COLLEGE

PILOTING a Distance REVOLUTION

Rob Conner’s Portland Pilots get faster by running slower

Three years ago, David Kinsella and his freshman classmates at the University of Portland began their collegiate careers by running among themselves so they could gingerly adjust to collegiate training. One week in, longtime Portland mentor Rob Conner let ‘em loose to run with the varsity.

Their guide for their trial by fire was Michael Kilburg, a man who would explode as a Pilot senior in 2008 after an otherwise undistinguished career to run a school-record 28:20 for 10,000m. Kilburg proceeded to haul ass through the Oregon forest at such a clip that Kinsella and crew remember not how far or fast they went — Kinsella is fairly certain it was 10 miles in 57 minutes — only that they had to hang on for dear life.

Welcome to college, fellas. “It was this attitude of just go out and blast it,” says Kinsella, who quickly discovered that everyday runs like that were the norm. He knew if he was to make it as a collegiate runner, he would have to survive a training regimen that typically consisted of 60 to 80 miles a week, blazing 6-mile tempo runs and intense sessions of 800s, 500s and 400s.

“An athlete-led revolution”

Since Pete Julian put Portland distance running on the national map back in 1993, Conner’s blue-collar Pilots — with nary a Foot Locker finalist in the bunch — have perennially ground out West Coast Conference championships, NCAA cross-country appearances and even a few All-Americans. And as the mantle of leadership passed through the years from Julian to guys like Uli Steidl and Ryan Grote to Todd Davis and Joe Driscoll, the Pilots progressively trained farther and faster than their predecessors while Conner incorporated pieces of the regiments of the most successful Pilots into his subsequent training plans.

Julian, for example, succeeded with hard 4-mile tempo runs, so that became a staple. Steidl did better on more mileage; recovery days for the group soon evolved from 7- to 10-mile runs. The one constant throughout was that all of that running was done at a very quick clip. Grote, a star on Portland’s 10th-place NCAA cross-country squad in 1996, remembers hammering 15-mile Sunday runs at 5:20 pace. “We would load up and get after it,” recalls Grote. “We were not shy about that.”

The regimen helped Grote run 29:35 and earn All-American honors in the 10K. Yet, many others wilted under such a tough regimen, and understandably so. “A guy would totally bonk, and it was like, ‘Come on, man, get tough!’ There was no sympathy,” Conner says. “You think a guy is soft. Well, he’s probably soft for a reason. Or you’d hear, ‘He got burned out.’” Now, says Conner, “I don’t believe in getting ‘burned out’ anymore.”

Conner audibly winces when recalling the yeoman efforts of teams of yore. “Those poor guys!” Conner laughs. “Every time I talk to an alum, I apologize. I’m like, ‘If you were doing what these guys were doing ... I’m sorry.’ We just weren’t training then as we are now.”

What they are doing is producing top-shelf distance runners. Consider this: In 2007, three Pilots ran under 29 minutes for 10K, and two more ran under 29:20. Last year, the top two marks were under 28:30. None of the aforementioned athletes was a blue-chip Foot Locker finalist, and all accomplished their marks by employing a training methodology that sprang not from the stars but from the shadows. And last fall, led by Kinsella’s fourth-place individual effort, the Pilots finished seventh in NCAA cross-country championships, matching the 2001 team for the best in school history.

90 is the new 60

The revolution began three years ago with a book and a gaggle of fringe athletes. First, Conner spied a copy of Jack Daniels’ book of training on Pilot women’s coach Ian Solof’s desk. He asked Solof what Daniels recommended for a 29-flat 10K guy. “And voila,” says Conner, “my eyes were opened.”

Conner explained his new approach to training to his guys in layman’s terms: “How many of you guys played soccer?” he asked. “Everyone’s hand shot up. ‘How long is soccer...”

Steve Morin photo / Portland Pilots / Courtesy of Portland Pilots

There was, he says, a collective epiphany. So 60-minute 10-mile "recovery" runs quickly evolved into gentle 90-minute runs. And Wednesday and Sunday long runs became relaxed efforts at 6:30 to 6:45 mile pace instead of the hammerfests of yore.

The transition to this more deliberate training was facilitated by a mix of athletes who decided to make 13- to 14-mile runs routine in an effort to make the jump to varsity.

"And at first," says Kinsella, "I wasn't part of this movement. These were like the three-crazy-guys. We were always plucked off after workouts because we had to wait in the van while they were out doing their thing." Yet eventually, says Kinsella, "It forced everyone to re-examine what they were doing."

A seed had been planted and the idea of training longer and slower began to spread among the team as the trailblazers matured and the accumulation of miles manifested itself into giant PBs. In turn, the Portland program shifted from a program, says Kinsella, "where 8-10 miles was the norm, it felt cutthroat, and ego came out a lot on runs," to a program where the collective attitude became, "let's just get the miles in and be nice to each other five days a week and put in a good long workout the other two days."

"I think that idea has been perfected over the past two years," says Kinsella, who finished eighth at the NCAA cross country meet in 2007. "There's a very conscious understanding of what we're doing, and why we're doing it, and the guys are aware that if they do it, results will come."

Now, for every athlete like Kinsella or Kilburg who makes headlines, there is a lesser light like Colin Harris making massive strides and fanning the flames of the movement. Harris, a sophomore from Colorado, finished his 2008 freshman track campaign with modest 16:02 5k credentials. He returned this fall having completed a summer of monstrous 130-mile weeks, promptly ran 24:51 for 8k at the Willamette Invitational under muddy conditions and placed eighth in the West Coast Conference meet before finishing the fall campaign as the alternate on the NCAA squad.

"The breakthroughs we've made," Conner says unequivocally, "have been based on slowing down." Tempo runs are 10 miles and 90 percent of their workouts are 10 miles in duration. "It used to be we'd run [four to six] 4:30 to 4:30 mile repeats with a 400 jog," he says. "Now we're at 10x1 mile in 4:30 with a minute rest. And now we get Kilburg dropping 40 seconds [in the 10k] as a fifth-year senior."

No doubt, Conner's emphasis on mileage and aerobic development to the near exclusion of all else is taking Daniels' thinking to the extreme. Conner's extremist bent doesn't stop there. You just may see Kinsella piloting a Portland charge in the Boston or London marathon this spring. Such a race would be a litmus test for Kinsella to determine whether he wants to run professionally or hang 'em up while he goes to law school. And with so many JV guys running 100-plus miles a week, why not have 'em give it a go? Says Conner, "Galen [Rupp] and Alberto [Salazar] are thinking wild and crazy, why aren't we?"

**PILOT YOUR TRAINING**

Portland's David KINSELLA, the fourth-place finisher at last fall's NCAA Division I cross country championships, offers his take on three of the staples that have piloted the Portland program to the upper echelon of the collegiate distance running ranks. Take heed on how to do them correctly.

**01 10X1 MILE WITH ONE MINUTE REST**

**KINSELLA:** I love that workout. You should just be "breathing"; it should never be hard. They're run at a moderate threshold effort. To run this right you should never leave anything out there, or run so fast as to impinge on your form or anything like that.

**YOU ARE DOING IT WRONG IF:** you are getting worried at No. 5 that you can't finish; at no point should it cross your mind you can't do it all.

**02 10-MILE TEMPO RUNS**

**KINSELLA:** This run distinguishes itself by not allowing the rest you get with the cruise miles, though the biggest distinction is a mental one: A lot of improvement is born out of the mental toughness that you acquire, that you can put that kind of work in for that long, when you become used to putting out effort like that. That carries over a lot to a 10K; there is almost something consoling about toeing the line for a 10K knowing, "I've done work way longer than that."

**YOU ARE DOING IT WRONG IF:** you're running with someone and you can't maintain a conversation; not an extended conversation but you should be able to talk without feeling like you're jeopardizing anything.

**03 90 IS THE NEW 60**

In recent years the Pilots have significantly upped their collective mileage by habitually running at least 90 minutes on the five days a week they don't run hard workouts. Instead of the hour they ran in years past. The key here, says Kinsella, is to run these days, including a Wednesday moderate distance day and Sunday long run, "gently." It's not unusual for Kinsella to run his Wednesday 15-milers in a pedestrian 4:45. "I'm not being self-deprecating when I say that," he says. "It's a very conscious decision. When we started training this way, it took some getting used to running 7-minute pace. But now we realize: Why do anything else to beat yourself up before Friday?"

**YOU ARE DOING IT WRONG IF:** you're running too fast. There's a group consciousness here now.

Everyone is aware of the system and what needs to get done, so everyone holds each other accountable. It's rare for runs to go beyond the 6:30 to 6:40 range because everyone keeps each other honest.
