

Meet the Runner Who Leads Every Pack and Then Vanishes

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By Scott Cacciola

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Erik Sowinski had one job earlier this month at the Millrose Games in New York: to run a half-mile, or about 800 meters, in 1 minute 53 seconds.

Before the race, Sowinski experienced his usual butterflies, an electric mix of nerves and excitement that signaled it was time to perform. Sure enough, Sowinski immediately bolted to the front of a 13-man field before an enthusiastic crowd at the Armory in Washington Heights.

As he circled the 200-meter track, Sowinski occasionally peered over his left shoulder. Behind him were Olympians and world-championship finalists who, in a twist, were depending on Sowinski to maintain his lead. And after a half-mile, his first-place split flashed on the video board: 1:52.99.

But Sowinski, who would later nitpick his effort as “a little quick,” did not win. In fact, he did not even finish. After running one more lap for good measure, he stepped off the track to cede the spotlight to the athletes behind him. They were running the mile.

Sowinski, 33, knows how strange it sounds, to be the best in the world at dropping out. But such is the life of a professional pacer, and no one, according to those most familiar with his handiwork, does it better.

“The faster the pace, the more there is that can go wrong,” said Yared Nuguse, a rising star who followed Sowinski at the Millrose Games before setting an American record for the indoor mile, finishing in 3:47.38. “You really need the right person for that job.”

Sowinski has spent recent weeks crisscrossing the globe to pace — or rabbit, in the vernacular of track and field — at high-profile indoor meets in Germany, Sweden and Spain. He paced two races on the same day in Boston. He then made a cameo in Boulder, Colo., where he lives (in theory), for a workout with the On Athletics Club before returning to the East Coast to rabbit in New York. Four days later, Sowinski was in France to pace a 1,500-meter race that Jakob Ingebrigtsen, the reigning Olympic champion, won.

“I think it’s a little more enjoyable for my mother,” Sowinski said. “When I used to race, she would show up to my meets and be too nervous to even watch. Now, she sort of knows what will happen.”

Sowinski, who grew up in Waukesha, Wis., and was a five-time all-American at the University of Iowa,