**Breaking Your “Four Minute Mile”**

by George Ambler on June 25, 2006

The story of [Roger Bannister](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roger_Bannister) is an inspirational one. For many years it was widely believed to be impossible for a human to run a mile (1609 meters) in under [four minutes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_minute_mile). In fact, for many years, it was believed that the four minute mile was a *physical barrier* that no man could break without causing significant damage to the runners health. The achievement of a four minute mile seemed beyond human possibility, like climbing Mount Everest or walking on the moon.

It was a windy spring day, on the 6th of May 1954, during an athletic meeting between the British AAA and Oxford University, that Roger Bannister ran a mile in 3 minutes, 59.4 seconds. He crossed the finish line with a time of 3 minutes, 59.4 seconds, and broke through the “four munite mile” psychological barrier. John Landy a great runner of that day never run faster than within 1.5 seconds of the four minute barrier. Then 56 days after Roger Bannisters breakthrough, John Landy ran the four minute mile in 3 minutes and 57.9 seconds in Finland. Later Bannister and Landy raced in the *Mile of the Century* where Bannister won in 3 minutes and 58.8 seconds.

Roger Bannister breaks four-minute mile, 6 May 1954 [Photographer: Norman Potter](http://corporate.gettyimages.com/masters2/BeforeAfter.aspx?id=bannister)

The breaking of the four minute mile was so significant, that is was named by [Forbes](http://www.forbes.com/2005/11/18/bannister-four-minute-mile_cx_de_lr_1118bannister.html) as one of the greatest athletic achievements. What made this event so significant is that once the four minute barrier was broken by Roger Bannister, within three years, by the end of 1957, 16 other runners also cracked the four minute mile. Describing the psychological impact of the four minute barrier in an [interview with Forbes](http://www.forbes.com/forbeslife/collecting/2003/10/21/cz_jc_1021sport.html), Sir Roger Bannister, who was knighted in 1975, related that:

The world record then was four minutes, 1.4 seconds, held by Sweden’s Gunder Haegg. It had been stuck there for nine years, since 1945. It didn’t seem logical to me, as a physiologist/doctor, that if you could run a mile in four minutes, one and a bit seconds, you couldn’t break four minutes. But it had become a psychological as well as a physical barrier. In fact the Australian, John Landy, having done four minutes, two seconds, three times, is reported to have commented, “It’s like a wall.” I couldn’t see the psychological side.

So what happened to the *physical* barrier that prevented humans from running the four minute mile? Was there a sudden leap in human evolution? No. It was the *change in thinking* that made the difference, Bannister had shown that breaking four minute mile was possible. Often the barriers we perceived are only barriers in our own minds. Previous runners had been held back by their beliefs and mindsets. When the barrier was broken other runners saw that is was possible and then 16 runners went on to do they same.

[Sports Illustrated](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sports_Illustrated) commemorated Bannister’s achievement in their issue of December 27, 1999, more than 40 years after his famous run.