Narrow margin determined entry into run-off

By Lindsay Young

Senior editor

That's new many it would have taken for Empower to avoid a run-off election.

In the days after the election, presidential candidate Heath Mello would try to explain that

If ASUN wouldn't count write-ins, Empower probably would have garnered a large enough percentage of the vote to win outright March 1.

If the Daily Nebraskan would have supported Empower in its annual endorsement editorial and its editorial cartoons, or would have not had an editorial at all, voters may have stuck with the party.

If he would have been more competitive, voters would have seen he was the man for the job.

The regular election's results were tough to swallow for Mello and his first vice presidential candidate, Cecily Rometo, who were about 9 percent away from clear victory. Second vice presidential candidate Mike Butterfield faced the same margin in his race.

As Empower supporters trekked between the Culture Center and their assigned spots on City Campus, they carried Heath (for Mello), Butterfinger (for Butterfield) and Rolo (for Rometo) candy bars, "collector's edition" orange bookmarks and little candies.

They were trying to attract attention to their party and to encourage students to vote in the first election. They spent the entire day domeso. And they wanted to keep the day light.

The idea came up to have a stereo system and microphones so Dave Saylors, one the party election day coordinators and a member of the Scarlet and Cream ingens, ould sing songs about the lo, Rometo and Butterfield. The didn't happen.

They had talked about having cari-

catures drawn and placed on balloons so they would grow with the amount of air one blew in. The party did end up having caricatures done, but they were placed on the bookmarks instead.

Party members even joked about wearing sandwich boards on election day – saying things like "The End is Near – Vote Empower."

In the end, the long day's work, though they tagged it as fun, turned into a whirl of emotion for Mello.

The fateful day, Mello worked from 7 a.m. to a little after noon, when he had to leave for his one class, handing out candy bars, bookmarks and talking with students on their way to their classes. He came back strong later, and worked until he had to go to his ASUN meeting. He played a little PlayStation somewhere in between.

He said his experiences that morning were encouraging. Many students he talked to had voted or said they were voting for Empower.

At 11:45 a.m., when I arrive at the north side of the union, Mello is standing in the spot he would come back to time after time throughout the day.

I take a seat on the concrete bench next to a Duff supporter standing with a bullhorn, spouting out Tom-Green-like phrases to students passing by:

"Keep your hands in your pockets, your heads down, and you won't get a flier," or "Vote for Duff because we didn't hand you a little piece of paper."

Impact presidential candidate John Conley arrives and starts working the crowd right away, handing out those little pieces of paper.

What seems like friendly bantering occurs between Mello and Conley, and they walk side by side, at least 5 yards apart, down the sidewalk giving each passer-by an Empower and Impact hand-out.

The image it portrays is one of friendly competition, but the days after the election would prove otherwise.

Conley would wrote a letter to the Daily Nebraskan supporting A-Team



Heather Glenboski/DN

JUNIOR ADVERTISING MAJOR Dave Saylors presents Cecily Rometo with a bumper sticker as one of the gag gifts the party presented to each of its candidates at the midnight rally the night before the election. With food, skits and other presentations, the rally pumped everyone up for the stress of the coming day.

before the next Wednesday's run-off election.

But this day, Mello was more upset about that day's Daily Nebraskan editorial. In fact, much of my day was spent listening to Empower members defend themselves against the establishment party label.

Early in the day, I walk past Rometo, wearing her Empower T-shirt and handing out party bookmarks, on the way back from class.

In the distance I hear Mello, "Lindsay!" I know what to expect. The Daily Nebraskan's annual endorsement editorial came out that day, and it didn't support Empower. In fact, A-Team was the editorial board's top pick, and Impact was the only other party that received votes.

As Butterfield would tell me later, Empower at least expected to be in the top two. Mello arrives. "What happened, Lindsay?" He says the editorial was harsh and shakes his head disappointedly.

Later, when he's handing out fliers to students at that same place, he turns to me and starts explaining why his

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ideas may not be implemented if he's not elected.

He said the Daily Nebraskan's comments in its election day endorsement editorial were misleading.

It read: "... presidential candidate Heath Mello says his goals will be met whether or not he's elected. Well, then we don't see the point in electing him."

Mello explains to me that in reality
the best way for his ideas to be carried out is for him to be elected. After all, he said, who's going to listen to him

Mello explains to me that in reality

As they appropriate thing that can happen is a run-off.

the students didn't even choose him to be their president?

Empower presidential candidate everyone. There

that seriously if

The sentence in the editorial comes from a philosophy Mello adopted at a previous meeting. He used it at debates, and he focused on letting people know he would work to get his ideas implemented regardless of whether he's elected.

We'll have a quote for the Daily Nebraskan when we win tonight, Mello says. But now, he said he wishes he would've taken a stronger stance during debates and throughout the election. "I wasn't competitive enough," he said.

It's about 10:15 p.m.

Mello, Rometo and Butterfield, as well as a small contingent of supporters, gather around the phone outside Mainstreet Cafe.

Mello is on the phone.

His head falls back up to the sky for a brief moment. Everyone around doesn't know what that means. Could be defeat.

Then he announces the run-off.

Then he announces it was just by .9 percent that it happened. "Damn, Damn, Damn!"

Then he tells them about second vice presidential candidate run-off.

"Holy shit! Holy shit! Holy shit!" Rometo yells out happily, but with a hint of surprise at how close it was. Butterfield echoes Rometo. Everyone hugs.

Mello pretty much predicted his own fate. Earlier in the night, he wasn't worried. "The worst thing that can happen is a run-off." Soon after the votes were announced to their supporters gathered in the bar – about 30 minutes after – Campaign Manager Sarah Kippenbrock, the executive candidates and friend Jake Wobig headed for the door to walk to P.O. Pears, where Impact and Duff were having their parties

As they approached the backdoor

of P.O. Pears, before entering the fence, those at the front of the line signaled to the back to be quiet. "Shhhhhhhh

..." Kippenbrock and others at the front of the group say, holding their arms up as if to halt

everyone. There's a slight pause, and they trudge inside and make their ways through the crowd of blue Impact shirts and green Duff shirts.

Heath Mello

Mello headed straight for Duff candidate Jason Kidd, they hugged, and Kidd directed Mello to the back, where Conley sat visiting with Daily Nebraskan reporters Samuel McKewon and Katie Mueting.

But Conley apparently did not want Mello, who was heading right for him, in the area yet. He held up his arm to indicate to Mello to wait in the hallway outside of the back room. Mello was signaled in a little later.

Meanwhile, Mello reiterated his happiness about the situation to me, saying he was surprised at how things turned out.

The conversation between Mello and Conley didn't last long – a few words like "good race" thrown around.

That was the idea, Mello said. He said he "knew what losing was like." It's not fun, he said.

But in the days following the regular election, tensions between Impact and Empower would rise to the surface.

Mello would talk with Jaron Luttich, Impact's campaign adviser, over coffee on the Friday after the election

They talked for 2½ hours, Mello said. Luttich told Mello he wasn't supporting Empower.

Luttich also expressed discontent with Mello and Empower's decision to come to P.O. Pears the night of the election. Mello said he told Luttich: "If you think I went there out of arrogance, I'm not sitting here anymore."

