

KATHY ORMSBY

Kathy Love Ormsby, 21, a junior from North Carolina State, had set a U.S. collegiate women's record for 10,000 meters at the Penn Relays on April 24, and last Wednesday night in the NCAA championships at the Indiana University track stadium in Indianapolis she was favored to win the event. Early in the race she had fallen off the pace, but she had struggled back and after 6,400 meters was in fourth -- alone but only three strides behind the lead trio of runners.

She ran smoothly down the back straightaway across the infield from the main stands and the finish line, but when she reached the next curve, she kept running straight, heading toward a railing that borders the outside of the track. She didn't slow down or break stride. Peter Tegen, coach of the Wisconsin team and of the eventual winner, Stephanie Herbst, who was in the lead, had taken a position behind the railing at precisely that point. "I thought she may have confused me for her coach; I was wearing red and white, the same colors as N.C. State. There were 8 1/2 laps to go. I know that because I was supposed to give a signal to Herbst then. I missed giving it because I was watching Ormsby."

Ormsby slowed to duck under the railing next to Tegen, then ran full pace up a set of steps into the stands and vanished. "It was eerie," said Tegen. "Her eyes were focused straight ahead. She didn't look left or right. I thought she was heading for the bathroom -- there's a concrete building in that corner with bathrooms in it. That's the last I saw of her. And then she just disappeared beyond the stands."

Only a few of the 1,500 spectators in the stadium probably noticed that Ormsby had left the race. Her parents, Dale and Sallie Ormsby of Rockingham, N.C., were in the stands. Five minutes after Kathy ran off the track, her mother sought out a member of the university campus police force and told him that she couldn't find her daughter. According to the police, Mrs. Ormsby didn't seem panicky, only puzzled. But she did give the officer a detailed physical description of her daughter, which was immediately broadcast to officers around the campus. Inside the stadium the race was not even over, but outside the search for Kathy Ormsby had already begun.

Her coach, Rollie Geiger, had seen Kathy leave the race and had gone outside himself, but didn't see what happened next. Apparently, Ormsby crossed a softball diamond, climbed over a seven foot fence and then ran down New York Street, a main thoroughfare, toward a bridge that crosses the White River. Geiger returned to the stadium, and also spoke to a police officer. Ormsby was then paged on the stadium public address system, and when she didn't turn up, Geiger went back to search for her.

The area around the stadium is well lighted, and the bridge is illuminated brightly with a double row of arc lamps. At 10:10, barely 10 minutes after Ormsby ran off the track, a campus police officer was hailed on New York Street by a motorist who said that "there is a problem" at the bridge and that an ambulance was needed there.

It was Geiger who had asked the motorist to find help. Geiger had just seen the still form of Kathy Ormsby lying in the marsh grass below the bridge. She had run 75 feet onto the bridge, then plunged over the side, falling 35 feet onto the soggy, rain-soaked ground -- about 25 feet from the edge of the river itself. Geiger had stopped the motorist, then clambered down the bank to Ormsby's side. Soon afterwards, Sgt. Bill Abston of the campus police arrived at the scene. When Abston questioned the coach, Geiger replied, "She said she jumped."

Lieutenant Doug Cox of the campus police was also there. "She was semiconscious -- awake, but not talking -- by the time I got there," he recalled. Cox covered her with his jacket. She lay flat on her back. No one tried to move her for fear of aggravating possible spinal injuries. Within minutes, an ambulance arrived on a rarely used dirt path that runs under the bridge along the river's edge. A spine-support board was slid gently beneath her body to immobilize the spinal cord, and a few minutes later Ormsby arrived at Wisard Memorial Hospital.

She had suffered a broken rib, a collapsed lung and a fractured vertebra, which had injured her spinal cord in her middle back. The doctors' prognosis two days later was that she would be permanently paralyzed from the waist down. Dr. Peter Hall, chief of neurosurgery at the hospital, said at a Friday press conference, "Given the distance that she fell, she's very lucky she's not a quadriplegic. She could

easily have died.” The police report implies that that is exactly what Ormsby had in mind: The incident is officially listed as an attempted suicide.

All in all, it was a baffling, tragic turn of events in the life of a young woman who seemed to be a paragon. She was valedictorian of her 1983 graduating class at Richmond Senior High in Rockingham, with a 99-plus grade average; a middle distance runner who as a senior set state high school records at 800, 1,600, and 3,200 meters; the only athlete in her school’s history to have her jersey retired; a student so admired by her peers and her teachers that the school held a day in her honor.

At North Carolina State she was a star runner and a star premed student. Her physics professor, Gerry Lucovsky, said, “She is sweet, courteous, diligent, sensible, not afraid to reach out if she needs something. She is a model student-athlete.” Coach Geiger said, “She is loved dearly by people on and off the team. She gives a great deal to the program and to the rest of the university.”

Ormsby is very religious, and after she broke the 10,000 meter record in April, she told a reporter: “I just have to learn to do my best for myself and for God and to turn everything over to Him.”

Dale Ormsby, a textile plant manager in Rockingham, told the *Indianapolis Star*, “We have accepted this and have faith that somehow it will be used to glorify God. I believe, though, that it had something to do with the pressure that is put on young people to succeed.”

Perhaps, but a lot of that pressure to succeed seems to have come from Kathy herself more than from others. Her high school coach, Charlie Bishop, said of her, “If she didn’t come in first she had a tendency to think that she was letting a lot of other people down. Winning was not just for herself. I don’t think this was something on the spur of the moment that said, ‘Kathy, get off the track.’ I think it was something that had been building for a period of time.”

One of her NC State teammates, Wendy McLees, said in an interview with the Greensboro News & Record, “She’s a perfectionist. She’s always been a pusher. She’d even bring her notes to our workouts so she could study.”

There are dozens of theories about what led Kathy Ormsby to jump from that bridge. Perhaps in the near future she will be able to explain it herself. “We want her to know that she can do whatever she wants to,” said her father, “and we feel that she will be able to go ahead and succeed independently.”

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