

Runners reflect on historic 1995 race by Dave Vilhauer, SD Sport Scene



Jaime Pauli of Milbank leads Meg Larson of Aberdeen Roncalli as the two approach the finish line during the 1,600-meter run at the Region 1A track and field meet in 1995. Courtesy photo

There was nothing to signal that anything special was in store as day broke on a Thursday mid-May morning in 1995.

Meg Larson of Aberdeen Roncalli boarded the school bus for a track and field meet in Milbank with the same anxious feeling she always got before running. The up-and-coming freshman recalls “not wanting the bus to get all the way there. That was pretty par for the course for me every time.”

In Milbank, Jaime Pauli was preparing for the Region 1A meet. The junior knew her main competition was on her way from Aberdeen, but there was nothing unusual about the start to her day, either.

“I don’t think I woke up thinking we were going to do anything special,” Pauli says.

Each standout runner had already competed in an event that morning when they stepped up to the line for a 1,600-meter run that would soon gain the attention of the entire state.

While neither individual can remember the exact details of the race that was about to unfold, according to documented coverage, Pauli took an early lead as she was wont to do.

"I didn't trust my ability to come back and just run my own race on my own pace," Pauli says of her running style. "I felt more comfortable at the front and I just tried to stay there, and that was the way I ran."

What happened next may have been the catalyst that changed the standard for girls' distance running in South Dakota forever.

Larson passed Pauli on the third lap, setting the stage for a fitting finish to the most memorable mile race in state history.

"I just remember running. We didn't set up splits," Larson says. "There wasn't a strategy like stay here and then go then. None of that."

Not to be denied, Pauli had something left in the tank and let it all go on the final homestretch, outkicking Larson by less than three-tenths of a second to grab the win.

"I probably did slow down and she kept the pace," Pauli says of the last half of the four-lap race. "I had to go with her or I was going to get beat, so I tried to hang on."

It wasn't until afterward that the girls found out exactly what had happened: they had become the first two high school girls to run a sub five-minute mile in South Dakota history, Pauli clocking a time of 4:59.17, Larson a time of 4:59.39.

"I don't know if we knew it was any kind of a record," Larson says. "We just knew it was a darn good time for us."

Reality didn't sink in until days after the race had taken place. Pauli had a tough time wrapping her head around what had transpired for a much longer period than that.

"Even looking back in my mind, I don't know that I ever thought that was a great big barrier and a big deal," Pauli says, "until later on when I realized 'Oh OK, now, I guess we did go into a different group of runners. The people ahead of us we're always trying to reach that.'"

While Pauli won that milestone race, to this day she understands the importance of having somebody to push her who helped to ensure an elite time.

"I think it's a great honor, and a huge accomplishment," Pauli says of owning the state's top 1,600-meter time during her era, "but I'll be the first to tell you I never would have accomplished something like that without Meg."



American News Photo by John Davis

Embracing the competition

Aberdeen Roncalli's Meg Larson, front, hugs Milbank's Jaime Pauli after the Class A girls' 1,600-meter run in the state track and field meet at Sioux Falls Saturday. Pauli edged Larson by three-tenths of a second. Larson defeated Pauli by a similar margin in the 800-meter run at Beresford on Friday. For more on the state meet, turn to Pages 2D and 3D.

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Meg Larson of Aberdeen Roncalli and Jaime Pauli of Milbank share a hug following a race at the 1995 state track and field meet. While the two were fierce competitors, they helped to make each other better. Courtesy photo

Those sub five-minute times have long been passed by other standout runners through the years and don't even rank among the state's top 10 any longer.

The fact that training, conditioning, diets, equipment, and strategy are much different today than they were 30 years ago only adds to the impressiveness of what Pauli and Larson were able to accomplish that day.

"I think Jaime was the same as me. She didn't run much outside of track season. She did basketball and volleyball," Larson says. It was a not a year-around training, strengthening. We just kind of did it."

Not only that, but there were also no rules and regulations when it came to food intake.

"I ate what I ate. I wasn't doing protein shakes. I wasn't doing anything," Pauli says. "We ate Hardee's. We ate Taco John's. I would say training has changed a lot."

The two girls were never able to replicate that remarkable feat the rest of their high school careers.

Pauli left for the University of Nebraska where she competed for the Cornhuskers, and two years later, Larson graduated and ran for Colorado State. The two have not talked to each other since high school.

Each wonders what the other is up to these days.

"I think we'd have a lot of catching up to do," Pauli says of what that conversation would look like. "Where you at? How many kids? How's the family? All that sort of stuff. I would probably never start with running."

Pauli, now Jaime Appelwick, lives in Madison, while Larson, now Meg Kugler lives in New Raymer, Colo.

Each has children who have probably heard a few stories about what their moms accomplished that memorable day in 1995.

Kugler said the thing that her kids notice about photos from her high school running days is her familiar blonde curly hair.

"It's still very curly and very fuzzy, but not quite as bad in dry Colorado," Kugler says. "They just can't get over that."



It was always a marquee matchup whenever Meg Larson of Aberdeen Roncalli and Milbank's Jaime Pauli ran in the same race. Here they dual in a 400-meter dash in Hayti in 1996. They will be forever known as being the first two girls in state history to run a sub five-minute mile. Courtesy photo

Looking back on the course of events, Kugler tries to explain the elements that led to what transpired on that ideal spring day.

"It was a perfect storm. Everything just fit together where she was feeling good, I was feeling good, towards the end of the season, perfect weather, track conditions, we both wanted to compete" Kugler says. "I just think it was everything all together, I guess."

After a few minutes of reflection, Kugler says the events of that day were just meant to be.

“God works in mysterious ways, and He is in ultimate control,” she says. “We do all that we can do in His will. I don’t know why He allows certain things to happen or not happen. I am thankful when good things happen, and I trust Him and His will when not-so-good things happen.”

Appelwick, who won 19 state championships in track field and one in cross country, was selected the outstanding female athlete at the state track meet in 1993, 1994, 1995 and 1996, and was named South Dakota Female Athlete of the year in 1995.

She finished with nine gold medals for having the top overall times at the state track meet, while Kugler concluded with five gold medals. Only one other non-Class AA female athlete in state history has more than four.

Appelwick knows that her top times of the day have since been surpassed. She understands that records are made to be broken.

However, she also knows that what she and Kugler accomplished on May 18, 1995, will stand the test of time because no matter what happens going forward, they were the first South Dakota girls to run under five minutes in the mile and nothing will ever change that.

“Looking back that was probably more significant than all the gold medals,” Appelwick says. “Now we kind of have a place in history.”