

Press Release



The Perfect Mile

by Neal Bascomb

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"Perfect . . . An absolute page-turner . . . Do we have another *Seabiscuit* here? Yup." — Buzz Bissinger, author of *Friday Night Lights*

"A book with a breathtaking sense of time and place . . . Bascomb reminds us all of the purity of sport for sport's sake." — Tim Layden of *Sports Illustrated*

About the Book

In this day and age of superathletes whose bodies have become machines carefully calibrated to accomplish their respective feats, it's difficult to imagine a record that can't be broken. But there was a time, fifty years ago, when one record seemed truly out of reach . . .

May 6, 2004, marks the fiftieth anniversary of what *Sports Illustrated* named the twentieth century's greatest sporting achievement — the breaking of the four-minute mile. In *The Perfect Mile: Three Athletes, One Goal, and Less Than Four Minutes to Achieve It*, Neal Bascomb tells the story *behind* the story of that pivotal moment in sports history and describes the individual paths three men followed in their quest to accomplish the impossible.

The story is as captivating as *Seabiscuit*. In fact, the same team who made that book into an Oscar-contending film has optioned the rights to this story.

The three principal characters, all of whom are alive today (and live near the place where they made their first attempts at overcoming the mile barrier), were driven by very different forces in their pursuit of the sub-four-minute mark:

- **Roger Bannister**, a young English medical student, epitomized the idealistic amateur — motivated not by winning but by the nobility of the quest — in a world fast being overrun by professionals and the commercialization of sports. Bannister wanted to capture the four-minute crown to demonstrate that athletic greatness did not have to be achieved at the expense of all other endeavors in life; his guiding principle was that running should be one part, and only one part, of a much larger, fuller existence. The four-minute mile, then, wasn't an end in itself for Bannister; rather, says Bascomb, it was "proof of his theorem of sport and life."

- **John Landy** was the privileged son of a genteel Australian family. Though more interested in collecting butterflies than in running, he trained relentlessly, with an almost spiritual rigor, to school his body to this single task. His resolve and discipline were extraordinary. Once he returned from the 1952 Olympics, where he had been inspired by the superior European runners, he didn't miss a single training session. It was a pure exercise of will, and running brought out the best in him.

- **Wes Santee** was the brash American — a Kansas farmboy and born athlete who believed that with his raw talent he was simply better than everybody else. (Few knew, however, that behind his swagger lay the scars of a brutal childhood; he had turned to running as an escape from his abusive father's control.) According to Bascomb, "of the many top athletes in America, Santee embodied better than most sport's changing landscape. Playing to the spectators and generating excitement was the name of the game, and he loved doing both. The days of quiet achievement and quieter heroes were over."

It is no surprise, then, that Santee was the one to throw down the gauntlet, publicly announcing his intention to be the first to shatter the four-minute barrier. Bannister and Landy hoped to prove him wrong, and it became a three-way race of body, heart, and soul, as well as of their respective nations' honor.

The three men mesmerized the world and stole headlines from the Korean War, the atomic race, and such sports legends as Edmund Hillary, Willie Mays, Native Dancer, and Ben Hogan. Who would be the first to achieve the unachievable? "Wes Santee . . . John Landy . . . Roger Bannister . . . Who is going to be the first to reach the end of the rainbow and run the fabled four-minute mile?" wondered the Associated Press. The question was answered on May 6, 1954, when Bannister ran the mile in 3:59.4.

But, a mere seven weeks later, Landy shattered Bannister's record and set a new world record of 3:58. The question then became who would win in a head-to-head competition. Bannister and Landy met at the Empire Games in Vancouver in August 1954 for an epic showdown — "a world title fight," Landy remembers. Bannister finished in first place, at 3:58.8, and Landy came in second, at 3:59.6. "In the race of the century, in the contest between the first two milers ever to break four minutes, both runners had once again crossed the threshold," Bascomb writes. "It was perfection." Here was a defining moment in the history of sport — the perfect mile.

Bascomb, a former editor and journalist, had full access to — and support from — Bannister, Landy, and Santee, as well as a host of their running and training companions, while writing his book. The athletes provided him with many anecdotes and details, especially about their

formative years, that have never before been documented. As a result, Bascomb offers the most complete and personal account to date of the three-way race.

The Perfect Mile is more than just a great track and field drama; it is as much about individual personalities, courage, and determination as it is about the sport of running itself. It is a story, also, of the changing face of athletics in the 1950s, when sports became a serious business.

In the tradition of *Seabiscuit* and *Chariots of Fire*, Bascomb delivers a breathtaking tale of unlikely heroes and leaves us with a lasting portrait of the twilight years of the golden age of sport.

About the Author

Neal Bascomb is the author of *Higher: A Historic Race to the Sky and the Making of a City*. A former editor and journalist, he has appeared in documentaries on A&E and the History Channel. He has also written for the *New York Times*. A major motion picture based on *The Perfect Mile* is currently being developed by the team behind the movie *Seabiscuit*. A native of St. Louis, Bascomb now lives in New York. More information can be found at www.nealbascomb.com.

A Conversation with Neal Bascomb

Q) What drew you to write about the race to break the mile barrier?

A) In high school, I joined the freshman cross-country team and first acquainted myself with the joy — and buckets of sweat and discipline — required of distance running. For inspiration I turned to Roger Bannister's autobiography, *The Four-Minute Mile*, and marveled at his story. My passion for hockey got in the way of my running efforts, but I never forgot Bannister's heroic efforts. As the fiftieth anniversary approached and drug doping scandals ran rampant, I found a copy of the old book and thought about how much could be learned from efforts of Bannister and his rivals John Landy and Wes Santee. In many respects, I felt that Bannister, who wrote his story only months after his May 6 run, had only scratched the surface in respect to the drama and rich characters involved in his tale. A lack of modesty convinced me I could do the story the justice it deserved.

Q) What do you think makes the achievement significant? Why is it likened to climbing Everest?

A) Four laps of the track in four minutes. The symmetry alone begs the attempt. Then you add over a century's worth of effort and myth surrounding the perceived impossibility and you have a barrier. People were literally convinced that the human body could not stand the level of sustained speed to run the mile in less than four minutes. That's why I start the book with the question asked of Bannister: "How did he know he would not die?" Much the same was asked of Edmund Hillary.

And finally you have to consider that the battle to be the first to break the barrier captured

enormous international attention. It became a matter of national pride, much as staking one's flag on the tallest mountain in the world.

Q) Why should someone who does not run, nor cares a great deal for sports as a whole, care about four-minute miles?

A) That's a valid question, but also one I find easy to answer. I chose to write this book only after being convinced that this story was much greater than a track and field drama. Put simply, *The Perfect Mile* is about what it takes to do the "impossible." It is about staring down the naysayers and forging ahead with one's plans. The lessons the characters learn — whether in failure or triumph — can be just as easily connected to the challenges faced by scientists, artists, politicians, businesspeople, or engineers.

I dare someone to read this book without coming away inspired by the efforts of these three runners — no matter their pursuit in life. This is not a testament to my writing. Rather, it is proof that in the crucible of sport, much can be learned.

Q) What surprised you the most during the research?

A) How different these three runners were as individuals. They had different backgrounds, different running styles, different training techniques, different personalities, different connections with their coaches, different race tactics, and different reasons for wanting to break the barrier. Here they were attempting the same goal, but each taking his own path.

I remember returning to New York after three months of traveling for my research. While transcribing my interviews and sorting through the secondary sources, I realized how much I wanted each one of them to have broken the barrier first. Although Bannister is the one who ultimately claimed the prize, I gave Landy and Santee equal time in the narrative. Their stories are as compelling — and in some circumstances more so — than that of the first four-minute miler.

Q) Why was Bannister able to do it first?

A) It's a tricky question, one perhaps that each reader will have to answer after finishing my book. My view is best explained this way. At the beginning of this story, Bannister runs from his head, Santee out of sheer heart, and Landy as an expression of determination and will. In the end I believe only Bannister was able to come to the realization that in order to break the barrier, he would have to draw on all three. This made for a great character arc. That said, luck, good pacemaking, and the singular focus Bannister gave to achieving his goal didn't hurt.

Q) What is the perfect mile?

A) Likely not what you think. This is what made this story so fascinating to me and what few people realize. No doubt the four-minute mile was a singular achievement, the sporting event that most people remember from 1954. But it is the race three months later at the Empire Games in Vancouver that provides the truest test for these athletes. So Bannister makes history on May 6. Six weeks later John Landy bests his time by over a second. Then, six weeks after that, the first two sub-four-minute milers face off against one another. Landy is a front runner, Bannister a fast finisher. In what was deemed "the Mile of the Century," an

event broadcast throughout the world, one beats the other around the final bend in the last lap. Better yet, they both break four minutes again. This is the perfect mile.

The story had all the elements of an Aristotelian drama. And, personally, I could not have dreamed up a better sequence.

Q) How were Bannister, Santee, and Landy different from athletes today?

A) Let me count the ways. Take Roger Bannister. He participated in sport under the philosophy of "effortless superiority." It was an approach where one never gave the impression that sport was to be taken too seriously. There's the famous anecdote of the British sprinter Bevil Rudd, who showed up for a race with a lit cigar in his mouth. Rudd placed the cigar on the side of the track, ran (and won) his race, and then picked up the still-smoking cigar before receiving his trophy. This was wrapped up into the whole amateur approach, that sport was only part of a larger life, and it most certainly was not a career. What's amazing is that Bannister managed the impossible in sport while also in medical school — where he incidentally finished at the top of his class. He retired from athletics at the top of his game.

Q) Why are the events of 1954 that you chronicle considered a watershed moment in sports history?

A) Consider this. Bannister trained little more than an hour a day and considered running a passionate hobby. He achieved greatness on a cinder track he had helped build in front of a small crowd, a handful of journalists, and a lone camera crew that had to be persuaded to attend. Only three months later, in a modern concrete and steel stadium, Landy and Bannister battled each other in a heavily promoted race covered by an army of journalists and camera teams, broadcast to millions of homes worldwide, and commentated on by their fiercest rival. "The Mile of the Century" had all the hallmarks of a professional sporting event — except that not one of its competitors earned a penny in the process. If the first race sounded the death knell of amateurism, the second race struck the first notes of sport's future.

One of the reasons the story of the American Wes Santee is so interesting is that he was the victim of this changing tide. He was being pulled toward professionalism at a time when amateur officials were not yet ready to let go of their control of sport. It's tragic.

Q) What is your view on the recent scandals of athletes taking performance-enhancing drugs?

A) It's atrocious. But we reap what we sow. Athletes have always wanted to push the boundaries of performance. Then if you add the trappings of wealth, fame, and enormous pressure to win at any cost by fans and owners — factors that all professional athletes now face — what do you expect? Yes, you can blame the athletes; undeniably they are the ones who have to make the choice to cheat. But we are also using them as scapegoats for the environment we have created in sport.

Are we past the point of return when three-, four-, and five-year-olds are being trained to become the superathletes of tomorrow, when genetic modification is now on the table as well? Probably so. But ultimately it's a call the fans will have to make. They vote at the

ticket office and from their lounge chairs. Will they turn away from baseball when a home run count is largely a question of who has the best drug cocktail? Or track and field or bicycle races when records are broken by the children of parents who arranged for some prenatal chromosome engineering.

There was something pure and romantic about athletes of the past striving solely for the sake of the attempt. That is why I felt *The Perfect Mile* was important to write.

Q) Personally, what have you gained from writing this story?

A) Can I twist the Jack Nicholson quote from *As Good as It Gets* — "It made me want to be a better man." Seriously, though, at the end of my interviews with Landy, Bannister, and Santee, I asked them what they had learned from their endeavors on the track. All three were quite clear that their running had really given them a blueprint on how to approach their future. Landy said it best: "Running gave me discipline and self-expression . . . It has all the disappointments, frustrations, lack of success and unexpected success, which all reproduce themselves in the bigger play of life. It teaches you the ability to present under pressure. It teaches you the importance of being enthusiastic, dedicated, focused. All of these are trite statements, but if you actually have to go through these things as a young man, it's very, very important."

Writing this story reminded me of how much I owed to my youthful pursuit of sport — which in my case was more hockey than track and field. On a less philosophical level, it also got me running again, reminding me of how much I enjoyed the feeling. In fact, this year I am running a marathon for the first time, in Chicago. Such was my fervor that I even convinced my brother and sister to join me.

Advance Praise for *The Perfect Mile*

"*The Perfect Mile* is my idea of the perfect sports book. It is an absolute page turner in the quest of what may well be the greatest athletic achievement of all time. It is written with delicious attention to detail. And it is about character, the character of men who once upon a time pursued sports for the sake of something else besides money and endorsements and their own empire-building. Do we have another *Seabiscuit* here? Yup." — Buzz Bissinger, author of *Friday Night Lights*

"Neal Bascomb has written a book with a breathtaking sense of time and place, artfully bringing back to life a simple, yet vital era in the history of sport . . . Bascomb reminds us all of the purity of sport for sport's sake, contested by young men motivated only by their passion, true amateurs." — Tim Layden of *Sports Illustrated*

"Neal Bascomb has unearthed the entire dramatic and compelling story and has delivered it with exceptional grace, intelligence and style. Moreover, he has drawn three unforgettable portraits of three wholly different athletes and interwoven them into a fast-paced read. The end result is a fascinating look at the nature of human endeavor. From start to finish, *The Perfect Mile* is a winner." — Glenn Stout, series editor of *The Best American Sports Writing*

"Neal Bascomb skillfully brings the chase for the perfect mile to life while illuminating those

men in the shadows, largely forgotten by history, like Wes Santee and John Landy, who not only had the pluck and verve to spur Bannister along with astounding miling feats of their own but, for the odd twist of fate, may have even beat him to it. Sports fans will relish Bascomb's tale of the days when the mile was much more than just a footrace." — Chris Lear, author of *Running with the Buffaloes*

"Bascomb's excellent account captures all of the human drama and competitive excitement of this legendary racing event . . . With Bascomb's narrative skills, it's no surprise that movie rights have already been optioned." — *Publishers Weekly*

"Using exhaustive primary research — including interviews with the three athletes and hitherto unexamined archive material — *The Perfect Mile* provides a fascinating account of the events that led to Bannister's historic achievement." — *Bookseller* (London)