

Jogging with George

The president leads (in sweats and a tee).

One sunny November morning last fall, shortly before election day, my office phone rang and a woman on the line identified herself as President Bush's secretary.

"The president would like to know if you would go jogging with him this noontime," she said rather routinely.

As a White House reporter, I'd had several opportunities to jog with the president, mostly while he was vacationing at his seaside home in Kennebunkport, Maine. But never had I received a request directly from the Oval Office.

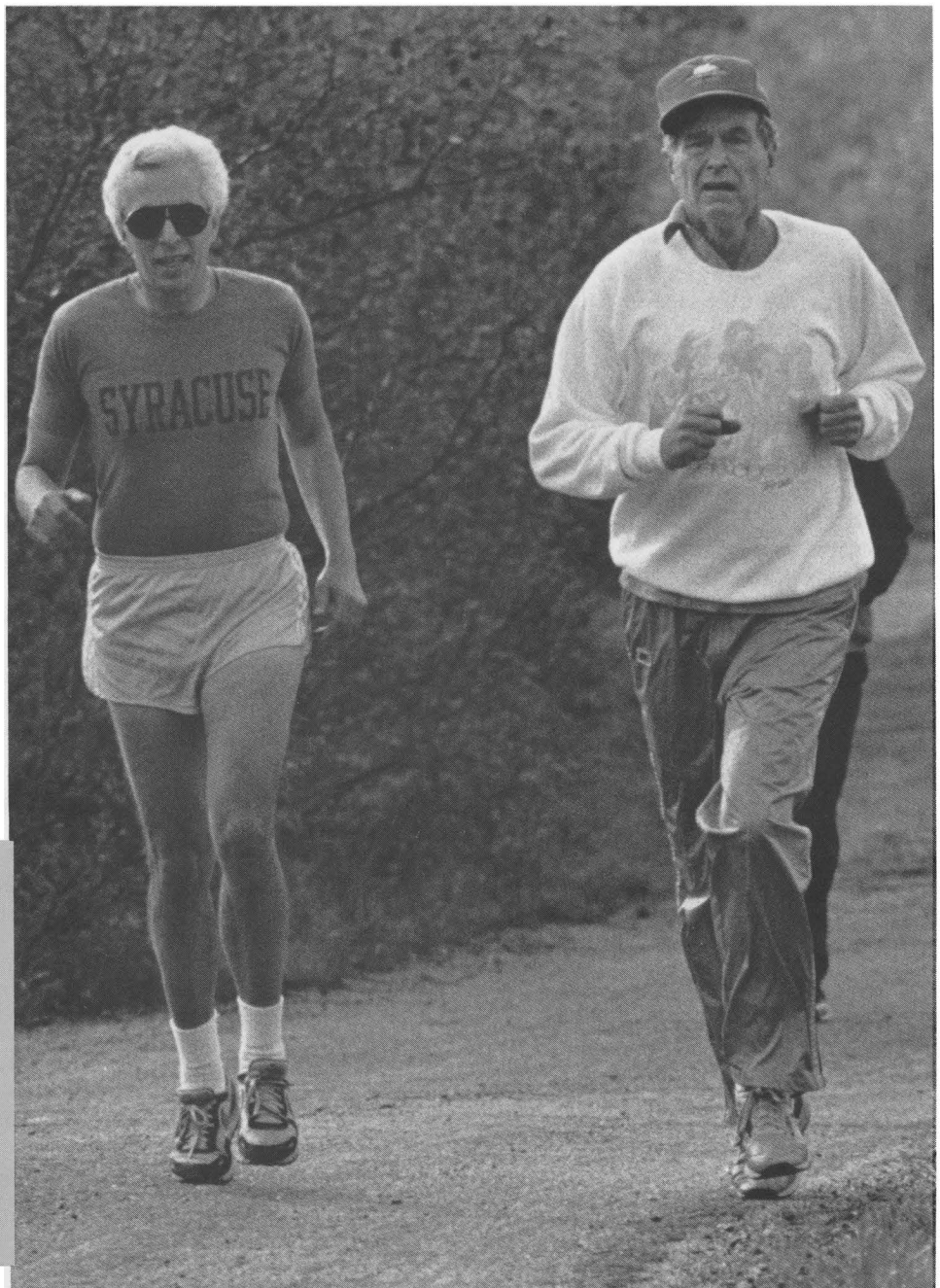
Without even asking my editor if he had other plans for me that day, I quickly accepted, hung up, and dashed off to get my running gear, casually shouting over my shoulder that I was going out to jog with the president.

Despite his 66 years, George Bush is a remarkable and highly competitive athlete. As a left-handed first baseman he captained the Yale baseball team in the late 1940s. In addition to jogging—usually around two miles in 20 minutes—he's an avid golfer, plays a mean set of doubles tennis, pitches horseshoes, swims, dabbles at softball, hunts for quail, fishes with limited success, and races his sleek, blue,

BY RICHARD BENEDETTO

28-foot cigarette boat *Fidelity* across the chilly Atlantic waters off the rocky Maine coast.

Reporters who cover Bush, most at least two decades younger than him, often marvel at his stamina and his unwillingness to sit still, even when on vacation. On a trip to Texas last spring he got up to jog at 6 a.m.



► **RICHARD BENEDETTO**, shown on a Kennebunkport jog with the president, is the White House correspondent for *USA Today* and writes a weekly political column for Gannett News Service, which serves 83 daily newspapers.

Benedetto holds degrees from SU's Utica College and the Newhouse School, the latter an M.A. in newspaper journalism that he received in 1971. He has written for the *Buffalo (N.Y.) Evening News*, the *Utica (N.Y.) Daily Press*, and the *Utica Observer-Dispatch*. He had been working in the Albany, New York, bureau of Gannett News Services, covering political affairs, when he was tapped to join *USA Today's* founding staff.

and was amazed that no reporters joined him. He labeled the press corps "lazy" and exhorted them to get in shape. (I wasn't on that trip.)

Bush likes athletes and their company. Muscleman-actor Arnold Schwarzenegger is a frequent White House guest. On the hustings, Bush often slips the name of the local team or star athlete into his speeches, a slick move that usually draws big cheers. He truly enjoys inviting national championship teams to the White House, as he did the Syracuse University lacrosse team this June.

At a White House dinner for Italian President Francesco Cossiga, Bush introduced me to the guest of honor as "a reporter who jogs with us once in a while." To that same dinner Bush invited Los Angeles Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda and ex-New York Mets manager Davey Johnson. Bush, a Mets fan, had Johnson sit at his table.

Feeling extra spunky one sunny Sunday in Kennebunkport, Bush engaged in five sports: fishing, golf, tennis, swimming, and softball. In the softball game against reporters he lined a shot over first base into right field and, running full tilt, legged out a double. Standing on second, only slightly out of breath, he clapped his hands and urged his Secret Service teammates to drive him home. After the game he boasted of his five-sport feat, calling it his "pentathlon." But a day later he complained of "a little stiffness" from overdoing it. Yet it didn't keep him off the golf course in the morning, and from jogging in the afternoon.

On that November jog to which I'd been invited, the president brought along old pal Henry Catto, the U.S. ambassador to Great Britain. A motorcade had formed in the driveway near the Rose Garden to take the joggers to Fort McNair, an Army base about two miles south of the White House where the run would take place. To jog on Washington streets would cause too much of a security risk and would clog traffic for hours.

After doing a few stretching exercises, I prepared to enter the press van for the ride over, only to hear Bush call me and tell me to get into the limousine with him. This raised more than a few eyebrows among my colleagues, who were going along to cover the event.

The president, in blue shorts and a red-and-white baseball shirt, settled back in the plush seats, waved me in, and off we went. He told the Secret Service agent who was driving to instruct the motorcade to stop at traffic lights and not use any

sirens. As we drove out the White House gates, open-mouthed tourists lined both sides of the streets, shocked to see Bush, in a sweatshirt, waving to them from the bunker-like limo.

Much of the conversation between Bush and Catto focused on British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's political problems. Bush referred to her as "Maggie," as all of Washington does in casual conversation. He would never do it in public, however. His conversation with me touched on the comings and goings of various members of the White House press corps, catching up on a little gossip and some of the "crazy" questions he got at the last press conference. All was in a light-hearted manner with plenty of laughs.

At Fort McNair, military personnel saluted smartly as the president jogged past. He returned the salutes and shouted out "Great day!" or "At ease, gentlemen!"

"Mr. President, Hungary loves you," shouted a man in a thick accent.

"Thank you," beamed Bush.

Two women on a lunchtime walk approached the running entourage and shyly waved to the president. "Pick up the pace, ladies!" he shouted.

As we passed an athletic field, a group

of soldiers was playing a heavy game of volleyball. "We've got a place for you here, Mr. President," called one near the net.

"Try a real sport: running!" called back Bush with a chuckle.

Three jogging, skin-headed officers approached and Bush invited them to join him. They saluted and "sir-ed" him profusely as the commander in chief asked their names, where they were from, and what their jobs were. "You guys are doing a great job and we all really appreciate it," he said.

Bush asked Catto how he was getting along with the British press corps. Catto told of a formal dinner in London where he received an award. Just as Catto had started his acceptance speech, a journalist seated at the head table began to get sick. Bush began howling, "Your speech was that bad?"

Back in the limo, the president handed his sweating guests chilled bottles of spring water. "Leave the air conditioner off," he told the driver. "We smell like goats, but we'll sauna it back to the White House. If it gets too bad we can open the window."

About halfway back, he did.

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