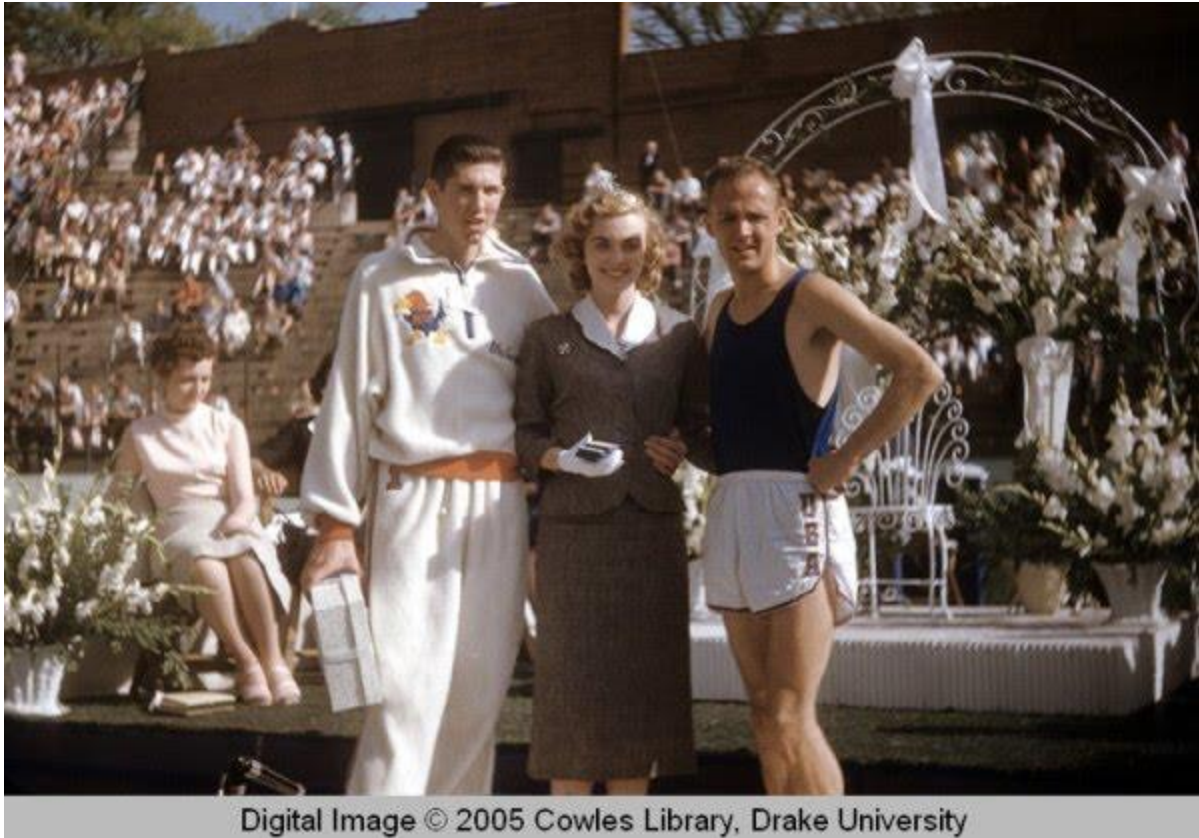


THE RIOTOUS WANAKAMER MILE



Wes Santee (pictured above, left) was one of the USA's most prolific milers. One of his most memorable races involved Villanova's own Fred Dwyer (above, right). Here is how Sports Illustrated's February 14, 1955, issue described the "riotous" Wanamaker Mile that saw a world record set, but by neither Santee nor Dwyer.

There are those who say it was the best running battle New Yorkers have seen since the Democratic Convention of 1924 took 103 ballots to nominate John W. Davis. There are others who say this is not so, that there has never been anything like it before.

It is necessary to understand the importance of the one-mile run to any indoor track-and-field meet and to understand that this was the Millrose Games, the most famous of all indoor meets; that there were 15,000 of the passionate, dedicated, perceptive breed called track fans in Madison Square Garden, and that the event was the Wanamaker Mile, the single most important indoor race in the world. As Wes Santee said in Washington just two weeks earlier, it is the race that everybody wants to win.

Last Saturday night to the Wanamaker Mile in the Millrose Games in Madison Square Garden came six men. All six wanted to win. But three expected to, in the way a man expects dinner when he arrives home from the office: there is simply no question about it; it is his natural due. This is called confidence, and it is a quality possessed to an extraordinary degree by the three young men in question: David Wesley Santee of Kansas, Gunnar Nielsen of Denmark, and Frederick Anthony Dwyer Jr. of New Jersey.

Wes Santee's confidence rested on cold logic. The record showed that he was best. No one had ever run a mile indoors faster than he; only the four-minute milers—Roger Bannister and John Landy—had ever run a faster mile outdoors. He had been beaten, true, by Nielsen's sprint finish in a slow race in Washington on Jan. 22, but a week later in Boston he had run Nielsen into the ground with a driving pace over the last half-mile that had left the Dane 35 yards behind without a sprint and Santee all alone at the tape with a new world record. And he had beaten Dwyer five times in five races.

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"Why should I expect to lose?" said Wes Santee.

Gunnar Nielsen's confidence rested on his great sprint finish and a curious lack of regard for Santee. Nielsen was co-holder of the world half-mile record and he had, after all, defeated Santee in Washington.

"If I stay close to him," he said in his halting English, "I can outsprint him and win. I can beat Santee. The only man I fear in all the world is Bannister."

No one knew what little Freddy Dwyer's confidence rested on. He is a good runner, a fine runner, but he had never been able to beat either Santee or Nielsen. He was confident all the same.

"I can beat 'em both," he said, and it was obvious that he believed it.

As the start of the Wanamaker Mile neared last Saturday night, the early events of the evening were all but forgotten—the powerful Audun Boysen's striking win over a splendid field in the 880; graceful Mai Whitfield's suddenly awkward struggle to stay ahead in the final yards of the 600; the commanding victories of Bob Richards in the pole vault and Harrison Dillard in the hurdles (the ninth consecutive Millrose triumph for each); Rod Richard's clear-cut win margin in the star-packed 60-yard dash. All were splendid performances. All were genuinely appreciated by the crowd. But all became of secondary importance as the time neared for the Wanamaker Mile.

The field was probably the best ever entered in the Wanamaker. There was Santee, the 4:00.6 miler, the indoor record-holder. There was Nielsen, conqueror of Santee, a great runner in his own right. There was Dwyer, who had won the Wanamaker and every other important Eastern indoor mile in 1953 before he had gone into the Army. There was Bob McMillen, who had finished second to Josy Barthel in the record-breaking 1952 Olympic 1,500-meter run, and who was slowly working his way back into top shape. There was Billy Tidwell, who had beaten Santee at the mile in high school and who had beaten him again, in the half-mile, just last year. There was Dick Ollen, who had set a record-producing pace for Santee in Boston and who had been brought to New York to do the same thing in the Wanamaker.



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THE PACE WAS PERFECT

Nielsen jumped into the lead at the gun, but Ollen took over quickly and led the field through the first quarter-mile in 58.6 seconds, brilliant time that brought an appreciative roar from the crowd. Santee, Nielsen and Dwyer followed Ollen in that order.

At the half-mile the time was 2:00.6, perfect pace for a record mile. Santee moved past the tiring Ollen just past the half-mile mark and took over the lead, Dwyer moving up into second place and Nielsen following in third.

Here, Santee lost the race. His sense of pace indoors is faulty, and his time for the third quarter-mile was a lackadaisical 63 seconds, much too slow to take the sting out of Nielsen's kick. Santee realized this belatedly and increased speed in the last quarter, but Dwyer and Nielsen stayed with him.

The crowd was all voice now, roaring its approval of Santee's driving pace, of Dwyer's persistence, of Nielsen's potential. On the backstretch of the last lap, 80 yards from the finish line, Nielsen moved out from the inside curb of the track to pass. With a tremendous, lifting burst of speed, he passed Dwyer and then Santee, just as they bent into the last turn. Santee was laboring and he bore out on the turn, possibly to hold off Nielsen, a common tactic in indoor running.

But Nielsen, his long hair flapping, his arms pumping across his chest, was suddenly three, four, five yards in front, his famed sprint wide open. Santee was through. It was obviously Nielsen's race, a great victory for him and a stirring thing for the crowd to see.

THE TROUBLE BEGINS

But before anyone could savor it, before anyone could really appreciate the scope of Nielsen's accomplishment, the strange events pictured on these pages began to occur. Dwyer, hanging like a leech to the fading Santee, tried to sneak past on the inside as they followed Nielsen around the last turn, a maneuver that is legal only if the man passing can get through without interfering with the man being passed.

It didn't work; there simply wasn't room. Santee came back to the inside of the track and Dwyer was dead, squeezed between Santee and the curb.

When they banged together (Picture 1), Chuck Hornbostel, the old Indiana half-miler who was serving as inspector on the turn, properly noted interference by Dwyer and called it to the attention of the chief inspector. Meanwhile, Dwyer, still running, was jostled off the track onto the infield (Picture 2, p. 9). He followed the curve of the track, staying abreast of Santee, and came back on the boards as they hit the straightaway, squeezing ahead of the weary Kansan.

Santee, seemingly unable to bear the sight of Dwyer in front of him, reached out a protesting arm and grabbed Dwyer's shoulder. Dwyer, in turn, infuriated by this violation of track ethics, turned angrily to thrust Santee's arm off and grabbed him around the body. The crowd watched in amazement. Nielsen's great race was forgotten.

The two spun around on the track in each other's arms, almost fell, broke apart and then staggered across the finish line. At once they turned to each other in post-race exhaustion and with monumental incongruity shook hands.

The crowd, shocked by the travesty, was in an uproar. Its rumbling anger was obviously directed more at Santee than at Dwyer. What Dwyer had done—cutting through on the inside—is fairly common. It was wrong, the judges spotted it, and Dwyer was penalized for it, but it was understandable. But for Santee to reach out and hold an opponent was a glaring breach of conduct, particularly so for a great runner.

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"That's not the way a champion acts," growled a spectator.

Indeed, when Dwyer's disqualification was announced, the crowd booed the disqualification. And when it was announced that Santee, who had finished third behind Dwyer, was being placed second, the boos grew louder. When Nielsen's world-record time of 4:03.6 was announced, the crowd seemed barely to notice it. Everyone was too busy talking about the fight.

After the race Santee sought out Nielsen and congratulated him, and photographers took their picture together. Santee seemed out of place in the picture. Then Santee went over to Dwyer and the two shook hands again.

"I'm sorry you were disqualified," Santee said.

"I'm sorry about the whole thing," Fred said. "Let's forget about it." He remembered the Baxter Mile scheduled for the Garden on Feb. 12. "There's always next week."

"What's going to happen next week, Fred?" someone asked Dwyer.

Dwyer, grinning, said, "I still think I can beat 'em both. Next week? Well, there'll be a fight." He stopped grinning. "I don't mean that literally," he added hastily.

Santee sought out Dan Ferris and returned his second-place medal.

"I gave it back because I don't think I finished second. Someone went past me." He paused. "I think we both should have been disqualified."

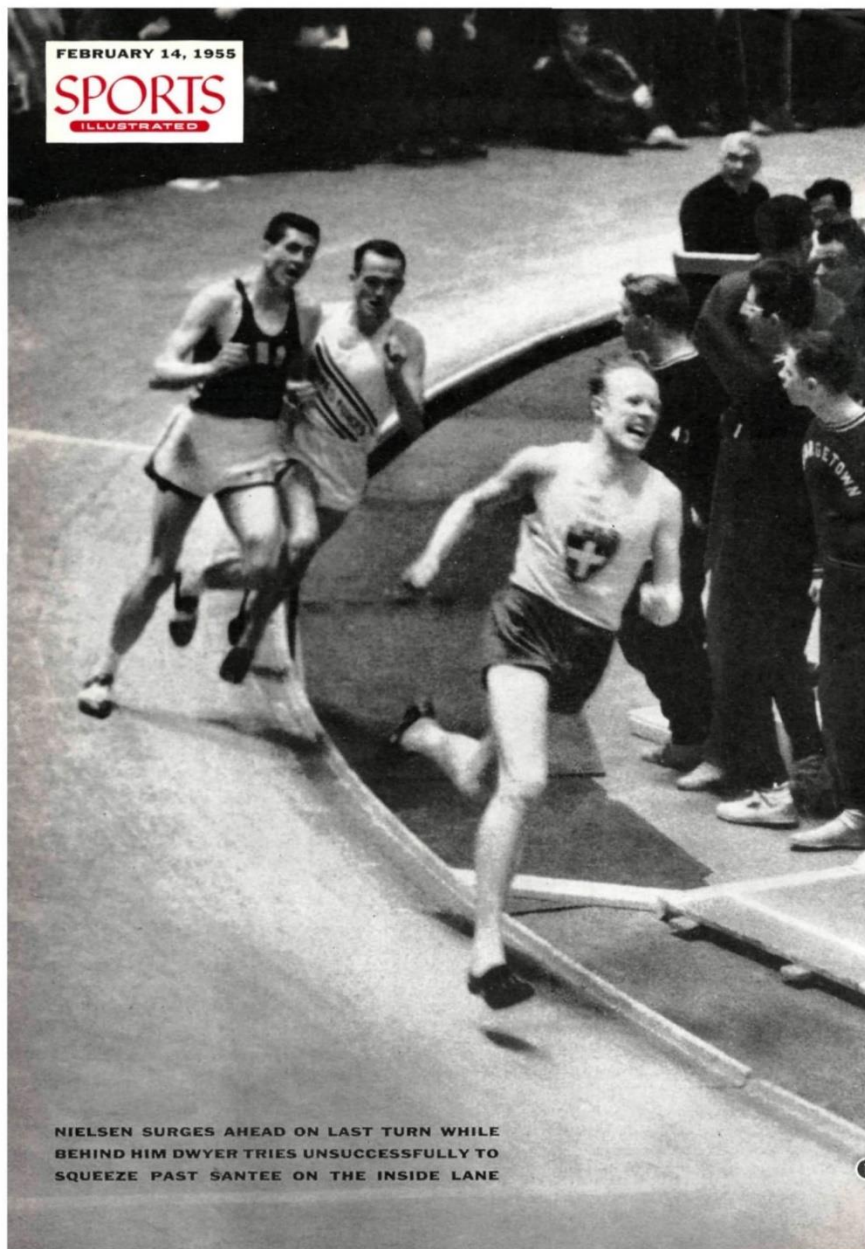
He went back to his hotel, dressed, phoned his wife, changed his airline reservation from Sunday noon to Saturday night, ate and flew back to Kansas on the 1:30 a.m. flight.

Meanwhile, at the Wivel, a Scandinavian restaurant in New York Gunnar Nielsen drank Danish beer and ate headcheese and herring from the smorgasbord. He said he was a little tired, that he had not been aware of the brawl behind him, that "perhaps" he could continue to defeat Santee and Dwyer in the mile races yet to come this indoor season.

He made an odd picture, this quiet, amiable winner of the world's most important indoor race. For despite his brilliant victory, his world-record time, it was not his race. To track fans, the 1955 Wanamaker Mile would always be the graceless Santee-Dwyer affair at the finish line.

Oh, by the way, the next week at Madison Square Garden Fred Dwyer did indeed defeat Wes Santee in the Baxter Mile (see photo right), exacting some mild form of justice.





picture sequence continued on next page

Numbered sequence photo's above and next page from the February 14, 1955 issue of Sports Illustrated.



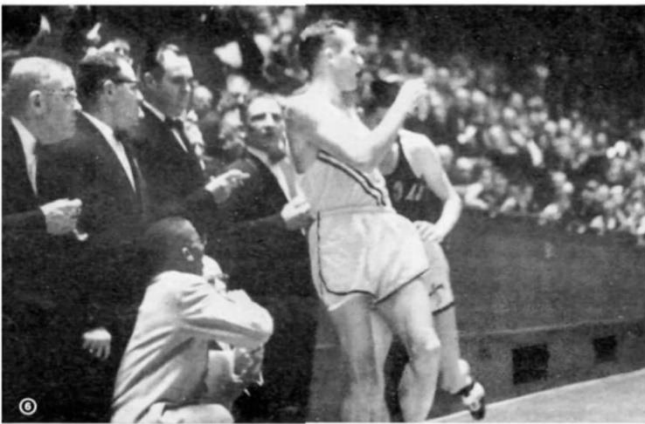
Photo right from the February 5, 1955 edition of the New York Times.



Back on the track, Dwyer, completely off the ground (3), clings to Santee after being spun all the way around toward startled crowd.



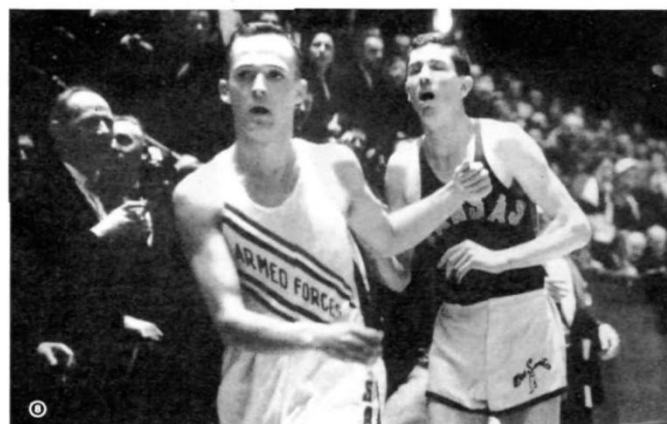
Dignified timers (4) stare in amazement as Dwyer and Santee break apart, almost fall, then continue to totter toward finish (5)



Dwyer twists away from Santee (6) and stays in front, but almost crashes into the timers (7) as he weaves his way along the track.



Exhausted Santee gulps for air (8) as he staggers across the finish line behind Dwyer, who throws his arms out to maintain balance



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(<https://villanovarunning.blogspot.com/2010/11/wes-santee-fred-dwyer-fight-for-1955.html>)

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<https://vault.si.com/vault/1955/02/14/45755#&gid=ci0258bda2d00126ef&pid=45755---010---image>