How Hungarians Launched America's Greatest Track Era

Mihály Iglói's coaching led to brilliant U.S. racing.

By Rich Elliott
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Ed Widdis/AP Photo

On the night of Feb. 10, 1962, the world of distance running shifted on its axis.

The scene was the Los Angeles Sports Arena. American miler Jim Beatty was racing in the featured event of the night, the mile, along with two of his Los Angeles Track Club (LATC) teammates, László Tábori and Jim Grelle. The race was a carefully planned assault on the world indoor record of 4:01.4.

The veteran Tábori hit the first quarter perfectly. Beatty led the second quarter, coming through the half in 1:59.6. Grelle muscled the third quarter, and then with a quarter to go, Beatty floored it. The fans in the packed arena leapt to their feet and roared. A tidal wave of sound brought Beatty home in a record 3:58.9, the first indoor sub-4:00 mile.

More from Runner's World

This world record in the mile signaled the first big success of the Los Angeles Track Club, a gang that would usher in the glory days of American distance running. Some of the LATC runners, and the runners they influenced, would set world records. Two would win Olympic gold medals. For a while, American distance runners would become, arguably, the best in the world. They would inspire generations of runners and coaches. And they would leave us with a persistent longing to return to the mountaintop.

The irony is that the breakthrough in American distance running in the 1960s may not have happened at all, if not for an unlikely series of events--a political uprising thousands of miles away, a critical decision by a brilliant Hungarian coach and his gifted protégé, and ultimately the formation of an ambitious new track club in America. It is a story best told by those alive today who were part of that running revolution: four former members of the LATC--Tábori, Beatty, Bob Schul and Joe Douglas--and one runner inspired by the club, Billy Mills.

When Hungary Ruled the World

"I don't need a strong man," Mihály Iglói *[pictured, right]* would say. "I need a fast man."

Tábori is quoting his old coach, the man who helped revolutionize interval training. At his current home in Southern California, the 82-year-old Tábori is reminiscing about the early 1950s and the miraculous rise of the Hungarian runners. "He was himself a runner," Tábori says. "He had a very strong mind."

In Hungary, Iglói had started out as a gymnast before finding his true prowess in distance running. He was a good runner, a 1936 Olympian, but he was an even better student. While studying physical education at the University of Budapest, he became fascinated by the training of a Polish champion whose workouts consisted of many repetitions of half-lap sprints. Iglói also followed the news of a German coach, Woldemar Gerschler, who was developing a system called interval training. Gerschler stunned the coaching ranks when one of his runners improved in just four years from 2:04 in the 800 meters to 1:46.6, a world record.

Gerschler saw that strengthening the heart was the key to a distance runner's improvement. He found that when a runner alternated sprints with jog intervals, this gave a powerful stimulus to the heart, and it was the *interval* that allowed this effect. By repeating short sprints, a runner could manage a high volume of training at race pace or faster. Gerschler theorized that interval training could also help a runner cope with oxygen debt.

Iglói experimented on himself, and he spent time in Finland, Sweden and Germany, studying how runners trained. Then World War II hit. Iglói managed to survive the war and the siege of

Budapest, only to be snatched off the street by the Russians as he walked to the drugstore. He spent five long years in Siberia.

When he was finally freed, Iglói restarted his life, became a university professor of history, and began coaching at the Hungarian Army sports club, where he had access to some of the best talents in the country.

It wasn't long before Iglói's runners saw their times dropping dramatically. In 1954, his team set a world record in the 4×1500m relay. Iglói was so confident of setting the record that he had commemorative cups engraved before the race, to the amusement of his runners.

Tábori remembers how, when they returned home from track meets, they were treated as national heroes. People stopped them in the street. Top officials held feasts for them. In András Kö's *László Tábori A Biography*, Tábori recalls, "We were poor kids who suddenly became famous. Eighty thousand people shouted out our names and gave us a standing ovation when we broke the world record. Could this be anything but pure joy?"

Iglói was crafting a unique brand of interval training. "You repeat shorter distances with higher speeds, but *how* you put it together, there is a secret," says Tábori, recalling Iglói's method. "It is very individual." Iglói broke the training into two speed sessions per day, 700 sessions per year, customizing every session. His lab was the track. He experimented with the length and speed of sprint repetitions. He grouped the reps into sets, and he tried different intervals. Some workouts stretched for hours.

Iglói was strong-willed. His experience had taught him stoicism. The training was fearsome. Tábori still calls his coach by the pet name the runners had for him--Naci Bacsi, or Uncle Nazi.

In 1955, Naci Bacsi was 47 years old, and he was at the top of his game. That year his runners had a season for the ages, setting eight world records in distance events and tying another. His star runners--Tábori, Sándor Iharos and István Rózsavölgyi--ranked 1-2-3 respectively in the world at 1500m. *Sports Illustrated* ran the headline "Hungary Becomes a World Power--in Track."

Going into the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, Iglói's runners seemed assured of winning medals. Then, four weeks before the start of the games, the Hungarian Revolution broke out.

Students and laborers rose up in rebellion against the hated Communist government. Skirmishes flared throughout Budapest. Anti-government rebels fought with kitchen knives and gasoline bombs. The secret police fired indiscriminately on crowds in the main square.

Amid the chaos of the uprising, athletic training was impossible. Rózsavölgyi was shot at while simply walking down a Budapest street. He and Tábori were thrown up against a wall by gun-wielding revolutionaries who believed the two were secret police. Their execution was averted when an onlooker recognized the two star runners.

Right before the Hungarian Olympic team flew to Australia, Soviet troops streamed into Hungary to crush the revolution. The rebels were no match for Soviet tanks. Thousands of Hungarians were killed or wounded.

In Melbourne, the Hungarian athletes resumed their workouts. They'd missed more than three weeks of training. They moved in a daze, stalked by anxiety, preoccupied by fears of what was happening back home.

"Mentally, you were not there," Tábori recalls. "What the hell am I doing this for?"

Iglói's runners couldn't live up to expectations. Tábori, his top placer, got caught up in a wild last quarter in the 1500m final, a kicker's race, and missed a medal by one step.

Tábori (686) on his way to sixth in the 5000m at the 1956 Olympics, before defecting to the U.S. rather than returning to his war-torn country.

As the Olympics ended, the Hungarian athletes faced the question of their lives: Should I go home? *Sports Illustrated* had orchestrated a plot to help athletes on the Hungarian team willing to defect. Tábori recalls the final critical days in Melbourne like it was yesterday.

He asked his coach, "What are you going to do?" Iglói, with his inimitable hardness, turned and walked away.

On the day of the closing ceremony, Tábori got a telegram from his sister. "If you can, stay for the time being," she wrote, "or act according to your discretion."

Tábori made a fateful decision--he would defect.

When he reached the airport for his flight to America, he was surprised to see his coach. "Naci Bacsi, what are you doing here?"

"We should stick together," Iglói said. He'd been to Siberia, and he'd had enough of the Soviets.

"Naci Bacsi," replied the protégé, "I'll do what you tell me for as long as I can run."

Rózsavölgyi, Tábori's friend and teammate, decided to go home to Hungary. He had a wife and child he could not jeopardize. The two teammates said little. "We didn't talk much about those kinds of things," recalls Tábori, "because it gets to you."

László Tábori crosses the line in the mile race in the International Invitation event at the British Games, at White City, London, May 28, 1955.

Men Without a Country

Sports Illustrated sponsored the Hungarian defectors for several months. Tábori and Iglói joined the U.S. indoor track circuit, meet promoters giving them a $3 per diem. A friendly coach at the University of North Carolina offered them a base for their training. It was there they first met a young runner by the name of Jim Beatty, in his final year of college, and they began a lifelong friendship.

In the summer of 1957, when *Sports Illustrated*'s sponsorship ended, Iglói and Tábori had to find a way to make a living in the U.S. The refugees moved to the San Francisco area. "The biggest problem was I couldn't even read English," Tábori remembers. "It was like someone dumped me in a big well."

Biographer Kö tells how the star runner worked as a janitor, swept floors, cleaned toilets. At times he'd get in his car at night and drive a triangle from San Jose to Oakland to San Francisco, and then back home again. "I was really down," says Tábori. "I didn't know what to do."

In this era, national teams sponsored nearly all of the international travel and competition for athletes. But Iglói and Tábori were not yet U.S. citizens. Tábori couldn't compete for Hungary or the U.S. Iglói couldn't be a national coach. They were men without a country.

Meanwhile, the state of distance running in their adopted country had been dismal for years. No American distance runner had come anywhere near medaling in the last Olympics, prompting *Sports Illustrated* reporter David Richardson to wonder whether "distance running simply no longer fits into the American way of life." The marquee distance runners in American meets were from New Zealand, Australia, Ireland, and yes, Hungary. Meet promoters mostly used Americans to fill out their fields or function as rabbits.

The Track Club

One of those Americans, Beatty had been a 4:06 miler at the University of North Carolina and an All-American. But since graduating, he'd stopped running and had gained weight. In 1959, at the U.S. vs. USSR track meet, Beatty watched a lackluster 1500m race that he felt he could have won. An idea began to grow. The Rome Olympics were a year away. Being a Catholic, wouldn't it be great to make the team and go to Rome? And he knew the coach who could get him there.

"I always knew I was better than my record at Chapel Hill," says Beatty, who still lives in North Carolina. "I was always knocking on the door."

So on a wing and a prayer, Beatty drove cross country to see Iglói. When he reached California, Beatty went straight to the track at San Jose State, where he found the coach.

"I walked up to Iglói," Beatty recalls, "and he said, 'Who is this fat man?'

"I said, 'Coach, you may not remember me; I'm Jimmy Beatty from the University of North Carolina. I'd like you to train me for the Olympic Games in Rome.'"

Thus began one of the most productive partnerships in track history.

In the months before Beatty arrived, Iglói and Tábori had found their bearings. Tábori was taking evening classes and had resumed training. Iglói had been hired by the Santa Clara Valley Youth Village, a sports club founded by Father Walter E. Schmidt for the express purpose, as he stated it, "to stimulate a revival interest in middle-distance running, which will enable the United States to dominate these events, for the first time, in the next Olympics." Good runners began showing up on Iglói's doorstep, including Max Truex, a former Olympian at 10,000m. Beatty was soon training harder than he'd ever thought possible. Tábori took him under his wing. "Trust the old man," the Hungarian remembers telling Beatty. "Just stick on me. Come, I show you." In return, Beatty helped the Hungarians with their English.

Within a few months Beatty was winning races and surprising everyone on the indoor track circuit. "It was astounding," recalls Beatty. "It became a revelation to me. [Iglói was] the only man who had training down to an equation. He could project the training and then tell you what time you would run at [a particular] date in the future. I don't know how he knew it."

In June, with Tábori as pacer, Beatty set back-to-back American records in the mile and the 5,000m. Beatty then won the trials 5,000 and fulfilled his dream of going to the Eternal City.

In Rome, slowed by a foot injury, Beatty failed to make the finals. "Watching other runners get medals, my disappointment turned to anger," remembers Beatty. "I made a pledge to myself--I'm going to come back next year, and I'm going to show them what an American runner can do."

Meanwhile, Tábori, the man without a country, was having one of his finest seasons. On the European track circuit he ran 11 races and won every one of them. Supporters pushed to get him accepted into the Olympics. But the International Olympic Committee had no structure for allowing stateless athletes to compete, as they do now. So Tábori sat in the stands in Rome, where he watched his old friend Rózsavölgyi win an Olympic medal in the 1500m.

For Iglói's budding track club, the biggest surprise was Truex, who placed a gutsy sixth in the 10,000m, an event long dominated by Europeans. "Athletes from all countries came over to say a word," Truex told *Track & Field News*. " It was amazing and thrilling. Apparently they never thought an American would run that fast."

Finely Tuned Machine

The next year, Iglói and his disciples moved to Southern California where he became coach of the Los Angeles Track Club. Iglói's program, fully reconstituted now on American soil, was hitting on all cylinders.

[Tábori, Iglói and Beatty discuss tactics in photo to right. Photo courtesy of László Tábori.]

"We trained at Dorsey High School in LA on Rodeo Road," Beatty recalls. But it wasn't like they were local heroes.

Every one of the LATC runners recalls the fence they had to climb to get onto the track. "I was ranked No. 1 in the world," says Beatty, "and here I was climbing a 6-foot chain link fence in the morning to work out."

Iglói, in suit and tie, would already be inside waiting.

Morning workouts typically lasted an hour. Evening workouts lasted two hours or more. In between, the runners were off to their full-time jobs.

What were the workouts like? Iglói the autocrat directed every step of the practice. Thirty runners all doing something different. He kept it all in his head. The runners never knew what was coming next. Iglói wanted to see how each runner reacted to each set of work.

What was the runner's breathing like? The sound of his foot strike?

The runners did set upon set of repeats at varying distances, varying speeds. Jan Mulak, a Polish coach, described the workouts as "baroque."

"It was a combination of the short interval speed workouts and the volume that served the purpose of two things . . . to increase your speed and stamina at the same time," Beatty explains.

There were no typical workouts, because Iglói made adaptations for every runner. Beatty offers this session as an example, however:

- One-mile jog warm-up, then 15 minutes of stretching
- 20 × 150m at medium speed, with a 50m rest interval
- 2 × 800m at an easy jog
- 10 × 300m at varying speeds, with a 100m rest interval
- 2 × 800m jog interval
- 10 × 100m all-out on a football field, with the U-turn as rest interval

Most work was absent the stopwatch. The runners were told to run by feel. Special terminology described each tempo: "fresh" meant relaxed speed; "good" meant 60 percent race tempo; "fast good" was 75 percent; "hard" was 90 percent; "very hard," 95 percent.

Iglói harped on things in practice until the runners could hear him in their sleep. "Please, jogging!" (Iglói insisted the runners jog their recovery intervals.) "Every day hard training make." "Must have big goals." "Must be patient."

When English failed, he shouted at his runners in Hungarian.

A total of 12 to 18 miles for the day. The runners returned home to eat and collapse in bed and get up early the next day to do it all over again. Thirteen sessions per week, with one "play run" on Sundays.

"You either had faith in him or didn't have faith in him," Beatty recalls. "And you also had to turn yourself over to him. You couldn't question anything. He would often say, 'I know everything,' and the fact of the matter was, he did. Imagine being a runner and never having to worry about what the workout was going to be. That takes a burden off you. What am I going to do today? You don't have to worry what you're going to do today. Iglói's got it plotted out already."

Iglói believed, and he taught his runners to believe. According to Beatty, Iglói preached, "If you listen to me, and you believe in me, I'll get you where you want to go and also where you think you can't go."

Word spread about Iglói and his group. Some of the top runners in the country began to join the club. One was Bob Seaman. He'd been a fine runner, going back to 1956 when he ran the second-fastest mile by an American (4:01.4). But he felt he had more to achieve.

Grelle was the most accomplished of the new members. He'd come from the storied University of Oregon distance program, where he'd been an NCAA mile champ. He'd gone on to finish eighth in the Rome 1500m final. According to author and fellow Oregon runner Kenny Moore, Coach Iglói welcomed Grelle with 35 quarters in his first workout.

Bob Schul came to Iglói's group on the orders of Truex, his commanding officer at Oxnard Air Force Base. Schul had been a good college runner before joining the military, where he was allowed to resume his training.

Schul remembers his initial two-week stint with Iglói's group. "It was the hardest work I've done in my life," says Schul, now living in Ohio. "Those two weeks with Tábori literally killed me. [But] I thought to myself, 'I've got to get back with this man because if there's anybody who can bring me to my best conditioning, it's him.'"

With the new additions to the club, the LATC had become the epicenter of the country's distance revival.

Breakout

By 1962, the groundwork had been laid for a magical season. A critical mass of well-trained, talented runners had formed, and a chain reaction began.

Beatty's indoor world record in the mile in February was merely the first shot. Beatty's 3:58.9 was one-tenth of a second off his coach's prediction.

Beatty proceeded to have one of the greatest years in American distance running, setting the 2-mile world record and every American record from the 1500m to the 5,000m.

This got the media's attention. ABC's "Wide World of Sports" began to showcase track meets to a growing audience. Few events that year captured the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat like the U.S. vs. USSR meet. More than 153,000 fans were treated to world records and stirring

finishes, including Beatty outkicking the Soviets in the 1500m. A sportswriter from the *San Francisco Examiner* called it "the greatest track meet of all time."

Later in the summer, Iglói brought his crew to Europe, where they scorched the track. Beatty won all his races, Grelle and Seaman notched personal records in the mile (3:56.7 and 3:58), and Truex set an American record in the 5,000m (13:49.6) before Beatty reclaimed it.

Grelle becomes the fourth American to break the 4-minute mile on April 28, 1962, at Mt. SAC relays.

Track observers were stunned by the sprinting ability of Iglói's runners. In training, the coach was experimenting with something he called "swing tempo," where his runners would shift to a faster speed. "With Iglói," Schul remembers, "we changed tempos constantly. A very good part of the success was teaching the body to switch gears."

Iglói was understandably proud of his group, even a bit cocky. "Everybody said the American runner is lazy, don't work," Iglói told *Sports Illustrated*. "Now the American distance runner is the best in the world."

During this breakout season, one runner from Iglói's club struggled. Ever the team player, Tábori helped pace Beatty in a few races, but his motivation waned. He fought with Iglói over whether to take money from meet promoters. "No," Iglói would say, "we are not professionals."

"I'm working all day long," Tábori recalls telling his coach. "I can't do it anymore. I don't have money for even a hamburger."

Just as American distance running was taking off, Tábori retired.

Far and Wide

Iglói was secretive about his methods, but aspects of his program filtered out and began to have an influence. "Other athletes had to do something to stay with us," Schul recalls. "At that time we were winning most everything."

"When they started finding out what Iglói was doing with our guys," Beatty says, "it started [to be] communicated outwardly that Americans can also be world-class, that Americans can also break world records."

Another LATC runner, Joe Douglas, recalls, "A lot of athletes started doing sets of 200s with a 100-meter jog, which they hadn't been doing before. I saw coaches sit in the stands and watch us train." Learning at Iglói's side, Douglas acquired a deep knowledge of his methods. Later, as head of the Santa Monica Track Club, Douglas would develop a who's who of great runners.

A young college runner by the name of Billy Mills was so taken by Beatty's success that one summer he hitchhiked from Kansas to San Francisco to try to find the coach. "I got caught up in the magic of Iglói," recalls Mills. "I had no [phone] number; I didn't know any of the runners out there." Mills spent a week searching for Iglói without success before making his way back home. But Iglói remained in his thoughts, and after college, when Mills began training himself, speed work became the main focus of his workouts. "Iglói definitely convinced me that I had to get some speed," Mills says, "but it was Iglói's athletes who were doing the convincing."

At the University of Oregon, coach Bill Bowerman began to experiment with Iglói-style workouts, after talking with former protégé Grelle. In *Bowerman and the Men of Oregon*, Moore describes how the coach used one Oregon runner, Vic Reeve, as a guinea pig, giving him "a hundred 220s at moderate pace in the morning and then fifty 440s in the afternoon."

Some of Iglói's early disciples were now getting into coaching themselves, and soon American kids were tackling Iglói-style workouts. This reporter's high school coach, Dick McCallister, was one such disciple. By his third year of coaching (1965), he had turned Proviso West High School (Hillside, Ill.) into a running powerhouse, breaking every high school distance relay record.

America suddenly became mile crazy. In 1962, six of the top 10 milers in the world were Americans. The following year, five ranked in the top 10. This success rate has never been matched by U.S. distance runners.

The media hyped each "new mile sensation." A 17-year-old from Kansas, Jim Ryun, became the first high schooler to break the 4-minute mile. Packs of runners were blowing through the 4-minute "barrier," an unprecedented eight in one race in June 1964. *Sports Illustrated* described the track scene as "strong milers, fast milers, and most surprisingly, young, young, young milers."

Runners in longer distance events were also coming on. Schul ran scintillating 2- and 3-mile times in 1963 before returning to Ohio to finish college. He'd given a glimpse of things to come.

"I owe Iglói a lot," Schul says. "He taught me how to train. He taught me the mental aspect of how to force your body when it had to be forced." In the months leading to the '64 Olympics, using Iglói's workouts as a template, he prepared single-mindedly for the race of his life.

[Photo, right: Schul, an Iglói disciple, wins gold in the 5,000m during the 1964 Olympics.]

In May 1963, Beatty soundly beat New Zealand's Murray Halberg, the Rome Olympic champ, in a 5,000m. Then he went head-to-head against Halberg's teammate, mile world record-holder Peter Snell, in two titanic races. In the first race, LATC runners tried to take Snell out fast to blunt his scathing kick, but they fell short, and Snell dominated. In the second race, Beatty slashed his own American record to 3:55.5, but lost to Snell by half a second. Years later, Beatty still regrets the lost opportunity. "It literally broke my heart."

Ultimately, Beatty would fall victim to a fluke accident. While taking out the garbage in the dark, he gashed his foot open on a rusty piece of metal. It took months for him to recover, and the lost conditioning kept him off the next Olympic team.

The heyday of Iglói's LATC was passing. With Beatty and Tábori, the heart and soul of the club, both gone, the team seemed to lose some fire. But they'd set a tidal wave in motion that led directly to the heroics at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, where American distance runners had their finest hour.

In Tokyo, Mills scored one of the great upset victories in Olympic history when, with his newfound sprint speed, he outkicked all the favorites in the 10,000m. And in the 5,000m final, Americans would win a historic gold and bronze, Schul and Bill Dellinger, an Iglói man and a Bowerman man.

The Tide Ebbs

By the late 1960s, Iglói's methods were in decline, losing popularity to Arthur Lydiard's system, which focused on building an endurance base through marathon training. Perhaps this was inevitable. Lydiard shared his ideas relentlessly, while Iglói had no temperament for proselytizing. Lydiard was as outgoing as Iglói was secretive.

Iglói's critics claimed his system led to a high injury rate and mental staleness. This is hard to dispute--so much sprinting on the track in spikes has to increase risks. But few of Iglói's runners agree with this negative rap. They point out that runners from all programs got injuries.

"He pushed us hard," Schul concedes. "Maybe I was fortunate I pushed it to the right level."

One drawback of the Iglói system was that it wasn't easy to replicate. Some elements got lost in the hands of lesser coaches--the modulation of tempos, the focus on shifting gears, the mid-workout adaptations, the setting up of paced races.

According to Steve Magness in The Science of Running blog, the Iglói system became misunderstood "because it was portrayed as the complete opposite of the Lydiard approach. The Iglói method got seen as a high-intensity 'anaerobic' training system." What got lost is that "Iglói manipulated the intervals to create both aerobic and anaerobic adaptations," Magness concludes.

Iglói left the U.S. in 1970 to take a position as a national coach in Greece. The LATC disbanded. Over the years, Iglói would coach Greek athletes to 157 national records. He died in 1998 in Budapest. He was 89.

In 1972, Frank Shorter rode the rise of marathon training to Olympic gold. In the excitement over our marathon success, long slow distance became the rage, sprint work was de-emphasized, and American top-level distance running struggled for years.

Epilogue: Continuing Legacy

Not long after Tábori retired from racing, he was asked if he'd coach the runners at San Fernando Valley Junior College. He stayed for 25 years. He ran the Iglói system because that's what he knew, and like his mentor, Tábori had success. "My J.C. guys won three straight state championships," says Tábori, "and every one of them got a full scholarship." He also coached some of America's first great female marathoners, including Jacqueline Hansen and Miki Gorman.

In recent years, Tábori has worked with the distance runners at the University of Southern California. There, too, he developed some fine runners. One of them was Duane Solomon. "I [was] teaching him to kick, kick, kick," says Tábori. It was a lesson that Solomon took to heart. Two years after graduating, Solomon ran 1:42.82 in the London Olympics 800m final, the second-fastest American time ever. "That fantastic finish in the Olympic Games!" says Tábori proudly.

One more beneficiary of the Hungarian connection.

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