

Breaking the Time Barrier

This passage describes the moment in 1954 when Roger Bannister, an English runner, attempted to break the world record for the mile, which stood at just over four minutes. People said that it was not possible to run a mile in less than four minutes. Bannister aimed to prove them wrong.

Roger Bannister sharpened his running spikes on a grindstone in the hospital laboratory. The weather was all wrong for running. This would not be the day when he ran his fastest race. But he went on sharpening his spikes just in case the weather changed.

He was a medical student. His final exams were coming up. Soon the gruelling duties of being a young hospital doctor would leave no time for sport. So this might be his last summer's running.

It would have been good to prove himself – to perform the impossible. Bannister sighed and laid the spikes aside. What difference would sharp spikes make, when there was a gale blowing?

At the running track in Oxford, the wind tugged violently at the flag on the church roof. Bannister tried on his new, super-light running shoes, but his mind was pretty much made up: too windy for a record attempt. At 5.15 p.m. it rained.

Watching the competitors limber up, the crowd was restless, keyed up. They had come there to see Bannister break the record for the mile. This was where he had run his first races as an Oxford student, so they were willing him on. They wanted him to perform the impossible tonight, in Oxford, in front of their very eyes.

If only they understood what they were asking! Only once would Bannister be able to pour all his nervous energy, his physical strength, his terror into making this run. If he tried and failed, it would not be in him to try again.

The flag on the church was wavering, the wind gusting more gently now. Bannister made his decision. He would try to run the mile in less than four minutes: a feat which had never been done, in the whole history of running.

The runners lined up. Perfect silence. Bang! ... Bang! Two pistol cracks. A false start. A surge of fury went through Bannister.

The runners lined up again. This time there was no mistake. His friend Chris Brasher took the lead, setting the pace. "Faster!" hissed Bannister in his ear, but Brasher would not speed up, knowing that if Bannister sprinted too soon, his stamina would not last the mile.

“Relax!” called a friend from the crowd. The Oxford crowd was willing him on. Even the wind held its breath. But Bannister was barely aware of his surroundings. At the half-mile mark he knew he was in with a chance. His legs seemed to be working independently; the ground had no hold on them. His mind was detached. In a kind of trance he took over the lead, put in his final burst of speed.

The winning tape seemed to recede with every step. He must not slow, must not falter. His lungs had to go on feeding his blood; his heart had to go on pumping the oxygen round. This was his one chance in life to do a thing supremely well. If he failed, the world would turn a cold shoulder against him. The winning line taunted him ...

He snapped the tape with his chest, snapped that invisible barrier everyone had said could not be broken. He had broken the four-minute mile.

It was then he realized – while pain wrung his muscles, and his lungs raged for air – while he collapsed into semi-consciousness – why he had been driving himself for eight years, why he had expended so much effort on achieving this moment. Suddenly he was free of the need to prove anything, free of the need to test himself, free of wanting something so very much. He was utterly, perfectly happy. Even though the crowd saw someone in a state of desperate, agonizing exhaustion, Roger Bannister was happier than he had ever been in his life. The tannoy announced: “Results of the one mile. In first place, Bannister with the time of three minutes ...” The crowd’s cheering drowned out the rest. Split seconds did not matter. For the first time a man had run one mile in less than four minutes.

Name: Class: Date:

1 Roger Bannister wanted to do more than just win a race. What was he trying to do?

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2 At the beginning, Bannister does not seem optimistic about his chances. Name **two** of the obstacles he felt he was facing.

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3 What finally helped him to break the record? Write **two** things.

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4 a) When the runners lined up for the race there were two bangs. What did this mean?

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b) Why do you think it made Bannister angry?

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5 “*Even the wind held its breath*”.
What makes this a particularly good description in the circumstances?

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6 Bannister was worried that, if he failed, the world would “*turn a cold shoulder*” against him. What does this mean? Tick **one**.

ignore him

make fun of him

congratulate him

7 When Bannister crossed the line, what physical barrier did he break?

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8 What mental barrier did he break?

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9 After the race ended, the loudspeaker announced the result. Why did the crowd start cheering before the announcer had finished?

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10 The writer wanted to tell the story of this famous event in an exciting way. Do you think she has succeeded? Identify **two** things she does to make the event come to life.

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