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Fan Fare: Patrick Bell will be missed

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When I received the phone call Monday night informing me of the untimely passing of 23-year-old Patrick Bell, I was completely caught off guard.

Bright-eyed and with a smile as infectious as his energy is how I'll always remember the well-spoken and intensely focused Bell - which is truly incredible when you consider he and I did most of our speaking in the moments following his finish in the annual Greenfield Triathlon.

Bell was as close to a local celebrity as there could be at the Greenfield Tri, an event he began competing in long before I ever knew the race existed. An event in which he became a local legend at a very young age. So popular and insanely talented was he that even when, for one reason or another, he told me in pre-race interviews that he wasn't expecting to contend for the overall win, I never believed him. Instead, I always expected him to uncork one of the kind of performances that would leave everyone speechless. He had that special capability.

And the hundreds of spectators along Nashs Mill Road felt the excitement, too. It was nearly impossible to walk past 10 people standing along the route and not hear "Has Pat gone by yet?"

Yeah, just "Pat." That's all they needed to say. No use for a last name; which other "Pat" would they be talking about?

Of course, the irony of the question was that it was nearly impossible for Bell to sneak by the masses that waited near the finish line. Bob Diamond, the perennial PA voice of the event, knew exactly what the crowd wanted, and was sure to announce Bell's progress whenever such information became available. In addition, Diamond added to the Bell-frenzy by shouting the fan-favorite's name into the microphone each time he sped by on his bike, giving the crowd ample reason to cheer.

Patrick Bell brought, at the same time, a stabilizing force and a feverish electricity to an event that would otherwise not lend itself to spectators.

In addition, according to him, he also brought an energy onto the race route, that only he and the competitors experienced. After last year's running, he spoke to me with his vibrant smile about how much he enjoyed playing the role of rabbit, giving people someone to chase.

"It's funny, because out there on the run, people would pass me and then say things like I can't believe I just passed Pat Bell," he said with a smile.

On a personal level, I'll miss him deeply this August. His politeness and courtesy on the telephone, and the way he would have tried to convince me, once again, that he wasn't planning on winning were charming and refreshing in an age where 23-year-old athletes with his kind of talent spend nearly all of their off-time trying to convince others how good they are.

He never needed to do that.

According to Greenfield Rec. Department director Cathy Buntin, the triathlon committee has already started its discussion on how to honor Bell during this year's event to be held Aug. 7.

Nobody asked me, but I don't think it'd be too much to ask to retire the number he wore during last year's running and hang it in banner form above the same finish line he crossed with regularity.