

Editorial: Ya Gotta Wanna...and Portland Doesn't

December, 2002

Despite the infuriatingly slow, clogged traffic on what passes for a freeway in Oregon, the warm autumn sun and brilliant fall foliage on November 2nd made for a pleasant trip down I-5 to Lane Community College. There on the south Eugene campus, Central Catholic junior Galen Rupp barely outdistanced Klamath Union senior Lauren Jespersen to win the State Class 4-A cross country championship. It was a thrilling match. The best of the best-and they gave it their all. The track record was broken.

This year Oregon high school boys may well take four of eight slots in December's Regionals to go on to Nationals. They're that good. The training, the effort, the sweat and tears-this time might bring the big payoff. State champion Rupp is trained by the best, world champion Alberto Salazar. Still, after all the work, there is plenty of risk. There will be only one winner. When you watch these guys run, you realize how badly they've got to want it.

One item, no doubt mostly overlooked, was the mention that of the top three senior runners, two joined state champions from previous years in committing to Stanford for their college careers. Too bad. At one time the University of Oregon was the track college in the country. But, to be number one, to be the best, you've got to want it. You've really gotta wanna. Oregon's best high school runners in years wanna, but not for Oregon.

Late autumn, early winter is also the time when high school seniors across the state busily collect their SAT test scores, their transcripts and recommendations and finish their college applications. For some it's a first realization that getting into the best colleges in the country means "ya gotta wanna"—through all four years of high school. For others it's the crowning achievement of four years of effort and striving. And many of Oregon's best and brightest, those that really "wanna" will be leaving for out-of-state colleges and universities.

What's that got to do with Oregon's recent elections and new governor? Plenty. Because to arrest and reverse the downward spiral of Oregon's economy and Oregon's businesses, somebody, somewhere, some leader has gotta wanna. They've gotta wanna as fiercely and as passionately as the kid who works and studies for years in order to score 1600 on his college boards; they've gotta wanna as fiercely and passionately as Galen Rupp, whose legs and lungs must've burned like fire when he ran 5,000 meters in 14:56.

You've gotta wanna...and Portland doesn't.

The morning after the elections there was a deafening silence in Oregon as everyone realized they had just elected a governor who had almost nothing to say through his

whole campaign about what he would do if elected, or why. They had, after 16 years of Democrats, elected another Democrat.

Not exactly a fierce declaration for change in the economic climate. And as that message sank in, a vague depression settled over the state. Because intuitively Oregonians realize that to compete, no, make that to survive, in the global economy, to attract the best of the best in business, in business executives, in higher education professionals, in school superintendents, in anything, it takes an attitude of fierce competitiveness.

One stunning example of Oregon's noncompetitive attitude was highlighted by OPB's Gretchen Lehmann. She reported that when confronted with the fact that a new federal school accountability program might result in 150 to 600 of Oregon's schools designated as failing, Assistant State Superintendent Kate Dickson responded, "We need to find a way to honor and appreciate the success in our schools as opposed to pointing out the deficiencies in labeling our schools with a large deficient label."

To be blunt, this attitude will yield more failures and no wins. Because to succeed, ya gotta wanna. You've got to look those failures in the face and make real changes.

Yet in this election cycle voters, mostly Portland voters and Multnomah County voters, chose complacency and the status quo. The death spiral of the state's revenue woes apparently didn't impress them. Or worse, they still believe that sucking "more taxes" from a dwindling business/revenue source will solve the problem, rather than rebuilding a competitive, healthy business environment that creates more revenues.

Sure there are hard feelings around the state over the typical rural-urban split. Rural areas have been hardest hit by recession and have traditionally remained more competitive than their laid back, liberal, urban fellows. To get beneath the surface of the divide, as always, follow the money.

During the Republican primary, Portland business leaders asked statewide business types to back their downtown candidate: fiscally conservative, socially liberal Ron Saxton. Rural leaders agreed that Saxton's candidacy made sense and paid for more than two-thirds of Saxton's campaign. Across the state, conservative business leaders made great strides toward ending the dysfunction of the Oregon Republican party. Post-primary, these statewide backers were as disappointed in Saxton's loss as Portland's business leaders. Still, realizing the urgency for an economic attitude change, statewide leaders quickly backed the winner, conservative Mannix, and asked Portland Republicans to do the same. Answer from Portland: Sorry, the one-way street runs downtown only.

So, after the general election, a deeper, more serious resentment smolders due to the timidity of the Portland business community, particularly the Republican business leaders who broke ranks to go with winner and Governor-elect Ted Kulongoski. After the election more than one Republican downtown business leader whispered that the election didn't turn out so bad. After all, they say, "We know Ted's people, we know Neil (Goldschmidt), we can work with Tom Imeson, we can work with Randy Leonard."

There was more to their timidity than just the abortion issue (though that can be so embarrassing at corporate cocktail parties). For “the downtown crowd,” the West Hills set, this time their vote showed their outright fear of change (as represented by the Mannix campaign) and their zealotry in clinging to small town power. At almost any price. Small town?and perhaps destined to stay that way. The Portland power crowd voted to remain mediocre, even in the face of economic contraction, rather than risk the effort required to reinvigorate the state economically. They have their piece of the pie; why risk the power shift that might result from a new competitive attitude? Maybe that’s why Portland is so very far away from being world class, and maybe that’s why the rest of Oregon deserves to be, and is, disgusted.

What do they say about a fat cat in power? They are risk averse. What do they say about being a winner? Ya gotta wanna.

Which brings us to the winner of the election, Ted Kulongoski. In May when we endorsed him for the Democratic primary we wrote that he had a “common sense approach”...and a “first class personality.” In October, when we endorsed Mannix over Kulongoski, we wrote “Kulongoski believes, and he does so passionately, that he can make the state work better by being a better facilitator, a better conciliator than Kitzhaber.” We closed our endorsement by saying that if “Ted Kulongoski wins...we wish him the best for his approach to change through negotiated compromise.” We meant it then and we mean it now.

But Kulongoski (and all of Oregon) may be in for some bitter disappointments if he thinks that Portland and Multnomah County actually supported his vision for the state. What they really supported was the status quo. And with the wrenching changes required ahead, Oregon’s governor-elect now faces the monumental task of building a winning spirit among his supporters, whose primary goal was resisting change. We think Kulongoski may have better luck with his critics. At least they wanna.