

Nathan Brannen

September 8, 1982 -

When Nathan ("Nate") Brannen retired from competitive running, he had won the respect of competitors the world over, having competed in three Olympic Games. And although he carved out a world-class middle-distance running career, when growing up in Preston it was hockey that first captivated him.

As a nine-year-old Brannen took part in the annual Can Amera Games that pitted Cambridge athletes against their counterparts from Saginaw Townships, Michigan. He continued running track in Can-Amera for several years.

"I remember that we were trying to limit the number of events the kids could enter," said Can-Amera track convenor George Aitkin, "to allow more children into the Games, but Nathan was the best in everything."

In the 1993 Can-Amera Games, competing in the 9-10 age category, Nathan won the 200m, 400m, 800m, high jump and was on the winning 4x400m relay team. He also finished 4th in the long jump. "We ran out of medals and I remember delivering a couple of golds to his home a week or so after the Games," Aitkin recalled.

"Once, around 2000, when a teachers strike interrupted cross-country season, Brannen and the Preston team weren't allowed to go to one of the big meets (maybe CWOSSA). Nathan went on his own anyway, and won the race. The principal called him into the office the next day and asked him how the other runners had felt being beaten by a runner who wasn't supposed to be there. I was told his reply was something like - "They would have felt guilty winning a race that he (Nathan) should have won."

It was club coach Peter Grinbergs who got him to focus on running, which coincided with the start of his high school career. Still, in Grade 9 at Preston High, Brannen played basketball in addition to cross-country and track, marking the only year he participated in other sports during his high school years.

Grinbergs' encouragement helped Brannen begin one of the most distinguished athletics careers by any high-schooler in the land.

"In Grade 9 I did well in Waterloo County," said Brannen, who that year won the county cross-country championship, as well as four track events (800m, 1500m, 3000m and 4x400m relay), "but at the provincial level I wasn't as good and ended up finishing 9th in the 1500m and 7th in the 3000 metres."

Said Brannen, "...even at that age, when I wasn't even close to being the best in Ontario, I thought I could be."

He was 13 that year and already entertained thoughts of not only winning provincial and national championships, but of making it to the Olympics. "I just always had these big goals and aspirations that I believed in." He had no illusions that anything would come easily, or that things would be handed to him, even if he did become an OFSAA champion. "I didn't want anything to be given to me. I was willing to go out and train as hard as I could to get it."

He went on to win nine OFSAA gold medals and a silver, and was runner-up at the Canadian championships three times.

Retired principal and high school track coach Mark Hunniford, then coaching track at GCI, recalled a maxi meet — a practice meet before the beginning of the qualifying season — held at Centennial Stadium in Kitchener during Brannen's senior year. So Hunniford, who was officiating at the start line, asked Brannen what time he figured he'd run. Brannen said 50 seconds.

"Ian Forde, our top 400 meter runner at GCI and the best high school sprinter at the time in Waterloo Region, when he found out Nathan was going to run the 400 at the maxi meet said, 'I'm not running.'"

Forde had qualified for OFSAA four straight years in races ranging from 100 to 400 meters. He told Hunniford: "If I run against Nathan in a race that's not his, and I don't win, I have nothing to gain from this. Sorry coach."

"I didn't argue with him," Hunniford recalled. Brannen ran the 400m in 50 flat, the exact time to the fraction of a second he had predicted.

"And at that moment," said Hunniford, "I thought, How good is Brannen? How good is he? You see stuff like that and you just wonder. I was in awe."

His senior year was notable in that he ran at the Senior National Championships (as an 18-year-old) instead of the Junior National Championships, and finished second in the 800m. "That's what qualified me for the World championships in 2001 as a high-schooler."

It was his first big exposure to international competition. "That really gave me the belief that I could compete against the world now."

At those Worlds, in 2001, Brannen was the youngest competitor in any event. "It was an eye-opener but also gave me the encouragement to want to be better."

He turned a lot of heads when he broke the Canadian junior record in the 800 metres by nearly a full second, running 1:46.60, which bettered the previous record of 1:47.7. That time would have placed him second at the Canadian senior championships.

But he did more than that as he closed out what was unquestionably one of the greatest high school athletics careers in Canadian history. He also ran a sub-four-minute mile, only the third Canadian high schooler to accomplish the feat, and just the seventh junior (under 20) in North America to do it.

For the record, the first two Canadians to achieve that feat were Brantford's Kevin Sullivan and Ottawa's Mark Oleson. Oleson was a good friend of Olympian Doug Consiglio.

Brannen ran the historic mile in Halifax, Nova Scotia, at the Aileen Meagher Track Classic. Meagher, a Halifax native, participated in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, on the same Canadian team as Preston runner Scotty Rankine. Meagher won bronze in the 4x400m relay at those Games.

As he closed out his high school career in 2001 Brannen was ranked fifth in the world among juniors over 800 metres, and 10th in the world over 1500 metres.

For the next several years Brannen's focus was on both the 800 metres and the 1500 metres, but the 800 became his speciality during the next four years at the University of Michigan.

"I felt very comfortable with the team there, but most importantly, with the coach. We just connected really well, and they always had a huge contingent of Canadian runners going there. Kevin Sullivan went there. You look at almost any of the top 1500 high school runners in Ontario, and they either went to Arkansas or Michigan. I just felt more comfortable at Michigan."

He regarded his years at Michigan as some of the best of his life. He met his future wife, Theresa, there. The talent was so strong there that the team was expected to win. "It wasn't a question of whether we were going to win; it was whether we were going to break the NCAA or Big 10 record that weekend."

In his sophomore year he won his first national championship as a Michigan Wolverine, winning the 800 metres at the indoor nationals. "Pulling off the win as a true sophomore — I was pretty young — was the first really big win I'd had in my career to that point and that's the one I always remember."



Nathan Brannen was an 11-time All-American at Michigan and a three-time Olympian.

When people ask about the biggest thing he ever did in his career, he usually mentions the Olympics, "but the thing I always remember is winning the NCAA's for the very first time."

After that he went on to win four NCAA titles, and was an 11-time All-American (three in cross-country and eight on the track). He also broke two world records there as part of a relay team.

He broke the NCAA mile record in his senior year, running 3:55.11 — this is also the Canadian indoor record — and set a relay record. Brannen owns the Canadian indoor mile mark of 3:54.32, set

as a professional a few years later (2014) during the famed New York Road Runners Millrose Games in New York.

An injury prevented him from competing in the 2004 Olympics. Then, in 2007, he had back surgery. For two months he didn't run. "It was a long, slow process going from zero running to slowly getting back doing just three to four minutes of running a day until finally qualifying in July for the Olympics."

"When I got to the Olympics in China, I was ready to go and felt 100 per cent. The first round I ran great," he said. "I got second in my heat and qualified easily for the semi, and then I didn't sleep from the first round to the second round, just being too excited. I struggled in the semi final and missed the final by three positions. That was tough."

It would be another four long years before he had a chance to redeem himself. By then he was running better than ever. "I went into the Olympic trials and was super confident. I won the trials pretty easily. Going into the Olympics I won 11 of 12 races and was one of the most consistent runners that year."

He broke 3:30, the qualifying standard, nearly 17 times. Brannen qualified for the semis in London, and things were looking good. But in the semi-final Brannen and another runner tangled legs, and Brannen fell to the track.

"It was tough. I'm still not over it to this day. Falling at such a big event, I'll never get over it completely." But it did motivate him to shoot for his third Olympics.

In Rio, nearly 34 years old, he finished 10th in the finals and was the oldest runner in the field. By the time he hung up his track shoes in 2018 he had run almost 13 years as a professional. During that time the lowest he was ever ranked was 20th in the world.

"For 13 years — 'you can ask my wife Theresa' — I lived, breathed and ate running," he said. He lives in Ohio with his wife and two children. He continues to run, but if he gets up one day and doesn't want to run, he doesn't have to. More importantly, he's not on the road and away from his family now.

At the time of his retirement Brannen held four Canadian track and field records; in the indoor and outdoor 1000 metres (2:16.86 indoor, 2:16.52 outdoor), 2000 metres (4:59.56), and the indoor one mile (3:54.32).

Brannen has won the city of Cambridge Tim Turow athlete of the year award several times and is one of the most decorated distance runners in Canadian history.

Inducted 2019