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# Olympic Collision

Kyle Keiderling

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# OLYMPIC COLLISION

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# OLYMPIC COLLISION

The Story of Mary Decker and Zola Budd

.....

KYLE KEIDERLING

University of Nebraska Press • Lincoln & London

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Set in Lyon Text by Rachel Gould.

Dedicated to the memory of  
William F. Faherty Jr., mentor and friend,  
and

Erik Polhemus, husband, father, and my favorite nephew, who  
left us far too early.

And, as always, for Ky.

This isn't a tale of heroic feats. . . . It's about two lives running parallel for a while, with common aspirations and convergent dreams.

—Ernesto “Che” Guevara de la Serna, *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2005)

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments . .	ix
Abbreviations . .	xiii
1. Starting Line . .	1
2. First Steps . .	3
3. Off with the Gun . .	9
4. Healing the Body . .	22
5. Dirty Little Secret . .	37
6. Running for Jenny . .	46
7. The Kid Comes Back with a Swoosh . .	58
8. Out of Africa . .	76
9. Gathering Storms . .	90
10. Rings of Fire . .	98
11. Dream Chasers . .	117
12. A Split Second That Will Live Forever . .	139
13. Coming and Going . .	165
14. The Phoenix Rises . .	173
15. World Champ . .	178
16. Rematch . .	185
17. World Champ Again . .	194
18. Mother Mary . .	202
19. Banned . .	205
20. Heart and Seoul . .	223
21. Marriage and Murder . .	235
22. Promoting L'eggs on Bad Legs . .	242
23. Budd Blooms . .	251
24. New Faces, Old Story . .	257
25. Seems Like Old Times . .	264
26. Trials and Tribulations . .	269
27. War and Peace . .	290
Epilogue . .	296
Notes . .	301
Bibliography . .	331
Index . .	333





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The endnotes to the book identify by name all those who participated on the record, whether in person, by email, or by telephone.

The journey that I embarked upon in researching and writing *Olympic Collision* was long and winding. But it was always interesting, informative, and eye opening in the revelations that were uncovered. I hope you find the journey through these pages as compelling and enlightening as I did.



## ABBREVIATIONS

AAU	Amateur Athletic Union
AIAW	Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women
BAAB	British Amateur Athletics Board
IAAF	International Association of Athletics Federations
IOC	International Olympic Committee
LAOOC	Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee
SAAF	South African Athletics Federation
TAC	the Athletics Congress
USATF	USA Track and Field
USOC	U.S. Olympic Committee
WAAA	Women's Amateur Athletic Association
WADA	World Anti-Doping Agency



# OLYMPIC COLLISION

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## ONE. Starting Line

.....

She was the most motivated and talented runner I have ever seen.

—Don DeNoon on the eleven-year-old Mary Decker

Mary Decker entered the world on August 4, 1958, in a delivery room at the Hunterdon Medical Center in Flemington, New Jersey, about ten miles from the home of her parents, John and Jacqueline Decker, in the tiny crossroads village of Bunnvale. The birth certificate recorded her full name as Mary Teresa Decker. The birth was unremarkable, and Jacqueline and her newborn daughter soon returned to Bunnvale.

Mary would spend her first ten years in a peaceful, bucolic area of the nation’s most densely populated state. People in Bunnvale knew their neighbors, and they rarely locked their doors. The four-season climate could produce hot humid summers and bitterly cold winters, but the residents took it all in stoic stride. No parkway or turnpike was then in sight, and many roads in the county were still dirt. The low rolling hills, heavily forested, surrounded acres of farmland under cultivation. Poultry and dairy farms were prevalent, and fields of golden hay, Jersey tomatoes, and tall sweet corn were arrayed in checkerboard patterns throughout. Hunterdon County was bisected by the waters of the South Branch of the Raritan River and bordered on the west by the Delaware River as it made its way eastward toward the Atlantic Ocean, about fifty miles away.

About equidistant from Philadelphia and New York, Hunterdon was one of the least populated of the state’s twenty-one counties. With fewer than one hundred thousand people, it had as yet no major shopping malls. Flemington, the county seat, had a population of about four thousand. The medical center where Mary was born had been constructed only a few years earlier through a massive countywide fund-raising effort.<sup>1</sup>

...

Mary attended public school in Lebanon Township. In the late 1950s five county high schools accepted students on a geographic basis.

Lebanon sent its students to North Hunterdon Regional High School in Annandale. Although in later years the school would produce outstanding track and cross-country teams—boasting several outstanding women runners—at the time, no high schools in the county offered track as a sport, and there were no women’s track teams.

In 1968, when Mary was ten, her parents decided to leave Hunterdon County and join the many others from around the United States who were making the move to Southern California. The Deckers—John, Jacqueline, their son, Johnny, and their three daughters—became part of a massive influx of people that saw Orange County become one of the nation’s fastest-growing areas in the 1960s and 1970s. The climate was pleasant, jobs were plentiful, and housing affordable. To keep up with the demand for housing, builders in the county, which is south of Los Angeles, were bulldozing as fast as they could the orange groves from which the county derived its name. Before they settled in Garden Grove, the Deckers lived for eight months in Santa Ana and for two years in Huntington Beach.

The move, prompted by her mother’s desire to join other family members in the area, would prove to be fortuitous. Had Mary Decker remained in Bunnvale and environs, she would not have had an opportunity to develop as a runner: she was born in the wrong place at the wrong time for aspiring young female runners. Had the Deckers stayed in Hunterdon County, New Jersey, it is unlikely we would ever have heard of Mary. Southern California, on the other hand, was arguably the best place a young female runner could be in the United States.

...

Soon after John and Jacqueline made the move west, their marriage headed south.

John was not the dominant influence in his daughter’s life. “My father is a very quiet person. My mother is a very unquiet one. The atmosphere [at home] was dominated by my mother,” Mary would say in later years. However, John had an adventurous streak. A tool-and-die maker by training, he once used his mechanical skills to construct a homemade gyro helicopter, which he flew—and crashed. He also loved to race around on motorcycles, hardly a safer pastime. Mary, riding behind her father when she was twelve, fell off and

fractured her skull. The injury resulted in a year of physical therapy and another scare when she resumed running too soon and began to hemorrhage. That was the end of her motorcycle runs with John.

Jackie disapproved of John’s hobbies and daredevil antics. And as her marriage crumbled, she grew increasingly unhappy about her circumstances. Her oldest daughter told Kenny Moore of *Sports Illustrated* in 1978: “They stayed together for the sake of the kids. It was the biggest mistake they ever made—besides getting married in the first place. They were never close, as long as I can remember.”<sup>2</sup>

While working as a bartender in a watering hole close to the Orange County courthouse, Mary’s mother began to seek counsel from the barristers who bellied up to her bar. As she poured them martinis, she poured out her tale of woe. And while they imbibed, she sopped up the spilled gin and free advice.<sup>3</sup>

...

When Mary was eleven, she and a girlfriend of the same age spotted a flyer announcing a cross-country event in a nearby park: “We didn’t know what ‘cross-country’ was, but we decided to go,” she said. They discovered upon arrival it was a running event, and they both entered. “My friend dropped out, but I won,” she recalled years later.<sup>4</sup>

In winning her very first race, with no training or preparation whatsoever, Mary Decker displayed a raw talent that would become the foundation for the greatest career of any female middle-distance runner America has ever produced.

## TWO. First Steps

.....  
Running is the perfect metaphor for life.  
You get out of it just what you put into it.  
—Oprah Winfrey

Eight years after Mary Decker arrived on the planet, and eight thousand miles away in a hospital in Bloemfontein, in South Africa’s Free State Province, a woman lay dangerously close to dying. She had been in labor for almost thirty-six hours and had received thirteen

pints of blood. Finally, blessedly, she was delivered of a daughter by emergency Caesarean section on May 26, 1966.

Fearing the infant had suffered brain damage from oxygen deprivation, nurses and doctors quickly carried the child—undersize, despite being full term—to an incubator to monitor her condition. Her mother also remained under close observation in intensive care, drifting in and out of consciousness for several days after the delivery. Not until her child was six days old was she able to hold her in her arms. She recalls that the infant was “a tiny little thing.” However, the newborn, despite her difficult arrival and diminutive size, was healthy and showed no ill effects from her traumatic delivery. The staff at Bloemfontein’s National Hospital watched as the infant thrived and soon were calling her “the miracle baby.”

Her father chose her name. Had she been a boy, it was to have been Zero. Since the baby was a girl, he decided instead on Zola, after the nineteenth-century French writer Émile Zola, whose work Père Budd admired.

Zola Budd’s difficult arrival in the world foretold her later life.

...

When the baby finally left the hospital, she came home to a single-story, white stucco house with a red corrugated roof; it was on a red dirt road just off Route 30, about seven miles outside Bloemfontein—a bustling old city of nearly four hundred thousand located on a high plateau about four thousand feet above sea level, in an area known as the veldt. In addition to the substantial house, the small farmstead included a menagerie of ducks and chickens, which Zola’s father, Frank, raised with pride, along with a few ostriches and several dogs and cats. In a small vegetable garden in the back, her mother, called Tossie, grew fresh produce for her home-based catering business.

The Budd family was comprised of the oldest sister, Jenny, who was eleven; nine-year-old Estelle; and twins Quintus and Cara, five. The Budds had had another child, Frankie, who was born in March 1960 with a liver ailment. The prognosis for survival, despite frequent medical care in Johannesburg, where the infant underwent several operations, was poor. When Tossie brought him home for the final time, she knew Frankie’s struggles would soon end. He

died on New Year's Day 1961, five years before Zola arrived. Pictures of the little boy were on display in nearly every room, making the palpable sadness of the loss ever present in the house. The parents never spoke of him to the other children, and discussions about him and his death were off-limits.

After the difficult delivery of Zola, Tossie, born Hendrina Wilhelmina de Swardt, to a Boer farming family, remained in the hospital until she was well enough to be discharged. But the experience had left her weakened and ill, so Zola's oldest sister, Jenny, assumed responsibility for the little girl's care. When the toddler spoke her first word, Jenny heard it: *Mommy*.<sup>1</sup>

...

Frank Budd, tall and balding, with muttonchop whiskers, had inherited a printing business in Bloemfontein from his father, who had immigrated to South Africa from England in the early 1900s. It was never a particularly profitable enterprise, however, and sales continued to decline as Zola grew older. Tossie supplemented their income through her catering business. Zola recalls being "up to my elbows in mayonnaise in the kitchen" as her mother and the few assistants the family could afford prepared an order.<sup>2</sup>

Bloemfontein (the Dutch word means "fountain of flowers"; the city's nickname is City of Roses) was settled by the Boers, who first arrived among the indigenous people of the future South Africa in the late 1600s. With a dry temperate climate conducive to agriculture, by the mid-nineteenth century the town had matured as the focal point of the thriving farmlands that surrounded it. The land around Zola's home was rural and spotted with small farms. The farmers raised potatoes and corn, and cattle farms were prevalent. The veldt, or grassland, was a gently undulating plain that stretched for miles in every direction, though mountains could be glimpsed on the far horizon. The days were sun splashed and warm, and the bright blue of the sky seemed to span the land like an endless azure canopy. The rains that rolled in on angry black clouds each summer were a welcome sight in the afternoons of baking hot days. "You could actually smell the rain before it arrived," Zola remembered.<sup>3</sup>

...

The young Zola Budd first experienced the joy of running with the eighteen-year-old Jenny, who introduced her to it when Zola was about seven. The two would ramble off for miles together, romping barefoot through the low grass and along dirt paths in the countryside. Those early runs with her sister Jenny, including frequent trips down Route 30 into Bloemfontein and through its many parks, would remain in Zola's memory as the happiest of her life.

Frank Budd shuttled his family from farmstead to city and back for the first ten years or so of his youngest daughter's life. The constant moving created problems for Zola once she began school: she was always the new kid, and her innate shyness, small size, and quiet demeanor meant she made few fast friends in her early years. Thus, despite her parents' growing marital difficulties, home was where Zola was happiest. Among her pet dogs and cats and the other farm animals she was accepted, safe, and secure.

One of her earliest friends on the farm was the child of one of the women who came to the house to help Tossie. The boy's name was Thipe, and together the two explored the land in and around the farm, playing all the games young children enjoy. But the relationship ended when the Budds moved back to the city. Thipe was black, and the camaraderie they enjoyed out in the countryside was not permitted in Bloemfontein—or indeed anywhere else in South Africa. Apartheid was still the law of the land, and such associations were not acceptable. But Zola learned a different lesson from this friendship, and as she later put it, “My relationship with Thipe taught me, early on, that the color of a person's skin is not what's important.”<sup>4</sup>

But the government of her country had determined that it was precisely the color of a person's skin that set him or her apart from others. The failure of others to distinguish Zola Budd's thoughts and actions from those of her government would play a large role in determining how she was perceived in the eyes of the world.

...

In essence, during her early formative years, Zola led a sheltered life. Perhaps because of the loss of Frankie, the family was extremely protective of their youngest child, who was generally coddled and treated with utmost care by her siblings and parents, though both

Frank and Tossie were kept busy with their own lives and business ventures.

And Zola always had Jenny. She ran with Jenny, shared her fears and concerns with Jenny. Jenny was always there for her and always would be. While their parents' marriage grew increasingly fragile, and their squabbles more and more frequent, Jenny was the one safe harbor in the home for Zola—her surrogate mother, her anchor, and her best friend. No matter what was going on in Zola's young world, she could count on Jenny to make everything right. But of course Jenny, who was tall and attractive, with dark hair and eyes and a ready smile, was growing up as well. By the time Zola was ten, Jenny was twenty-one and a newly married nurse with her own home outside Bloemfontein, although she was not far away.

Zola was in the early years of primary school in Bloemfontein—attending her third school, in fact, since her education began—when she first competed against others. At the annual race meeting, she was urged to try a longer-distance race against her schoolmates. “It was a three-lap event of 1,200 meters and Daddy, who was there, encouraged me to try it. ‘Come on Zola, give it a go.’ I was not really that interested. I had only been running in sprints and had just finished running a sprint and a relay race and was not at all sure I could last the three laps. I won by miles,” she recalled.<sup>5</sup> For her, running was little more than an extended recess activity she was good at and enjoyed. Though her father continued to encourage her, she was just as interested in books as she was in running: “I would go into town with my mother on her weekly shopping trips, and I saved all my allowance money so I could purchase books in town.”<sup>6</sup>

Surrounded by her books and stuffed animals inside, and her pets outside, Zola was happy and content on the farm. At school, however, she was not. Her father had determined that Zola, unlike her older sisters, would attend Oranje Meisieskool, a private school for girls from the upper class—a social stratum Frank had convinced himself befitted his family and his ambitions. But the attempt to turn the tomboyish Zola into a prim and proper young lady soon fizzled. Among girls from wealthy families, the decidedly middle-class Zola, sometimes arriving for classes in her mother's battered old pickup truck, was embarrassed and increasingly uncomfortable: “I really didn't fit in with the other girls.”<sup>7</sup>



Placed among the top-level students, the new kid—now in her fourth school—looked and felt out of place. She complained to her mother about the school and the bad dreams she was having because of it. Her marks, for the first time, were poor. She hated it. Making her even more miserable was some surgery to remove a small bone from her arches. The surgery was performed over the Christmas holidays, and Zola, both feet encased in plaster casts, was definitely not feeling the holiday spirit.

Jenny roused Zola from her blue funk. Jenny understood Zola best. They had shared a bedroom, and Jenny had taught Zola to swim and to run. Zola always turned to Jenny, not her parents, for strength, guidance, and love. Jenny had never failed her, and with her sister's stern but gentle urging, Zola soon was back on her surgically repaired feet—and back on the track.

• • •

When her mother arrived to pick Zola up one afternoon a short time later, Tossie had with her a uniform of the coed Dan Pienaar school, where Zola's sister Cara was enrolled. The uniform was for Zola, to her surprise. Tossie had persuaded Frank that their daughter was out of place at the snobbish Oranje Meisieskool, and the finishing school experiment was finally, well, finished. Zola joined Cara at Dan Pienaar.

The following year, at thirteen, Zola advanced to Sentraal Secondary School (the equivalent of high school in the United States), where she soon encountered a young history teacher, Pieter Labuschagne, who also served as Sentraal's athletics coach.

Dark haired and mustachioed, the handsome, well-built Labuschagne was himself a former runner who had a large group of runners under his tutelage: "I represented the province [Free State] while in University at the National Championships in both cross-country and the marathon," he said. "Coaching was just a natural extension of my own experiences, and when I started teaching it was an easy transformation for me into coaching young students."<sup>8</sup>

Among them was Zola Budd: "Several of the girls on my track team told me about her. They had run against her in meets last season and she had beaten them," he recalled.<sup>9</sup> Once aware of her potential, Labuschagne asked her to join his squad of runners, and Zola

agreed. However, as she described it, “He started me off in cross-country, and I wasn’t that thrilled about it. In fact, I hated it.”<sup>10</sup> Her reaction would soon change.

### THREE. Off with the Gun

.....

The taste of victory that had come with her first competitive race was sweet to small, pigtailed Mary Decker. That she had to savor it through teeth encased in heavy metal braces mattered little to her: she had found in running something that was at once not boring and deeply rewarding. She was good at it—and she liked being good at something. Mary would soon find that her excellence at track acted as a magnet, drawing attention from coaches in Southern California who were constantly on the lookout for young girl runners with raw potential.

Bob Hickey, then a police officer who doubled as a track official, described the context: “At that time, in the area, there were a number of women’s track clubs. They weren’t age-group clubs, just women’s clubs, and we were under the governance of the AAU [Amateur Athletic Union]. Meets were held all over the area, and it was an active organization.” Hickey adds, “We were all trying to develop women who could lift the level of talent in the United States to where we could compete on an international basis with the Europeans and Eastern bloc communist countries that all had state-sponsored and [state]-supported organizations.”<sup>11</sup> With names like Cheetahs, Jets, Comets, and Angels, the AAU clubs presented a unique opportunity for young female runners to expand their skills.

Don DeNoon was a volunteer coach with the Long Beach Comets, and he recalled that “Mary came to my attention when she was just ten years old.” He was a former race walker with impressive credentials and took over the head coaching job when Ron Allice, a former track star at North Carolina State University, left to take another job.

DeNoon found Mary Decker to be “the most motivated and talented youngster” he had ever seen and encouraged her to join the team. But Mary’s home was nowhere near the Comets’ training

center, so DeNoon had to make arrangements for her transportation so she could train with the team. “When I began coaching her, I hardly ever saw either of [her parents]. They would sign the forms she brought home for permission to travel and train, but that was about the extent of their involvement,” he said.<sup>2</sup>

In a home more than a bit unsettled by Jackie’s eruptions, which rivaled those of Vesuvius, and John’s no-less-damaging periods of icy silence, Mary’s parents were too involved in their deteriorating relationship to show much interest in fostering their daughter’s newfound pursuit. So for Mary the connection with Don DeNoon was significant. She would find comfort in the company of a man who saw in her the promise of something special. Track could get her out of the hostile atmosphere at home and into a place where her efforts would draw notice and approval—a place where she could channel her confused feelings into something exceptional and attain a sense of self-worth.

...

Track did not enjoy the fan support or the financial backing in the United States that the sport—known everywhere else as athletics—had overseas. It was a constant struggle for the AAU coaches, who were largely volunteers, to raise the money to support their clubs. “We literally went with our hands out to stores and malls, asking shoppers for contributions. If someone dropped some money in a girl’s bucket, we gave them a team logo decal,” Hickey recalled. DeNoon added that, although she was still only ten, “Mary Decker would do her part in soliciting.”<sup>3</sup>

Mary was soon doing more than her part in training as well, according to DeNoon: “She started as a sprinter and did well at the short distances. Then we moved her to longer distances, and she showed in training that she could challenge the sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds we had.” As DeNoon put it, “Mary had from the outset the most innate talent I’d ever seen. All I could do was try to improve her. She was a gem in the rough. She had natural ability and was able and willing to push herself. It was that attitude that most struck me about her. Mary didn’t want to be beaten, in practice or in meets. She always had to be first.”<sup>4</sup>

Their partnership would work very, very well for the next four

seasons, as Decker ran first for the Comets and then the Blue Angels Track Club in Huntington Beach, to which she followed DeNoon when he took over the top coaching job there. After starting Mary in sprints, he moved her to the mile and then settled on the half mile. His training methods included some long runs on the nearby beach, and for warm-ups he used the perimeter of the mile-square park where they trained. But most of the work was interval training on the track, at the time the accepted method for training middle- and long-distance runners in the United States. It used fast running on the track, followed by periods of rest intervals, stress, then relaxation. Volume (the total workload of an athlete) was generated by the repetitions. Workouts meant running sets of 220 yards, 330 yards, 440 yards, and 600 yards, with occasional longer individual runs.

DeNoon's teams trained four days a week, and they typically covered thirty-five miles a week, followed by racing on weekends.<sup>5</sup> Mary flourished within the system: "She loved the excitement, the spotlight, and the rewards," DeNoon said.<sup>6</sup> She would be in the spotlight often.

Throughout the four seasons that DeNoon coached the girl whom writers would call—appropriately, for her diminutive stature and age—"little Mary Decker," he was astonished by her truly extraordinary ability to "go through any pain threshold to reach her goal."<sup>7</sup>

We have no way of knowing if the physical pain she fought so valiantly to conquer—pain that is the constant companion of all middle- and long-distance runners—was her way of coping with the emotional pain she had to endure at home, but what is certain is that her ability was off the known scale for young female runners. Mary Decker was a gifted, motivated, even obsessed, talent who met every challenge thrown at her and stared it down while accumulating accolades and records along the way. The writer Kenny Moore observed that Decker was "moved by a competitive yearning that rises from so deep within her character that it connects with her will to be loved. Since she was a child, she has tried to transform her hunger for comforting approval into dominating athletic performance."<sup>8</sup> As her successes on the track, indoors and out, mounted, writers and fans joined DeNoon in marveling at her exploits.

...

Mary was virtually unbeatable at any distance. Her immature body seemed indestructible no matter how many training miles and races she forced it to endure. But, despite DeNoon's claim that "all I could do was try to improve her," he would be the first in a long line of ever-changing advisers to learn that coaching Mary Decker was anything but easy. In the face of all her achievement, she constantly sought reassurance and required encouragement and flattery. Despite his avowal that "she did it mostly by herself," DeNoon soon found Decker requiring almost his full and undivided attention.<sup>9</sup> He also discovered that reining in her enthusiasm and obsessive need to succeed was nearly impossible. When asked what motivated or possessed his then fifteen-year-old star, DeNoon said, "She has goals other people have never dreamed of having. I learned long ago never to underestimate her."<sup>10</sup>

He would be criticized from afar by coaches and runners alike who thought he was subjecting his superbly talented young runner to abusive and ultimately dangerous training methods. No less than Steve "Pre" Prefontaine, then America's top middle-distance runner, observed from Oregon, after viewing Mary's training schedule, that DeNoon's methods were likely to imperil her career. She "would burn out" early, he cautioned, if it continued.<sup>11</sup>

What Pre and others could not know was that DeNoon had in his charge an adolescent girl with blazing speed, fierce determination, incredible stamina and strength, and an indomitable will that impelled her, as hard as he attempted to control her, to take the bit and *run*. Mary Decker was going to run harder, farther, and faster than anyone around her. Francie Larrieu, a world record holder at 1,500 meters, two miles, and 3,000 meters, had also been a teenage star. Perhaps her own experience colored her point of view, but in 1974, when she was twenty-one, she voiced her doubt that Mary "would fizzle out. Somehow, I have the feeling that Mary is different. You can't be on top all the time. You've got to see how Mary reacts to the downs."<sup>12</sup>

In fact, if Decker had a chink in her armor, it was psychological, as Bob Hickey and Don DeNoon learned early in her development. Hickey, a full-time police officer and part-time track official, had begun running in his thirties with another cop; they often trained with DeNoon's team to keep themselves fit: "One day my friend

and I were on a training run with Mary. We were both much older and bigger and were jostling and bumping her and passing in front of her. We were just kidding around. All of a sudden Mary stopped, sat down on the track, and threw a fit, screaming and bawling like a baby,” he recalled.<sup>13</sup>

Observing the tantrum, DeNoon rushed to his young star’s side to comfort and console her. Then he took the two police officers aside. “He told us in no uncertain terms that we were never, ever, to run in front of Mary under any circumstances: ‘You don’t run in front of Mary. She always has to be in front,’ he said.”<sup>14</sup>

Hickey would remember that lecture, and that attitude, years later, when someone else passed Mary in a race that was much more meaningful than an afternoon training run in the park.

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Don DeNoon coached Mary Decker for four—by any measure spectacular—seasons. Now retired in Florida, DeNoon is not a man who is full of himself. He is the first to acknowledge that he benefited from their association, which he later turned into a string of coaching positions at several major colleges and universities. Similarly, he is not unaware of the criticism of those who, in hindsight, point the finger of blame at him, bringing his early training of Mary Decker under attack as the cause of the series of injuries that would hound her for years after they parted ways. “Let me tell you this,” he said more than three decades later: “I coached Mary Decker to her first three world records before she was fourteen years old. And while I coached her, she was never injured.” DeNoon added, “Mary loved every day she trained.”<sup>15</sup>

Expanding on the adolescent’s self-determined will to do more than anyone else, Bob Seaman, a world-class sub-four-minute miler and track official in Southern California, offered the following example: “During one seven-day period when she was still twelve, Mary ran a marathon in 3:09 and a 440, an 880, a mile, and a two-mile race.”<sup>16</sup> The next day, not surprisingly, she was in the hospital.

DeNoon recalled that “Mary had an attack of appendicitis. She was rushed to the hospital, where she underwent an emergency appendectomy. Two days after her release she was back training, with the blood from her [still intact] stitches staining her jersey. I remember

the doctor asking her before the operation if she had been ‘under any undue stress lately.’ She just grimaced and shook her head.”

“Mary Decker,” DeNoon added, “had a burning desire to excel. She enjoyed what she did. Most important, she enjoyed the success.”<sup>17</sup> Those, as they say, are the facts.

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DeNoon had always described himself as “more like a big brother to Mary,” and thus it was appropriate that, when he married Sandy Dean—Mary’s best friend on the team he coached—in 1971, Mary was the flower girl at their wedding.<sup>18</sup>

With the arrival of 1972, an Olympic year, it became obvious even to the most casual observer that little Mary Decker belonged on the U.S. team—obvious to all, that is, but U.S. track officials, who declared that their bylaws prevented anyone from participating in the Olympic trials who was not yet fourteen years old. Mary’s birthday was in August. The trials were in June. Although she had set the world age-group record for 800 meters at twelve, and had clocked a 4:55 mile at thirteen, Mary was not allowed to try out. “We appealed the decision but got nowhere with them,” Bob Hickey recalled.<sup>19</sup>

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That summer Mary developed Sever’s disease, an inflammation of the bone-growth tissue in the heel that often afflicts adolescents. Though both her feet were encased in plaster casts, her ceaseless activity soon turned them into rags: the casts had to be replaced, Mary bounced back quickly, and 1973 would be the season that saw the emergence on the national and international stages of the young phenomenon.<sup>20</sup> She finished first in the 1,000 meters at the *LA Times* indoor meet in February at the Forum, and in June at UC Irvine she went on to win a spot on the U.S. national team in the 880-yard race. Both events were televised.<sup>21</sup> When the Americans competed against the Soviet Union at an indoor meet in Richmond, Virginia, she finished third in the mile—and less than two seconds behind the winner, the reigning Olympic 1,500 meters champion, Lyudmila Bragina.

As impressive as that showing was, Decker continued to astound observers when she ran second to Wendy Knudson in the race at

880 yards at the outdoor U.S. championships.<sup>22</sup> Decker followed that with a winning performance in Toronto at the Pan Pacific Games. Knowledgeable track aficionados were slack-jawed at her speed. She clinched the win with a 53.9-second 400-meter segment. She was still only fourteen years old.

After that, Decker began a globetrotting tour with the U.S. team that saw her meet West Germany's Hildegard Falck, the 1972 Olympic 800-meter champion, with Decker losing by just a second. Then the American star hopped over to Turin, Italy, where she beat that country's best runners.

Then, in the eleventh in a series of two-nation competitions that were a fixture during the Cold War years, Decker faced the Russians again. In July in Minsk she ran against the Olympic silver medalist, Nijolė Sabaitė, a Lithuanian. At just five feet and only eighty-six pounds, Decker appeared overmatched by the bulky, muscular Sabaitė. Last at the bell for the final lap, Decker moved quickly up to third and then surged into the lead in the stretch, passing a shocked Sabaitė and leaving the Soviet star in her wake while winning in 2:02.9. The meets were popular television fare, and millions of Americans watched and cheered Decker on from the comfort of their living rooms.

It didn't hurt that Mary Decker was white, young, pigtailed, and tiny. She was a child facing and beating Amazon-like Russians, and she reflected a wholesome, all-American image in doing so.<sup>23</sup> A star had been born, and the media loved her. Though America had produced other young runners—Marie Mulder, Doris Brown Heritage, Jan Merrill, and Francie Larrieu among them—they were covered principally by the print media. Mary's appearances at televised events catapulted her further and faster into the limelight than her predecessors. She was a ready-made media sensation with irresistible appeal. *Newsweek*, *Sports Illustrated*, and other periodicals scrambled to put out gushing tributes to the newest track star.

Mary loved the spotlight and basked in its warm, bright glow. But spotlights, as she would soon learn, can also be harsh, and when they expose defects and flaws, they tend to turn away as fast as they arrived.

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