

# BIG HAIR DAYS on a TEXAS TRACK



Neal Barr, a fashion photographer whose portfolio included advertisements for Estee Lauder, Clinique, and *Vanity Fair*, took the photo. The runners' hair and uniforms are exactly what they wore during meets, but Barr gave them false eyelashes and turned Rinehart's head to hide a crooked tooth. Rinehart, who was 19 at the time, admits she padded her bra for the shoot because "they didn't have Victoria's Secret back then."

**D**URING THE SPRING of 1964, *Sports Illustrated* covers featured the usual cadre of super (or soon to be super) stars: golfer Jack Nicklaus, lefty pitcher Sandy Koufax, the first-time national champion UCLA basketball team. Then, on April 20, with hair blown out, makeup on, and crouched in sprint positions, Janis Rinehart (foreground) and two teammates became the first female track athletes from the U.S. to grace the cover. Their look was no joke. They were part of the Texas Track Club, a small group of high school- and college-aged female sprinters based in Abilene, Texas, led by a dedicated coach as obsessed with beauty as with winning races. Both coach and athletes believed style could get people excited about the sport. "We were pioneers in women's track," Rinehart, now 71, says. "We were making it popular. And people liked the way we looked because we were flashy."

After landing on newsstands, the issue gained the Texas Track Club plenty of attention. The Eugene *Register-Guard* wrote of one 1964 Oregon meet in which the young women competed: "Clusters of male spectators materialized out of nowhere. Binoculars were visible peering out of windows from the men's dormitory across the street." When Jerry Brown, a distance runner at Lubbock Christian College in Lubbock, Texas, saw the *Sports Illustrated* cover, he worked out a plan to meet Rinehart. "I saw her and knew I had to have her for the rest of my life," says Brown. They've been married 49 years.

Before joining the Texas Track Club in 1961 at age 16, Rinehart competed in pedal pushers, modest pants that hung around the knee. But wanting to draw attention to her runners, club founder and coach Margaret Ellison (holding start pistol, top left) clad the team in form-fitting uniforms and matching travel suits. "Ms. Ellison designed white bell-bottoms and a white jacket trimmed with red for when we flew to meets," says Rinehart. "My daddy was really against the shorts."

The runners actually competed while wearing these hairstyles. Rinehart sported the bob, Paula Walter (middle) the beehive, and Jeanne Ellison (back) the flip. Teasing helped add volume, and Aqua Net hairspray held it all in place. Even during a sprint down the homestretch, says Rinehart, her 'do didn't budge. "We went through those cans of hairspray quite often."

Jeanne Ellison was the daughter of Coach Margaret Ellison. The elder Ellison, nicknamed Flamin' Mamie for her strawberry blond hair and flamboyant personality, had little track experience but plenty of business savvy. "She would say anything," says Rinehart (including telling the *Sports Illustrated* reporter—falsely—that she dyed Rinehart's hair blonde so it would stick out during close finishes when really, she dyed it because she thought it looked more stylish). Hoping to attract both spectators and media, Ellison brought her athletes to a beauty salon before every meet. "She was an entrepreneur," Rinehart says. "We just ate it up—we'd get a lot of attention."



Guy Sullivan (left), now 87, was an elementary school phys ed teacher in Snyder, Texas, when he first saw Rinehart sprinting barefoot and cruising past boys on the

playground. She was only 9, and few young girls competed in track at the time, but Sullivan decided to coach her. He still remembers the girl's first meet. "I kid you not—she blew them off that track," he says. "She was barefooted, coming through with pedal pushers on, and she worked them over. In practice you work on your starts, your conditioning. You never work on running through the tape. She got to the finish line and that string was

→ across the track—she saw that and put the brakes on. I thought she was going to lose the race right there." She won, and Sullivan continued coaching her through the 1960 Olympic Trials in the 100 meters when she was just 15 (she didn't make the cut). After she left the Texas Track Club, he helped her earn a track scholarship at Lubbock Christian College [now University]—a rare occurrence for a female athlete before Title IX.

Gil Rogin, then an editor at *Sports Illustrated*, wrote the story that accompanied the cover photo. Rogin, a track superfan who traveled often to Eugene, Oregon, to watch guys like Steve Prefontaine compete (and crash on the couch of his buddy, distance-running legend Kenny Moore), thinks that's where he first saw the Texas Track Club. He eventually went on a road trip with them and wrote about it. "There had never been any story like ['Flamin' Mamie's Bouffant Belles']," says Rogin, 85. He'd chosen to write primarily about the athletes' beauty regimen rather than their running, and admits, "It was all just a stunt. It wasn't a track story."

When the magazine came out, Julia Chase-Brand was in Los Angeles training for the Olympic Trials. The 800-meter runner had long been an advocate for the right of women athletes to compete in races longer than 880 yards ("experts" back then considered distance running harmful to reproductive organs). She didn't care for the cover—or the story. "It was really embarrassing," says Chase-Brand, now 73. "And so condescending for those women who deserved recognition as athletes. In some sense, it was like the swimsuit issue."

Both Paula Walter and Jeanne Ellison have passed away, and Rinehart and Jerry Brown live in San Antonio. A framed original cover hangs near the front door of their house. "I'm proud of it," she says. "It opened up a lot of opportunities for me." Opportunities like meeting her husband and getting inducted into her high school hall of honor, where a copy of the issue hangs in the gym. Recently, her 16-year-old grandson asked her to coach him in speedwork before he starts playing football. —KIT FOX



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF GUY SULLIVAN (TOP RIGHT)