

BROWN: A motivated son wins race of a lifetime



THE 23-YEAR-OLD SENIOR is a member of the University of Texas track and field team, a top collegiate program.

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS

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Mohawk Road Runners Club. As a businessman, he gambled — and lost — with get-rich quick schemes. He committed suicide at age 48.

Sixteen years later, Darren is a 23-year-old senior on the University of Texas track and field team, one of the country's top collegiate programs. On and off the track, Darren tries to reconcile a longing to honor his father with still-seething anger about his death.

"To say I'm not angry would be a complete lie," Darren says, the zip from his voice fading, his otherwise constant smile receding. "I'm absolutely pissed at him."

"I want to be better than him at everything. That's how I can deal with my anger toward the situation. I feel like the only thing I can do is to use that as motivation to be the best runner I can be, so I can continue to honor him as the runner he was."

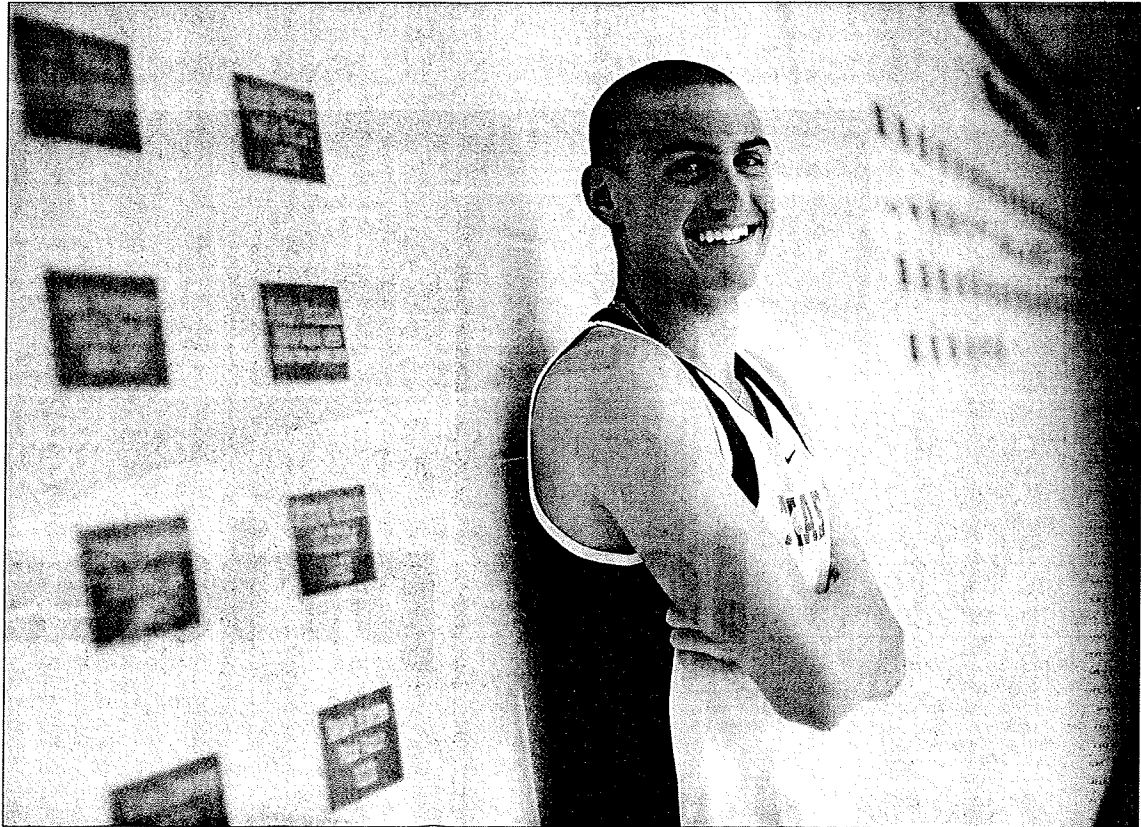
A Colonie High graduate and All-American while running for Providence College, Barry set 12 U.S. age-group records, including five at age 40.

He excelled at many distances and even once ran a marathon — a distance of 26 miles — in 2 hours, 15 minutes and 15 seconds, a record-setting time for a man that age. He broke the four-minute mile in 1972.

He ran and walked among the elite. Olympians like Frank Shorter and Marty Liquori stayed at his home and pushed Darren for walks in his stroller.

"Barry Brown was the Pied Piper of running," Liquori says.

Barry ran 100 miles a week and spent half the year in Florida to



BEN SKLAR/SPECIAL TO THE TIMES UNION

AFTER HE GRADUATES, Darren Brown plans to attend graduate school and study sports management. Also in his plans is to compete in the 2012 Olympic Games.

spent half the year in Florida to train. When Barry left the family's home on training runs, Darren followed him to the end of a gravel path that led from the front door to the road. Darren greeted his father in the same spot when he returned. They jogged home together.

Barry remains Darren's running partner, the rabbit he chases. But with that comes Darren's anger at the other side of Barry Brown, the part that kept him from being at Texas the day his son made history.

Barry never outran his litany of debts. His constant thirst for instant wealth led to a handful of lawsuits. His poor judgment affected others, too — reportedly, he scuttled his parents' life savings of more than \$100,000.

Darren knew none of this when his mother, Bobbi, fetched him from school Dec. 14, 1992. They opened the front door to their Florida home to find the stench of fumes. Bobbi hurried Darren to a friend's. She returned to the house, where she discovered Barry's body in the

garage and his suicide note in the bedroom.

From his friend's home, Darren heard the racing ambulances and screaming sirens, though he didn't know their destination. His mother and grandfather came for him sometime after 11 p.m. Bobbi drove down the block and pulled over.

Darren sat in the back seat. His mother turned and placed her hand on his knee.

"Darren, you know we love you, and we're here for you, and we just want you to know it's OK to cry," she said as tears welled in Darren's eyes — he thought his pet bird died.

Bobbi paused, then added, "I need to let you know that your father has passed away."

Darren screamed. Bobbi climbed into the backseat and clutched her young boy to her chest. Darren's grandfather turned and put his hands on their backs.

The family held the funeral at the University of Florida track. More than 300 people attended. At the conclusion, the mourners took a lap around the track, one

last run to honor Barry. Darren jumped into a steeplechase pit, because his father loved the steeplechase.

Christmas came less than two weeks later. Darren and his mother opened Barry's gifts, even the ones they bought for him.

Bobbi wanted Darren to remember the good times with his father — the days they played with a NERF football in the house, Barry lying on the couch with ice on his knees, flinging the ball to Darren, who caught it and pretended to tackle his father; the motorcycle trips the family took around the East Coast, Barry driving his Harley-Davidson, Bobbi following on her Honda, with Darren in the sidecar.

When Bobbi and Darren later moved to California, he grew enamored of soccer. He disliked running, though not because of his father. He understood little of his father's death and asked no questions. He knew his father left him a note but never asked to read it.

"I was happy being indifferent," Darren says. "I was sad that he was gone. And I was sad that he went through everything that brought him to that point. But I wanted to remain indifferent. That was easiest."

During Darren's sophomore year of high school, an Achilles' tendon injury curtailed his soccer

career. Contact threatened to make the injury worse, so Darren took up cross country instead. And he improved fast. He began by running about 21 miles a week. By senior year, he ran more than 50 and became one of the top runners on his high school varsity team.

Bobbi knew comparisons to Barry would come. She asked if Darren wanted to learn more about his father. Now the time felt right.

For the first time, Darren read the letter his father left for him. Barry wrote that he loved Darren and his family, that he was proud of his son, even at age 7. But he saw no way out of his financial problems.

"It wasn't written to a 7-year-old," Darren says. "That makes me realize how confused he was. It just shows the darkest hours I can ever imagine someone being in. And I can only imagine the pain of sitting down and writing a letter like that."

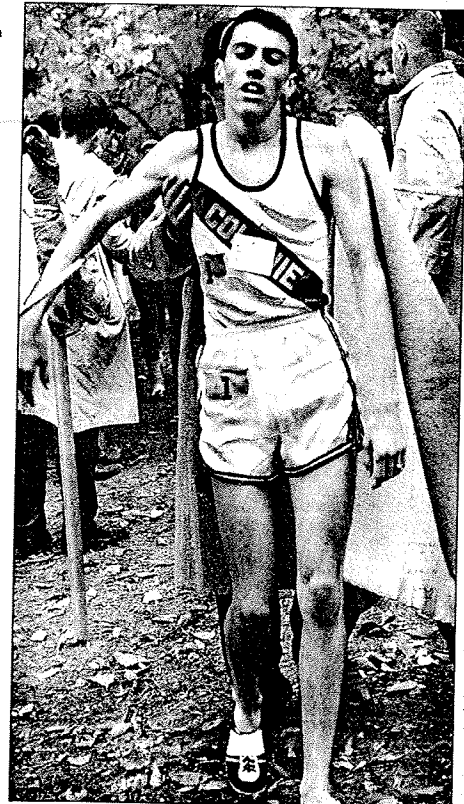
Indifference turned to desire. Darren strove to honor his father by besting him. He kept a list of his father's times in his room, a constant reminder of his goals. He even chose to run at Providence, Barry's alma mater. There, Darren heard about another elite runner whose father ran a four-minute mile; they hoped to be the first father and son to break the barrier. Darren adopted the same goal.

After two years at Providence, Darren transferred to Texas, near where his mother then lived with his stepfather, David Norris. Darren became one of the school's top runners. His mile time crept closer to four minutes.

"I saw him run two or three times where he missed it by a hundredth, by a tenth," Texas track coach Bubba Thornton says. "That's a dot. And I know there was some frustration in some of those runs. But I'll give it to him: There was something inside him that just said he was going to get this done."

Darren targeted the Texas Relays, held April 5. Noticing the bookmark and finding the coffee mug the morning of the race gave him pause. He believed them to be a foreshadowing.

He zoomed the first three-quarters of the race in 3 minutes,



A COLONIE HIGH SCHOOL graduate, Barry was All-America at Providence College. He went on to set 12 U.S. age-group records.

Father and son

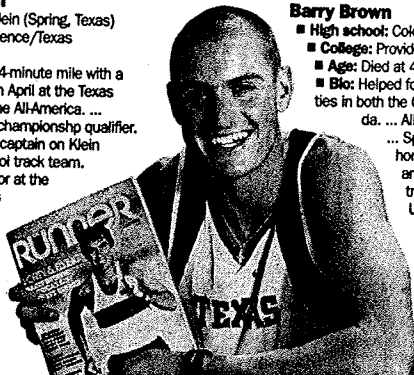
Here are a few highlights from the careers of Darren Brown and his father, Barry:

Darren Brown

- High school: Klein (Spring, Texas)
- College: Providence/Texas
- Age: 23
- Bio: Broke the 4-minute mile with a time of 3:59.99 in April at the Texas Relays. ... Two-time All-America. ... Three-time NCAA championship qualifier.
- Two-time team captain on Klein (Texas) High School track team.
- Economics major at the University of Texas
- Who hopes to attend graduate school in Austin next year.
- Eyeing the 2012 Olympics.

Barry Brown

- High school: Colonie
- College: Providence
- Age: Died at 48
- Bio: Helped found running communities in both the Capital Region and Florida. ... All-America at Providence.
- Split time between homes in Bolton Landing and Gainesville, Fla., to train all year. ... Set 12 U.S. age-group records.
- Held five age records at 40, including the marathon, half-marathon and 10-mile. ... Died Dec. 14, 1992.



you get 3:59." As he closed on the finish, Darren puffed his chest and leaned, an unorthodox move for a distance runner — most just run through the line. The lean saved him fractions of a second.

Darren pulled up and watched the scoreboard. First, the time 3:59.00 flickered. Then, the time 4:00.00 flashed. He stared. And then his time appeared — 3:59.99. He fell to his knees and cried. He hugged his mother, who watched from the stands.

"Being able to speak about my father, to just mention his name with pride and joy, to say that he

Darren, a senior economics major, competes today in the Big 12 conference championships, one of his last collegiate races. He stands within a few credits of receiving his degree in economics, after which he plans to attend graduate school at Texas and study sports management. He wants to someday run as a professional, or maybe coach. He hopes as soon as this summer to visit Bolton Landing, where Barry trained on lakeside trails.

And in 2012, Darren is aiming for the Olympics — the one feat his father never accomplished.