

# Squires, Boston and the Zoopy Zoopy

## Bill Squires may be the best marathon coach in U.S. history

By Scott Douglas

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**Bill Rodgers' win at the 1979 Boston Marathon wasn't surprising.** He was the defending champion and had already twice been ranked the top marathoner in the world. Soon after Rodgers finished, however, things got stranger. Third place, in 2:12, went to Bob Hodge, who had entered the race with a 2:28 PR. Less than 2 minutes behind Hodge, Randy Thomas placed eighth, followed closely in 10th place by a full-time mailman named Dick Mahoney. Like Hodge, Mahoney wore a white and red singlet reading "Greater Boston Track Club." Rodgers and Thomas were also Greater Boston members. In a race in which Rodgers set a new course and American record, his club of the last several years had placed four runners in the top 10. If you scored the race as a team event, Greater Boston, a seat-of-the-pants club with a minimal budget, would have beaten all other countries, including the rest of the Americans.



The club's coach, Bill Squires, was nowhere to be seen in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 race. The year before, as Rodgers was winning his second Boston, his coach was in the vicinity of Heartbreak Hill, en route to a 2:48 finish. Yet knowledgeable running fans knew what a large role in his runners' successes Squires had played.

That's what Squires did, after all--take any and all comers and make them better runners. Some he made world-beaters. With Squires' guidance, Rodgers went from being a regionally good road racer in 1973 to a 2:19 marathoner in 1974 to a 2:09 runner the next year. Jacqueline Gareau, the 1980 Boston champ, was coached by Squires. Thomas, "a basketball player with a bad back," according to Squires, ran 2:11 in 1978. During the first running boom, the runners who sought Squires now read like the pantheon of American glory days: Alberto Salazar trained with Greater Boston while in high school. Under Squires' care, Dick Beardsley took a now-mature Salazar to the line at Boston in 1982. The next year, Squires guided Greg Meyer to victory in Boston, a win that has since made Meyer known almost solely as the last American man to win Boston. (It feels like part of his name now.) Runners who weren't official members of Greater Boston--Olympic marathoner Pete Pfitzinger, Olympic 10K runner Bruce Bickford, 1976 Boston winner Jack Fultz--maintained varying degrees of contact with Squires and his runners. During that first great wave of big-city marathoning and mushrooming road racing and American prowess, Squires was at the center of it all, orchestrating group track workouts, long runs over the Newton Hills and team trips around the country and world. No coach has approached the Squires record at Boston. Transport his runners to the present, and they would be competitive.

In recent years, a series of top Americans has tried to liberate Meyer from his unwanted epithet. Yet, according to Squires, neither the runners nor their coaches have consulted the man whom Rodgers calls the best marathon coach in U.S. history. Squires mostly sits at home in his cluttered rambler in the working-class Boston suburb of Melrose. The living room overflows with tchotchkes and athletic memorabilia. In mid-December, the clocks were still on Daylight Savings Time. The kitchen houses a stack of empty ice cream containers. A 15-year-old cat is his most frequent companion. And the American drought at Boston continues.

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**Everybody has a Bill Squires story.** Many involve workouts written on Eliot Lounge cocktail napkins. In Dick Beardsley's, Squires lets Beardsley sleep in his motel bed the night before a race, and when Beardsley goes to the bathroom at 4:00 a.m., he sees Squires sleeping in the tub, covered by a towel. Greg Meyer tells how his then-wife said to another runner, "I'm starting to worry about Greg. He understands what Squires is saying."

The reputation for inscrutability is deserved. Ask Squires when he ran his first marathon, and you'll hear about "donuts" (self-important, ignorant coaches) and "guppies" (locally good racers toyed with by roadwhoring national-class runners). You'll hear that, 50 years ago, basketball was "hoey doey" (a minor sport). You'll hear about "Imbeciles Anonymous" (the first high school team he coached) and the "Lollipop 10K" (generic inconsequential road races). Bill Rodgers will be described as "the laziest man I ever met." There will even be a cryptic reference to downed U.S. spy plane pilot Gary Powers. But it won't be until 27 minutes after your question that you'll first hear the word "marathon." It will take another nine minutes to be sure that the preceding two-thirds of an

hour has been the backstory to Squires running the 1961 Boston Marathon. And then you'll have to go home and look up that he was 20th in 2:47.

These aren't just the tangents of a 78-year-old enjoying the chance to reminisce. I spoke with several runners Squires coached three decades ago, and all paused or chuckled when I asked if they always understood what he wanted them to do. Salazar says, "He has his own language. When I started running with the group, the other guys would translate for me." Zika Rea, the cofounder of ZAP Fitness whom Squires coached to a 2:41 marathon PR, says she often got off the phone with him and didn't know what her next hard workout was supposed to be. After one call, she ran twelve 1200m repeats at 5K race pace. Meyer says, "Squires communicated a lot with his hand gestures. For the most part I knew where he was going with it."

Here's Squires' description of how his long runs differ from others': "I'll give you an 18-mile run. I'll give you the hardest 18 miles that you'd ever want to do. What you'll have is eight one-mile rest stops, and then when you hit the hills, boom, boom, boom!" (Here Squires slaps his right hand on his left palm, then thrusts his right hand forward like a plane taking off, and whistles.) "And then you'll respect the marathon." When I asked about some of his key principles, Squires told me, "Running is a simple sport. You don't need all the zoopy zoopy."

Adding to the Squires mystique is the quality of athletes he worked with. Rodgers, Beardsley, Hodge, Thomas ... none were high school or college standouts the way that, say, Ryan Hall and Dathan Ritzenhein were. About the teen Salazar, Squires says, "He looked like a broken down old man. If he hadn't come to me before college, he would have never gotten into Oregon. He was a very bright kid--I thought he was going to go to med school." (Think how different American running would be if that had happened.) "I would have chosen not one of my athletes if I was recruiting for a Division I school," Squires says. "Zip! None! Even Meyer, he had everything going for him, but he didn't believe in himself."

So when Rodgers became the genial face of the first running boom and started documenting his training for magazines, Squires bristled.

"I had to pull him aside and give him the facts of life," Squires says. "I said, 'Look pal, we're just little nerds who are kicking the world around. None of you people would I pick to be outstanding. But the program works. If you want to radio it out to the world they're going to kick your can, because they're better than you, ya hear me? You're only good with the group I trained. So just shut your mouth!'"

Squires is now more forthcoming. In 2005 he and Boston University coach Bruce Lehane self-published a book, *Speed with Endurance*, consisting almost entirely of schedules. The book's 1,723 detailed workouts reveal little that would have caused Rodgers' rivals to upend their training.

"The workouts were really nothing special," Hodge says. "We'd do things like mile repeats in 4:50 with a brisk 400 jog between, maybe 6:00 pace." Moderation was key. "If anybody raced a workout Squires immediately jumped on them," Hodge says.

"It's things you can handle," Squires says. "A workout is an effort where you can control your speed. That means you can control your form. They always have more in their gun when they leave. I'm not into these practice runners, the Cinderellas, who want a Purple Heart for their workout. I always say, 'Let's see what we do on Saturday [in the race].'"

Before his first Boston victory in 1975, Rodgers experimented with a 200-mile week. Before winning in 1978, he doubted his fitness, because he had been averaging under 130 miles a week. Yet Squires says he wasn't the impetus for this approach.

"My athletes, I never pushed them on distance," he says. "If they started going on the loopy stuff, 125, 160 miles a week, I said, 'Go with Rodgers. He has to do that.' He must love seeing the birds and squirrels and all that crap." When he hears runners say how they're going to become world-class marathoners by holding 150-mile weeks for months on end, Squires thinks, "You're wasting shoe leather. It's a game of speed. Now if you want to do 50-milers and 100-milers, which about nobody does, and get your little medal you bought, fine. But when the gun goes off in the marathon, it's the fastest they give the awards to, not who can run all day."

I asked Squires three times if Rodgers could have been as successful running 90 miles a week. Three times he answered, "Oh yeah," but then drifted away without edifying me. Then again, Hodge, who eventually ran 2:10:59, didn't consistently run the mileage Rodgers did. Nor did Beardsley or Meyer.

If there was a Squires specialty, it's what he calls "pickups"--surges of anywhere from 1 minute to 5 miles, done especially during long runs (and on the Newton Hills when preparing for Boston). Rea says that Squires wanted her to incorporate pick-ups into every run, even on recovery days. Says Beardsley, "On my Sunday runs, in those 22 or 24 miles, I'd do everything I'd done in the previous six days on that one run--surges, hill repeats, tempos. I'd get done that and if I'd nailed it, that gave me so much confidence and strength."

Beardsley was an anomaly among Squires' most successful runners in that he mostly trained alone. Another hallmark of the Squires model was group training. Squires took what was a necessity when coaching large high school and college teams and made it integral to his post-collegiate program. Squires divided Greater Boston runners--which included all levels of runners--into three



groups. Runners of Rodgers' ilk were in Group 1. Regional-class runners formed Group 2; after enough time with Squires, some of them made the jump to Group 1. Everyone else was in Group 3. ("In my mind, I had a 3-plus, for the real slow ones," Squires says, "but I didn't tell them.")

These weren't groups of a few top runners training together. "Group 1 was 12 to 14 guys," Squires says. "All were, at the lowest, second or third in national championships. In Group 2, everyone won New England titles."

Meyer says, "Training the way we did, it gave us a level of confidence. You're running with guys like Billy [Rodgers] who are the best in the world." Rodgers adds, "Maybe it's like what the Kenyans have now with their groups, where you push each other. We all helped each other, but there was also some competition going on. Greg [Meyer] is thinking, 'I beat Billy on those hill repeats. I think I'll try the marathon.'"

Among current American groups, the Hansons program would seem the closest to the Greater Boston model. Squires isn't a fan. "They would have been my Group 2," he says. "Dickie Mahoney ran faster than them!" More broadly, he thinks top Americans are too coddled, with "therapists and massage people and nutritionists, even for nobodies. Jesus cripes! Without hunger, you're nowhere."

"One thing I took away from Squires," says Meyer, "is that there's a lot of different ways to get fit. I don't remember Squires ever talking about times in the marathon. He only talked about strategy and beating people. If you get people to believe and if they're happy, they tend to do well."



"I think the most important thing was his enthusiasm and passion," Rodgers says. "Billy [Squires] got you fired up." Squires once called Beardsley at 9:30 on a Tuesday night. "I got so fired up I wanted to go out for a 20-miler right then," Beardsley says. "I told him, 'Coach, from now on you can't call me after 8:00. I get too excited.'"

"I totally believed everything he told me," Beardsley says. "If he had told me to go sit in a garbage can, I'd have done it."

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**Nearing the end of his eighth decade, Squires is slightly stooped.** He had a small stroke in 2009 and a pacemaker inserted last December. He no longer drives. "My eyes are gone," Squires says. "One night, oh geez, bad storm. I said to the good Lord, 'If you get me home, with the rain and these ziggy roads up here that I run, I'll give up my license.'"

Despite the declines, Squires still stands over 6 feet tall. A lifelong runner's calves are evident when he props up his legs. He runs five or six days a week. "I have to," he says. "Without running I'd be long gone."

Squires was born in South Boston with a defective heart--one of the four valves is so narrow as to be nonfunctional. His mother moved them to Arlington when he was 12 to be closer to the doctor who Squires says saved his life. (The South Boston accent remains, and becomes more pronounced the more animated he becomes.) Instead of exerting himself as little as possible, as had been the advice, Squires was told to exercise, two to three hours a day. He ran, played football and basketball and other sports. In high school he was urged to focus on running, his best sport, so that he could earn a college scholarship.

At Notre Dame, he was a track star. As a sophomore in 1954, he narrowly lost the NCAA mile championship to Salazar's future college coach, Bill Dellinger. He made All-American three times. With bests of 21.7 for 220 yards and 47.6 for the quarter, Squires was versatile, and his coach had him run multiple races most weekends. Squires sensed this wasn't the way to maximize his potential. Out of college, he raced overseas while in the Army in the mid-to late 1950s. Squires says he was a "baby spy" and that part of his front was being in a unit known for its runners. At a time when a sub-4:00 mile was world-class, Squires ran 4:04.7.

Once out of the Army, Squires settled home in Massachusetts while waiting to hear about a sales job for Wilson Sporting Goods in California. He knew because of his heart he should keep running, and because, in his words, "running is the most freakin' boring

sport," he continued to compete. In his telling, one day Squires was running at Wakefield High School, north of Boston, when some of the school's runners pleaded with him to become their coach.

In his first year coaching cross country, Squires' team won the state title. "You have to understand," he says, "these were the world's worst kids. They were useless! But American coaches were idiots. They knew nothing. I got the crappums of all time, and if I can win states with these kids ... " He knew how to coach, he says, from training himself after college. "I was the experiment with everything," he says. "I knew I wasn't really a distance runner." After more state championships, Squires began coaching at Boston State College, where in 18 years he produced 16 All-Americans. In 1973, when Greater Boston was formed, Squires added post-collegiate runners to his repertoire.

Squires is an autodidact who prides himself on always being the sharpest guy in the room. He once rolled a tennis ball over part of the Boston Marathon course to demonstrate to his runners the best way to run that hill. About Arthur Lydiard, he says, "Arthur learned more from me than I did from him." Of Bill Bowerman, coach of Steve Prefontaine, he says, "Bowerman didn't know horsecrap."

His stories owe something to George Carlin routines in their depiction of mentally outmatched people; when imitating the others, Squires' voice becomes slightly feminine, a little slow, and evokes someone standing with their eyes and mouth a little too open.

For example, he says, "I have a thing with exercise physiologists. They only work with established runners. They can't coach a cat to meow. To be a marathon coach, you better run the marathon. You don't have to be a speed demon but you have to do it. Then your body can get the feel. I'd say, 'You ever run a marathon?' [He switches to his imitation voice.] 'No, no, Coach. I was a swimmer.' [Back to Squires.] Wonderful. If we have a flood the kid is sure to win."

He clearly enjoys the thought of exploiting others' psychology to get his way. Often the ruses seem overly clever. While on road trips with Greater Boston, Squires thought his runners slept better with the air conditioning running. Instead of simply saying, "I'm the coach, here's what I think," Squires devised this scheme: As the group was leaving the motel for dinner, he would say, "Hold on fellas, I forgot something," and then go back to the room and turn on the air conditioning.

To find out whether Rodgers was going against his wishes and indulging in frequent races for money, Squires would pull phone pranks on his star runner, pretending to be a race director offering a hefty appearance fee. When Rodgers would excitedly agree to run the race, Squires would revert to his normal voice and call him out.

At track workouts, when he wanted to make sure his runners weren't working too hard, he would pretend he had missed the time for a repeat. "They'd go, 'Aw geez, Coach! Hey Dickie, you get it? Yeah, yeah, I got it,'" Squires says. "It's a ploy. If they can respond like that, I know they still have life in them." In this case, not only does the machination seem unnecessary, but some former runners doubt it's what was happening. Meyer, laughing, says, "I think he made this up later in life. He often had no idea what we were doing. Half the time we'd look up at the end of a repeat and he'd be sitting in the stands reading the Boston Herald sports section."

Squires is the rare person who is meaner in his stories than he's portrayed by others. That trait especially comes out when he talks about Rodgers. "When Bill first came to me," Squires says, "I told him, 'You need my coaching and you need a group to teach you how to run, unless you want to go off with the gun and do your little bullshit thing that'll get you in the Boston Marathon fifth at best. You need to be with my group on Tuesdays, because that's a speed thing, and that's what you don't have, pal.'" Squires also relates outing Rodgers in front of the group for would-be secret racing. "I'd say, 'Hey guys, we got a champion we didn't know about. Went down to Rhode Island. Made a few bucks, beat the guppies.' And then I'd say, 'You ever freakin' do it again, take a hike, pal!'"

"I'm a bitch, you know."

But from Rodgers you'll hear only stories of fun and admiration and how Squires ran out on the course to hand him water bottles at Boston in 1980, when Rodgers had received death threats for denouncing the Olympic boycott. Salazar will say, "What Coach Squires did for me when I was in high school shows what kind of person he is. He took a lot of flak from others for letting me train with his group. He didn't care." Beardsley's voice will crack and he'll struggle to hold back tears when he tells how, after a farm accident that almost cost him a leg, one of the first letters he received was from Squires. Inside was a check for \$1,000.

**Squires' heyday ended as open professionalism blossomed.** Meyer's 1983 Boston victory was his last coaching success at that level.

"That golden era seemed to undergo a change," says Rodgers, a driving force behind the change. "Now the sport was not just about friendships and aiming high and let's have fun and listen to Squires' crazy stories." As shoe companies signed runners to national clubs, more casual organizations like Greater Boston lost their appeal to elites. Squires wasn't a recruiter; he was used to runners asking him to coach them. Without the top runners as magnets, his system of moving runners through his groups until they were national-class fell apart.



Rodgers and other former Squires runners who benefited from professionalism are ambivalent about what they wrought. "I was living in a \$112 a month apartment in Jamaica Plain when I won Boston the first time," Rodgers says. "It's good to be in that crucible. But it's also good to get out of it."

"I knew professionalism was going to come," Squires says, "but not so soon." Uncharacteristically voicing a regret, he says, "I then did something I wish I hadn't done, that being becoming a consultant to New Balance. I knew I could go and have a local little club, like I had with the Liberty [Athletic Club] girls. Would that appease me? No, not really. So I spent four years with New Balance. I knew they wouldn't be one of the biggest companies, with their odd sizes and old man's shoes." Through his Boston Marathon connections, Squires was also hired to coach employees of marathon sponsor John Hancock.

After the New Balance gig ended, Squires tried to convince TAC, then the national governing body, that he should head a national coaching system. The idea went nowhere. Squires wanted to keep going to the Olympic marathon trials, so he would pick someone to coach who needed help qualifying. Hodge says, "Over the years, you'd see less and less of him." In 2006, Squires tried to get a group going of runners just slower than the Olympic marathon trials standard. Nothing came of it.

At one point, 12 of Squires' former runners, including Randy Thomas and coauthor Bruce Lehane, were college coaches. His most direct involvement now is through Salazar, who has brought Squires out to Oregon more than once. When Salazar was preparing Kara Goucher to run Boston in 2009, he had her train over the course. Squires was there, and assumes he'll be so again if Goucher comes to train in Boston before this year's marathon.

Because of his heart condition, Squires says that he's living on borrowed time. He's eager to shape his legacy while he can.

"My hope is that when I drop there'll be five or six guys around the United States who say, 'You know, that friggin' guy knew what he was doing,'" he says.

"I have God-given talents. Listen to me, it works. Whatever I say, it works. And I don't know why but someone upstairs said, 'We screwed you over with your health and all the other things, we nailed you here, we nailed you there, and you came back fighting for this. So we're going to make you a pretty good marathon coach.' I had a dream one day years ago and it was like, 'That's your deal, and don't you ever change.' And I have improved every athlete I've ever coached. Every one! Even the wackos."

"Squires knows something," Rodgers says. "I can't quite put my finger on it. I don't think anybody can. But Squires got Dick Beardsley, a guy who nobody knew in high school, to take Salazar to near expiration. On a hot day almost 30 years ago, Dick Beardsley ran Boston almost as fast as Ryan Hall did last year. It's something to think about."

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Senior editor Scott Douglas' next book, *The Little Red Book of Running*, will be published in June.