The Charlotte Observer
NOV 6 1970

UNC RUNNER WALDROP

Weird Tony Is State Champ

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CHAPEL HILL — Tony Waldrop is one peculiar kid.

For openers, he's a member of the University of North Carolina cross-country team, and of course, the sanity of long-distance runners has been strongly suspect ever since 490 B.C. when that Athenian fool Phidippides croaked after running 150 miles to solicit Sparta's help against the Persians.

And he doesn't fit the harrier stereotype of a grimacing, haggard, tortured soul, staggering onward (with "The Impossible Dream" chorusing in the background) toward glorious victory.

He's an 18-year-old freshman with a bowl-over-the-head-and-watch-the-ears haircut and an innocent, happy, uncomprehending countenance. He wears black dress socks and too-large-looking shoes when he trains, all of which contributes to the image of a naive child who has neither endured the pain nor shouldered the responsibility demanded of a champion.

But Tony Waldrop, not quite five months out of Columbus, N.C.'s Polk Central High School is the North Carolina state intercollegiate cross-country champion much to the bewilderment of everyone running, coaching or otherwise witnessing last week's trot-a-thon in Raleigh. That's quite a trick for a kid who got creamed in the only two woods-and-streams races he attempted in high school.

Not that the lad never ran before; he was the state prep champ in the half-mile as a junior, and in the mile as a senior. But two or four laps around the football field is a helluva far cry from a five-mile chase up and down hill. And Tony was not looking forward to it when he enrolled at UNC this fall as a Morehead Scholar.

foul weather can find a way to talk himself out of it. And that is precisely what Tony Waldrop does.

Huh?

"I really psyche myself down," he explains, as though it were perfectly simple. "Before a race I keep telling myself how terrible I am. My mother used to really worry about me.

"I think if you set a goal and don't reach it, you get disappointed. But if you're a pessimist, you can surprise yourself."

There undoubtedly exists some deep psychological explanation of why such a seemingly absurd line of logic works, probably some kind of reverse psychology. But the other 55 contestants in this Monday's Atlantic Coast Conference championship meet in Chapel Hill have some bad news in store.

Tony Waldrop thinks he's going to stink the joint out.

"The early workouts nearly killed me," Waldrop remembers. "All the freshmen were walking at the end of the workouts." But the innate ability that enabled Tony to run a sub-4:21 mile in the 10th grade and a half-mile under 1:54 as a junior quickly allowed him to adjust to workouts of up to 20 miles in a day. He has run in the Tar Heels' No. 2 spot all season, behind squad captain Larry Widgeon.

And last week he got it all together, and overtook Duke's Bob Wheeler (also a sterling freshman) and Mike Graves in the last quarter-mile to win his first-ever cross-country race.

Success in this sport of madmen is largely a matter of self-discipline and attitude. Obviously, someone who lacks faith in his ability to negotiate five miles of rocks, roots and