

Frank Balaguer - 1985



Before we get into the exploits of Francisco Balaguer Jr. at Coggshall Park or on the cinders of Crocker Field or the indoor tracks of the 1980's we would like to relate three or four stories which have occurred over a twenty five year period which explains the character of this Hall of Fame runner.

Coach Ed Gastonguay loves to tell the story of his first encounter with a very young Frank Balaguer which occurred in the late 1970's. Rich Houston, the very fine cross-country coach at St. John's always had a full slate of cross-country runners who resigned terror upon most of Central Massachusetts' opponents. Most cross-country squads were lucky to have a dozen competitive runners on their squads; St. John's might have had thirty or forty. So Houston always likes to run a junior varsity race to give his younger and less experienced harriers a chance to strut their stuff. Houston would give fellow coaches like Ed Gastonguay a telephone call to set up a J.V. race. But good guy Ed would agree with Houston's request, but he would then have to go to B.F. Brown and Memorial Junior High Schools to get enough runners

for this junior varsity race. So in 1979 or 1980 Ed stood on a slight incline about a hundred yards from the finish line as the J.V. race came to a conclusion. As expected the young St. John's runners approached the finish line in a cluster of three or four, but lo and behold, just behind the leader came a little guy wearing a green shirt and a smile about a mile wide, and weighing less than 110 pounds, pounding toward the finish line. A shocked Coach Gastonguay said, "Who the heck is that kid?" Thus was Ed Gastonguay introduced to one of his all time cross-country runners, Francisco Balaguer, Jr. From the fall of 1982 through 1985, Frankie would not trail in many other cross-country races as he raced toward a FHS Hall of Fame induction.

By the fall of Frank's senior year at FHS in 1984 every coach in Central Massachusetts knew Frank Balaguer's name. He was the best runner in the region, and certainly one of the very best in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Frankie had established course records at Wachusett Regional, St. John's and Leominster as he annihilated the competition. Just before the Lunenburg Invitational in mid- October Coach Gastonguay trying to protect his super star for the Districts and States suggested that Frankie take it easy. Running at a leisurely pace for Frank Balaguer, the Red Raider cruised to an easy victory. Only later was it realized that his time was the second fastest ever run in Lunenburg. Just think if Frankie had been trying!

But as Frank's senior season rushed toward its conclusion, there was still one record which had eluded Frank's grasps, the Coggshall course record held by Eric Hanson, an exchange student from Norway who had raced for FHS in the mid-1970's. Coach Gastonguay hatched a plan and presented it to Dick Mulligan, Lunenburg's cross-country coach and A.D. who gave his hearty okay. It was decided that Frank would begin his run one minute behind the rest of the runners from FHS and LHS to see if he could catch the competition and establish a new record for the Coggshall site. Maybe the MIAA would not have approved this idea, but the two A.D.'s Mulligan and Doug Grutchfield said, "Let's go for it."

On a beautiful October afternoon excited spectators and competitors stood at the starting line awaiting the race. The starting pistol sounded and the two squads sped down the course while Frank stood quietly at the starting line waiting for his start. Sixty seconds later a second shot was fired and a Red and Gray clad blur raced off the starting line heading toward the granite stone house and the rest of the runners. The runners emerged from the woods for the first time and headed for the finish line for the first time and then Frank appeared from the woods and he was flying. Up the Coggshall hills went the pack as Frank

came on like a wild stallion. For five or six minutes everything was quiet since the runners could not be seen, but then there was wild cheering from the spectators as the leader of the race re-entered the Mirror Lake area. The runner was wearing a red and gray uniform and his name was Frank Balaguer. As he raced along the pond's edge the Raider faithful roared their approval. You had to be there to believe Frank's record-setting effort in the fall of 1984.

For the fall of 1981 Frank Balaguer, a member of the Class of 1985, entered FHS running, and he never really stopped for the next four years. The youngster immediately became a large factor on the Red and Gray cross-country squad which was becoming a major force in the CMC by the fall of 1981. Although Frank stood nearly half a foot shorter than most of his teammates, Coach Gastonguay could count on his budding superstar to finish in the top ten of any event against the very best in Central Mass. During the winter and spring months of his freshman track seasons Frank was rapidly becoming one of the better long distance runners in the mile and two mile and Frank would also begin to show his natural speed in the 4x400 relay event running with guys Marcello Filice and Rich Carabba. But it was in Frank's sophomore and junior years that he burst into the scene as a local track superstar. Fitchburg High had a wonderful cross-country squad which went undefeated in all its dual meets and was the Central Massachusetts Conference Champion before finishing second in the Districts in November in Gardner. There is a great picture of the squad coming to the finish line together in the 1983 Boulder and there is a young Frank Balaguer holding his finger high signifying the squad's number one position. During that fall season Frank finished first in the Knights of Columbus race, fourth in the Wachusett Invitational and eleventh in the Districts and he was only a tenth grader. He was also the fastest sophomore to ever race on the Coggs Hall course.

Frank's forte during his FHS years may very well have been his efforts on the hills of Worcester County during the autumn months, but he was no slouch when it came to indoor and outdoor track. As a sophomore Frank broke the school record by ten seconds when he finished 12th in the State Championship with an outstanding time of 9:38.4 at Boston College's Alumni Field. Earlier in that same season Frank had captured the District Championship in the two mile and stamped himself as a runner to watch. District Championships are seldom captured by sophomores!

Typical of Frank's efforts was his track competition against an excellent Keene, New Hampshire squad which knocked off the Red and Gray 77-68 in an outstanding track meet. Frank captured the mile in a time of 4:49.9, the two mile in 10:13 and was a member of the victorious 4x400 relay squad. That's the type of performance which Hall of Fames can be expected to give. During Frankie Balaguer's four year running career he was an outstanding All Star runner in track and field, but it was on the hilly cross-country course of Central Massachusetts that his running skills became legendary to the Red and Gray fans.

The fall of 1984 was really special for Frank. He was a sight to behold as course records fell before his pounding feet, and he ran with such joy. Maybe it was that Latin flavor which he inherited from his native Uruguay, that so endeared Frankie to the spectators. As November of this senior year approached, one title had eluded Frankie's grasp, the District title on the hills of Gardner. Fitchburg High students, teachers and teammates took the ride west on Route 2 to watch their champion take on the best that Central Massachusetts had in 1984. As the races piled up during the long cross-country season, Frank had begun to wear down a little and he had a nagging cold as the competitors lined up at the starting line. The starting gun was fired and Frank leaped to the front as the huge field raced down Gardner's long straight away. All were confident as Frank headed into the hills and that feeling was strengthened as he emerged with a solid lead. Frank headed for the long final stretch at Gardner with a comfortable lead, but then he seemed to hit a solid brick wall. Frank seemed to wobble and all of the FHS fans gasped. Would he make it to the finish line? His competitors gained heart as Frank struggled with less than 200 yard to go in the race. It did not look good! But somewhere Frank Balaguer summoned the courage to complete his quest. Literally staggering, he reached the finish line collapsing as he crossed the line. He had shown the courage and heart of a lion, and had concluded his high school career as a District Champion. That's what Hall of Fames do! Congratulations Frank Balaguer!