

Bill Bonthron – Detroit Northern 1928



After Bill Bonthron broke the World Record in the 1500, his track coach at Northern High admitted he didn't remember him too well.

Bonthron ran at Northern for two years before his wealthy parents sent him to the exclusive Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire to finish up high school. He improved to 4:35.0 in the mile, but never broke a school record.

As a Princeton soph, "Bonnie" flourished. He ran 9:25.96 for 2nd in the 1932 IC4A 2 mile. Described as "burly," he trained just as much in the weightroom as he did on the track. His stride was a beautiful, driving motion and his kick was ferocious.

In 1933 he won a 1:53.5/3:53.82 IC4A double. His only loss of the outdoor season came in the Oxford-Princeton dual, where Jack Lovelock of New Zealand broke the World Record in the mile in 4:07.6. Behind him, Bonthron set the American Record with his 4:08.7.

His senior season came close to perfection after a cross country disaster—leading in the final strides of the IC4A he collapsed and was hospitalized, ending his season. He ran well indoors. At the AAU he got nipped by Glenn Cunningham at the 1500 finish, but they both got credit for a World Indoor Record 3:52.2. He then lost to Cunningham's World Record 4:06.7 mile at Princeton in June.

However, he bounced back to win the NCAA in 4:08.9. At the AAU Championships in Milwaukee, he brought down Cunningham with his kick, breaking the 1500 World Record at 3:48.8. He won most of his races on a tour of Europe, setting a World Record 3:00.8 for three-quarters of a mile in Stockholm. The AAU honored him with the Sullivan Award.

Bonthron never liked running, and often said he would retire after college. He went to work as a broker and only ran four races in 1935, losing all of them. Then in 1936, he tried to rally for the Olympics. His speed was good (a WR 1:20.0 for 660 yards), but his results so-so. Then he shocked by winning the Semi Olympic Trials in 3:55.2. At the Final Olympic Trials in New York, he ran 3:53.7—his fastest race since his World Record—but finished a heartbreaking 4th, missing the team by 1.5 seconds. It was to be his final race.

Bill Bonthron died in 1983 in New York at the age of 70, after having spent his working career as a corporate accountant.