

## Attempt to Break the 4-Minute Mile

*I witnessed Kim's 4:01 race that very windy evening. I don't know what the extrapolation tables would calculate out to for running on a dirt track with 30 mile per hour winds but in my estimation, it was sub four.*

—Observation by Toni Ruggle, a 4:08 miler while a track athlete at Chico State University, concerning the valiant, but unsuccessful attempt by Kim Ellison to break the four-minute mile before a very excited home crowd on a cold, brisk evening in 1972.

Photo 1-1



Wildcat Kim Ellison winning the mile race during a home meet on April 29, 1972.  
*Chico Enterprise-Record* photograph



**Wildcat Track & Field**

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One evening in the spring of 1972, hundreds of spectators were present in the stands at the track stadium at Chico State University to witness a much-anticipated attempt by Kim Ellison to break the 4-minute mile. This feat had first been accomplished by Englishman Roger Banister at Oxford on May 6, 1954. Many others had subsequently also broken this barrier, but no “Wildcat” (Chico State track athlete) to date. At that time, Jim Ryun held the World and American Records of 3:51.1, set on June 23, 1967.

Ellison had a storied past as an elite runner, interrupted by military service in Vietnam. After graduating high school in 1965, as the three-time L.A. City Section Cross Country champion and the Los Angeles City Section 2-mile champion with a time of 9:20.0 and a second-place finish at the State Meet, he attended California State University, Northridge, for a time on a track scholarship, before leaving school to take a position with Adidas, then a fledgling shoe company.

One day his laidback lifestyle came to an end when, while hanging out on a beach with some friends, his brother, Kerry, came running up, waving an envelope, and yelling, “You got drafted.” Kim’s Army duty in Vietnam, at the Marble Mountain Army Airfield, south of Da Nang city, was, at first, as a clerk typist and later as a beach lifeguard. At the completion of his two-year obligation, Ellison was discharged from the Army and returned home.

Following the advice of Jim Roulsten, a former teacher and good friend, he headed to Chico, a small college town and agricultural community ninety miles north of Sacramento and enrolled at Butte College. Despite, understandably, not training in Vietnam, he retained his immense talent and competitive nature, and a return to fitness quickly followed. Within a year, he was on the Chico State track team and racing for a national championship in the mile, while pursuing a degree in English. In his final year at Chico State, Ellison wanted to break 4 minutes on his home track in front of hometown fans.

The stadium at Chico State is situated across Warner Street from the athletic fields and track at Chico High School. Because of this, there were close interactions between collegian and high school runners. They often encountered one another while training in nearby Bidwell Park, an expansive area stretching miles and miles from downtown Chico to the upper reaches of Chico Creek Canyon. The Wildcats were always very friendly and encouraging, and Chico High runners enjoyed attending Chico State home meets and cheering on the older runners.

One disadvantage of the open stadium at Chico State was that it was subject to mountain breezes (wind). To the east lay the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and, in the evening when the sun had set

and it was cooler at higher elevations than in the valley, cold dense air would flow downslope to fill the void left by rising warm air. This is the definition of wind—the movement of air masses from areas of higher density to areas of lower density—and the winds often picked up in the evenings in Chico. Moreover, unlike today, with the athletic fields at Chico State reduced to provide space for new buildings constructed since 1972, there were then practically no impediments to buffeting winds. As a result of this geography, it was generally more-windy during evening track meets than daytime ones. Conversely, it was exciting for the athletes to compete under stadium lights with more fans in attendance coming out for an evening after work.

## DUAL MEET AT HOME AGAINST UC DAVIS AGGIES

*Wildcats Bury Aggies 120-51  
Ellison Runs 4:01.4 Despite Cold Wind*

—*Chico Enterprise-Record* headline in Monday's newspaper.

On Saturday night, April 29th, Kim Ellison made his attempt to break the magic four-minute mile barrier. The following description of the exciting race is from the *Enterprise-Record*:

Chico State College's premier miler Kim Ellison didn't get his sub four-minute mile clocking at College Field Saturday evening but it was not because he failed to run a brilliant race.

Despite a bitterly cold wind which swept the local track Ellison streaked to a 4:01.4 clocking and gave promise he'll crack the barrier in the near future.

Paced by teammate Bob King, Ellison was under 60 seconds after the first 440 and at two minutes for the 880. Midway the third lap Ellison was forced to take the lead. He finished the 1,320 at three minutes then sprinted hard the last quarter. He tightened some coming down the stretch but his 4:01.4 was a great race. He broke the CSC mark of 4:02.9 set in 1969 by Duwayne Ray.

Ellison's clocking also broke the stadium record of 4:06.7, set the preceding year by Wildcat Gene Meyers. Finishing behind Ellison, UC

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Davis' Dwayne "Peanut" Harms broke his school's record with a time of 4:07.1.

Two other Wildcat distance runners also garnered wins in the meet with UC Davis. Dave Wood won the 880 with a time of 1:55.1; and Pat Stordahl raced to victory with a 14:21.5 in the 3-mile.

Ellison's time of 4:01.4 on the dirt track would be the fastest mile of his life. Unfortunately, going sub-four wasn't in the cards for him. One week later, he tore ligaments in his foot from landing in pea gravel (in a French drain on the inside of the curb) during a race on Sacramento State's new all-weather track. The injury took about a year to heal, and Kim could not compete again at a high level.

A year later, while serving as a "rabbit" (pacesetter) for the open indoor mile at the Cow Palace (located in Daly City near San Francisco), and at the Bakersfield Invitational, Ellison found that he no longer had his "top-end gears." His ability to "kick" at the end of races was gone. Despite great disappointment that his competitive running was over, Kim finished school, earned his degree, and readily embarked on a teaching and coaching career.

In 1975, he married his wife Nancy, and took a job at Paradise High School (PHS), located less than twenty miles up the ridge from Chico, where he remained until retirement in 2008. In addition to teaching English classes, he coached track & field in the spring at Paradise High, and cross country in the fall at Butte College.

Kim ran right alongside the athletes he coached. Teams at Butte College called him "DAD." He continued running with athletes at PHS and Butte until, one day on a 10-mile run with his Butte team, he felt his hip grinding. December 1999 marked the end of his running days when he had a hip replacement operation. The orthopedic surgeon told him to walk, bike, swim, but DO NOT RUN.

As a result of the later involvement, and his previous competitive running, Kim was inducted into the Paradise High School, Butte College, and Chico State Athletic Halls of Fame as a coach and an athlete. Although no longer running and about to turn 75, his love for the sport has never waned and he can be found at local meets, assisting as needed, and cheering on athletes.

Following a career in the Navy, I returned to Chico in 2001 to embark on a ten-year teaching stint, in which I also coached cross country and track athletes. It was always a delight to encounter Kim at meets. On the night of his race in 1972, I was a 9th grader at Chico Junior High School. Thirty years later, upon seeing him at a meet, I commented that I had always greatly admired his class in not citing the challenging conditions that night as the reason for nearly, but not

breaking the four-minute mile. He replied something like, “that was the day I had trained and peaked for, I was committed to it, and I have no excuses.”

Kim Ellison’s school mile record of 4:01.4 stood for thirty-seven years until April 12, 2008, when Scotty Bauhs broke it with a time of 3:59.81. In doing so, he became the 308th American to break the magical 4-minute mile barrier.

Photo 1-2



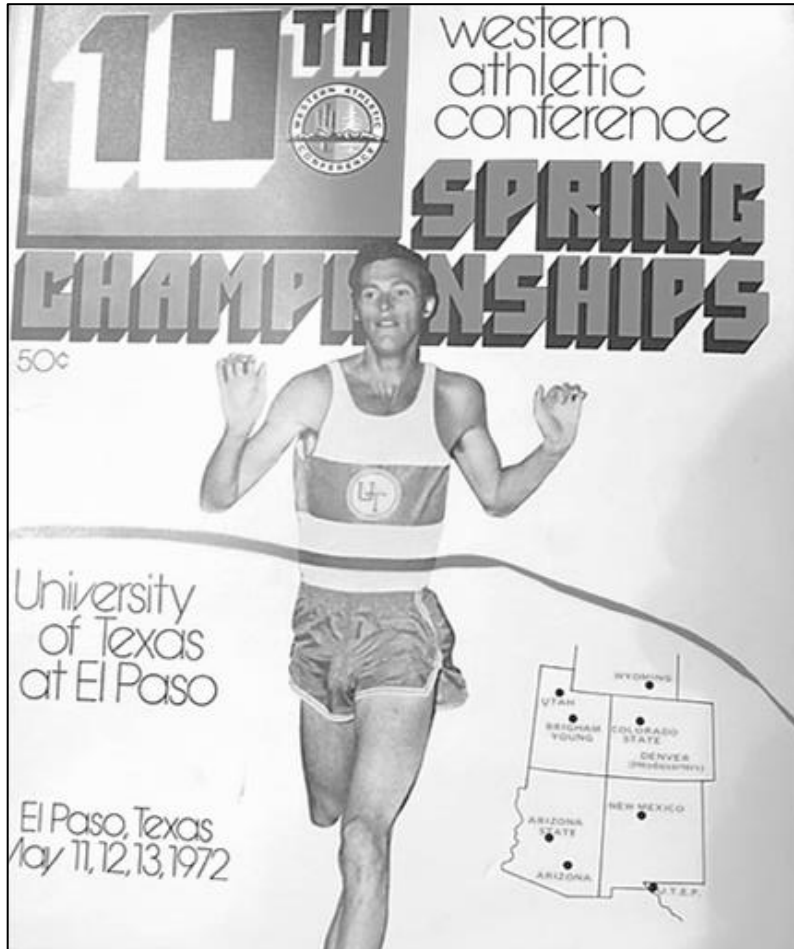
Wildcat Scotty Bauhs breaking the 4-minute mile.  
Courtesy of Tom Cushman

Kim’s brother Kerry was a member of the International Track Association (ITA), a professional track & field organization that existed in the United States from 1972 to 1976, which included many outstanding athletes of the day including Jim Ryun. At one time, Kerry Ellison and Kim Ellison held the world record for the combined mile times of brothers (3:57 in a relay and 4:01.4, respectively).

As an aside, Chico State University professor and outstanding runner Walt Schafer, introduced later in the book, attended an ITA meet as a spectator in San Francisco in 1973. He recalls about this event that, “The pole vault standards were replicas of Schick shavers. The pacing lights were first-ever at ITA meets. Now they’re back and seen as respectable.” Such lights, encircling the track, sequentially flashed one

by one, as the runners progressed in a race, to visually show viewers how close to the pace for the desired final time, they were—and thereby increase the excitement for fans. The race time set into the pacing lights might be an American record or another exceptional standard.

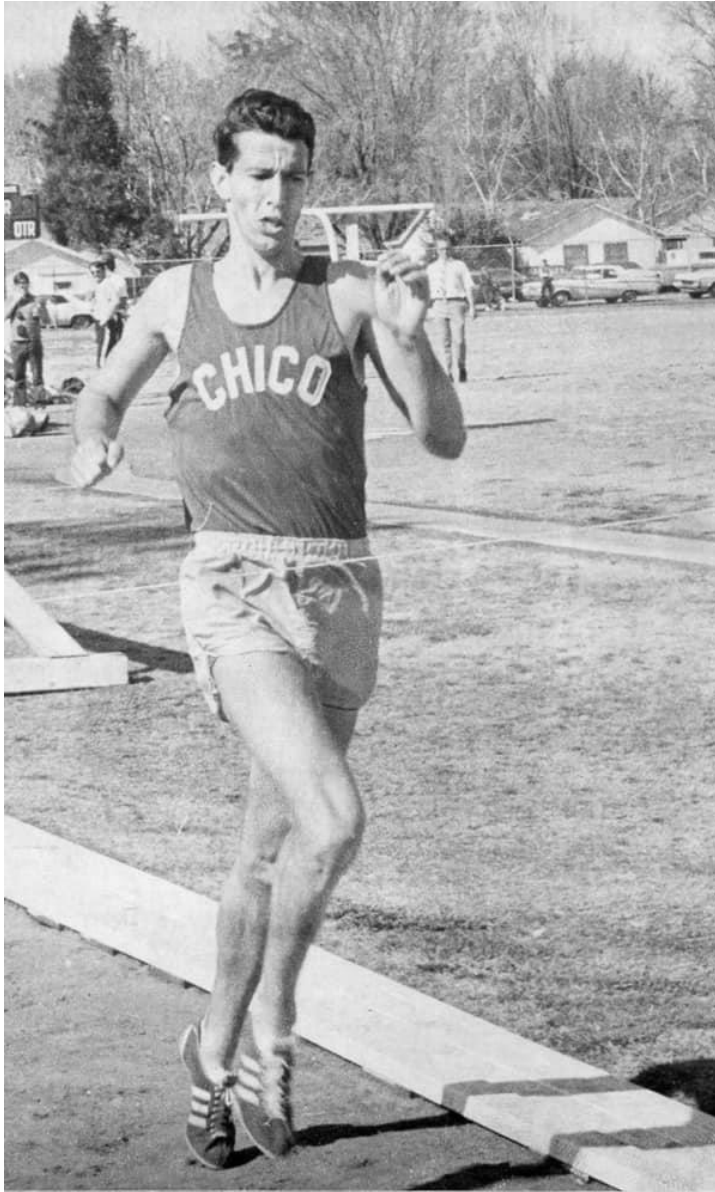
Photo 1-3



University of Texas El Paso track star Kerry Ellison gracing the cover of the program for the 1972 Western Athletic Conference Track & Field Championships. His college running preceded subsequent involvement with the International Track Association. Courtesy of Kerry Ellison

## CHICO STATE MILER PRECEDING KIM ELLISON

Photo 1-4



Wildcat Gene Meyers on the track, winning a race for Chico State.  
Courtesy of Cathy Anderson-Meyers

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In 1971 at the Far Western Conference (FWC) Track Championships, Wildcat Gene Meyers won the mile in 4:06.7, and the 3-mile in 14:07.2 (a new Chico State school record). Both races were battles to the end, with Meyers outkicking Hayward's Willie Eashman in the mile and Ed Haver of UC Davis in the three-mile. Evidencing how good Meyers' leg speed was in beating Eashman, the latter athlete came back with a 1:51.9 in the 880, narrowly losing to Chico's Jim Estes, whose 1:51.8 was also a new FWC record.

Placing third in the mile was Kim Ellison with a then lifetime best of 4:10.7. Other Wildcats distance runners scoring points in the meet:

- Bob Darling: Second in the 6-mile (29:25.7)
- Mike Dailey: Sixth in the 3,000-meter steeplechase

Gene Meyers best time in the mile came in his final race as a Wildcat, a 4:06.2 effort at the National Championships in Sacramento.

Eugene "Geno" Meyers (born and raised in Oroville, twenty-five miles from Chico) was inducted into the Chico State Athletic Hall of Fame in 1999. His athletic biography summarizes his qualifications for this great honor:

Geno became the cornerstone of one of the greatest distance teams that Chico State has ever had. During his 4-year tenure in cross country, Chico State won the Far Western Conference Championship in 1968 and 1969. In track and field, he held the conference meet record in the mile and was an All-American in 1969 and 1971.

Geno was one of the few athletes that could excel at all distance races. He held the school record in the 880-yard run, the mile run and the three-mile run. His converted times (from yards to metric distances) and ranking on Chico State's All Time Top 10 List exemplify how talented he really was thirty years ago! He is presently [1999] ranked second in the 800-meters, third in the 5,000-meters and fourth in the 1,500-meter race. His 800-meter record stood for 25 years and was finally broken in 1994.

Gene Meyers is one of the best, if not the best, distance runners to wear a uniform for Chico State.