age 27, took control of the 50-miler early and even led Tarrant. The last 40 miles were run in a steady downpour of freezing rain. Osler won with 5:52:33, beating Tarrant by about ten minutes and said, "I'm very happy with my time. I had planned to do about 6:10 or better to win. I felt perfect for the first 41 miles, like I had just started. Then a slow weariness set in. It got worse as I went along and in the last lap was quite bad. It was cold but my main worry was that it might freeze."



The 50-miler took a toll on Osler. His legs were stiff and tired for several weeks after that and he did not like feeling so shattered.

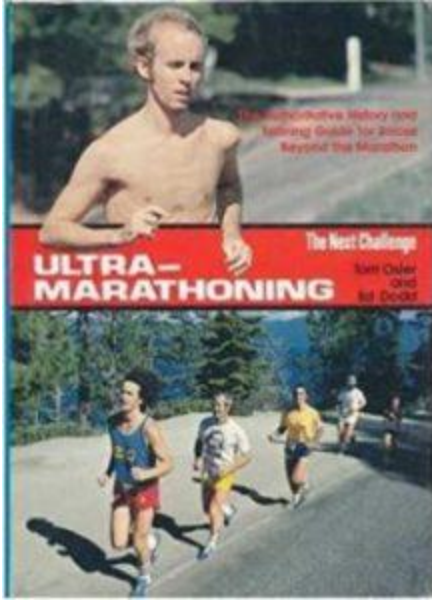
"I felt sick and weak. I became 'gun shy' and did not enter another 50-miler until 1974."

Osler, the Author



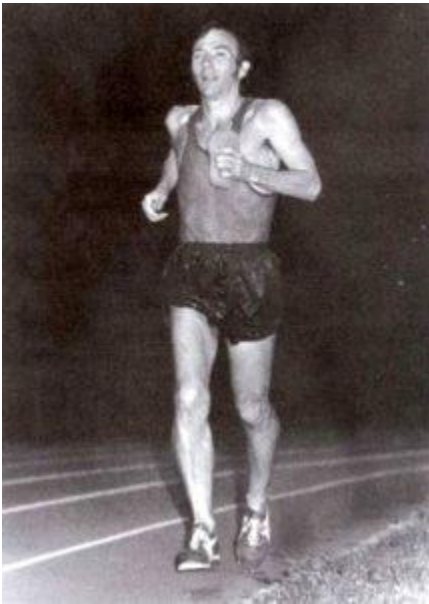
In 1967 Osler privately published 2,000 copies of a 29-page training guide booklet entitled, *The Conditioning of Distance Runners*. [Part One](#) and [Part Two](#). This would be the first of several books he authored on running training theory and practices. It was trailblazing and is still referred to decades later. He endorsed the long, easy training runs to establish a long-lasting base and then adding speed sharpening training. Running in frequent races was an important part of his training. He gave all the proceeds for his booklet to **Browning Ross** to keep support Browning Ross' monthly [Long Distance Log](#) that published results for road races across the country.

His second book, published in 1978 during the running book, *Serious Runners Handbook* sold more than 55,000 copies. Olympian **Browning Ross** called it "the best running book."



He later was a strong advocate of the value of walking in training and running on soft surfaces like trails rather than roads. In 1979, together with Ed Dodd, he co-authored *Ultra-Marathonning: The Next Challenge*, a classic must-read book. In addition, with a PhD received in mathematics in 1970, he has published more than 150 papers on mathematics and physics.

Glassboro 24-hour Run



In 1976, at age 36, Osler wanted to prove out his running/walking theory by running 100 miles on the track at Glassboro State

College where he was teaching. Each Christmas, the freshman class sponsored a fund-raising drive for needy families in the area.



He decided to do a 24-hour run on the outdoor quarter-mile track. He said, "This would not only assist the fund-raising project, but it would also provide a stem test of the method I felt I had uncovered. I decided on a ratio of seven laps running to one lap of walking. Thus, I would walk one quarter mile at the conclusion of each two-mile segment. I promised myself that it would be a 'go as you please' affair. I wanted to stay fresh and feel good for the entire day."



The doctor runs, and runs, and runs

Osler had never run further than sixty miles in races or training so he was interested to find out if he could reach 100 miles with the walking/running mixture. He explained, "I'm not trying to break any speed records. In this kind of race, you

can slow down, stop to eat or drink or even take a nap. But you don't get too far if you nap."

Osler did not sleep at all the night before. He couldn't wait to get on the track. He started at 5 a.m. on the cold, clear December morning. It was about 20 degrees. He wore a hat, gloves and "ski pajamas" to cover his legs. Several friends started with him and ran portions of the distance through the day, including the college president.

He said, "Gradually, the light of dawn spread over the cinder track. I had thought before the run of the great beauty of watching the sun rise and set, and the night close in darkly while the run went ever on. I did my best to relax and stay fresh." He reversed direction on the track about every half hour. During the day the track thawed and became wet and mushy.

Osler reached 50 miles in 8:08:13 feeling good. The sun set at the 70-mile mark. The freezing ruts in the track became a problem. Many students arrived to run with him. He recalled, "At 80 miles, I began to grow weary. For the first time, I was no longer comfortable. I really wanted to stop and take a rest but I thought it unwise." He recovered at 95 miles and finished strong, reaching 100 miles in 18:19:27. The college president and reporters were there to offer congratulations.



Osler, far left, on last lap with friends
"He stopped for a rest and a warm spaghetti dinner and a ten-minute nap. After the break, he couldn't get himself to run at all and proceeded to walk for the remaining time, covering 114 miles before he was done." He ended up

running 90 miles and walking 24 miles. He was delighted to discover that his post-race recovery produced no leg stiffness. He said, "I really don't feel too bad." Ted Corbitt told him that it was because of his frequent walks. Osler said, "I now knew how the great pedestrians of the past century had achieved seemingly impossible mileage."

Later Life



Two years later, Osler ran 100 miles again at the 1978 Fort Mead 100 and won with 16:11:15. He went on to run and race competitively for the next couple of decades. In 1980, Osler was inducted into the Road Runners Club of America Hall of fame. In 2003, he suffered a stroke but recovered. Two years later, he had another serious artery blockage that made him decide to retire from serious racing, but he did start walking and running again.



By 2011, Osler had run an estimated 90,000 miles and run in more than 2,000 races. He continued to run in a race nearly every week until he fell and broke his hip which was replaced in 2017, requiring him to stop running. In 2020, Osler was 80 years old and still teaching math at Glassboro (now called Rowan University), with a teaching career of more than 54 years. When asked why he ran, he replied, "Running offers both pleasure and pain. There is nothing like the purification of the soul through running. Running helps you connect with what is important in your soul."



Ed Dodd wrote of Osler, "He had the greatest influence on my own running career of anyone I have known. Tom has been extremely giving of his time and advice and has been a mentor to many, many runners in our area through the years. Some of the most enjoyable times of my life were

spent on Sundays taking long runs with Tom. He was likewise a mentor for many of his mathematics students at Rowan University. He gave many of his students the opportunity to co-write some of his papers and was the reason a number of them pursued an advanced degree and a similar teaching career.”

Tom Osler passed away on March 26, 2023.