

Interview With 1977's No.1 Road Runner

BILL RODGERS

by Tom Jordan

Three years ago, when Bill Rodgers made his breakthrough to world-class distance running with a third at the International Cross Country meet in Morocco, he was understandably exuberant, and more than a little shocked:

"I'll never run another race like that as long as I live. I think I'm going to retire right now."

The 27-year-old teacher of emotionally disturbed children didn't retire, of course. He won at Boston later that spring of '75, with a still-standing U.S. best of 2:09:55, and ranked 1st in the world at the marathon distance.

The Olympic year following brought the satisfaction of a place on the U.S. marathon team behind Frank Shorter, and the disappointment of a post-Trials injury which curtailed his Montreal training. Bill struggled home in 40th, keeping the promise he had made to himself before the race, that he would finish, regardless.

Resilience is essence in Bill Rodgers. He ran perhaps his best marathon ever later that year, beating Shorter with a superb 2:10:10 at New York, second-fastest in the world in '76.

The shorter distances, too, became so many powdery snowdrifts. With 28-minute 10,000 speed confirmed at the Olympic Trials, Bill gained increasing confidence at sub-marathon distances, a confidence shown by his prolifically successful '77 road season (see p.56 for details), an hour run American best, and another No. 1 ranking in the marathon. He has emerged as the best all-around road runner in America.

This success has changed Bill Rodgers, but has not spoiled him. Gone is much of the "is this happening to me?" reaction when Bill now discusses his rise from 8:59 two-miler at Wesleyan to world's best marathoner.

And though he is now also courted—some say pursued—by promoters and fans, he is still as approachable as any top athlete in the world, handling with good grace the harried life of the near-famous.

To allow more time for the 140-170 miles per week needed to keep him famous, and to provide hoped-for financial security, Bill has left teaching—probably for good—to open the Bill Rodgers Running Center in Boston with wife Ellen, brother Charles, and three other partners with expertise in exercise physiology and running.

As T&FN caught up with the 1977 Road Runner Of The Year, he was in Houston for a sporting goods convention, preparatory to traveling to Atlanta, Puerto Rico, and points beyond:

T&FN: How is your new business going?

Rodgers: It's going pretty well. We have a lot of different ideas and plans—it's more than just a retail store. It is a livelihood for us, but also we have fun-runs 6 days a week, and we have clinics every weekend with coaches, nutritionists, and physiologists.

It's very busy there, but we're all enjoying ourselves, too, I think.

T&FN: Your running certainly has never been better, though we heard you ran more races than you wanted to.

Rodgers: In a way I suppose I did, but you only run them if you really want to. A lot of them I ran for different reasons. . . . But also, I am a very competitive person, and I do like to race, but only if I'm in good condition.

I won't run as many marathons this coming year, probably just Boston, New York, Fukuoka, and maybe one more.

T&FN: It used to be that anyone who ran more than a couple of marathons a year was considered an iron man.

Rodgers: Ah, that's a myth.

T&FN: Is the marathon your favorite distance?

Rodgers: Hmmm. If I'm in really good shape, I like the marathon, to run against the top runners. When I'm not in super shape, then it's really a drag. Then I prefer 10-milers, 12-milers, things like that.

I don't know, I think I might be better at something like 30k than I am at the marathon, you know?

T&FN: Do you consider any one race this past year as your best race?

Rodgers: Yeah, I think that New York was my best marathon (2:10:55). I think that possibly the race at Springbank might have been my best road race of the year. Though maybe New York was a little better. . . .

T&FN: How about of all time—do you have a favorite?

Rodgers: I'd have to say the time I won Boston. That, I think, would always have to be that way. New York, again, was pretty nice. If a runner can win that, it will give him a big lift career-wise, because unless you have an Olympic medal, you need wins like that.

T&FN: When you look back at the Montreal Olympics, what sort of feelings do you have?

Rodgers: Having made the Olympic team was a great experience. I'll always remember that. But the race itself. . . . [groans]. It was "very sad," are my feelings from it.

T&FN: Did you know going into the race that you didn't have a chance?

Rodgers: It wasn't clear to me. But I know that prior to the race, I wasn't ready for it. In my runs—I tried a 20M run a week or two before and only went 17. And I hadn't done enough speed.

But I would love to go back in '80, you know? The Olympics are great; they're fantastic!

T&FN: Can you usually tell before your races how you're going to do?

Rodgers: Usually I know what kind of condition I'm in. You're always apprehensive, though, when you're up

Track & Field News



BILL KULLIAN

against top runners, because the difference is just going to be a matter of a few workouts—we're all basically pretty close. And if Jerome [Drayton] got in two speed workouts and I didn't, or Viren did, you know? . . . That's kind of the beauty of it.

T&FN: Who among the top road racers in the world do you respect the most for their ability?

Rodgers: Ah, hmmm. The racing I've done, of course, I've raced mostly Americans, and of course I come up against Frank a lot, so I'd have to say Frank. But if someone like Yifter or Viren were in top shape all the time, then it might have to be . . . I think Yifter, just the few things I've seen of him, is just stupendous. Maybe because I've seen his blistering kick and all that, which I don't have. He's a runner I'd like to run against when I'm in top shape over 15 miles, or something like that.

T&FN: We hear stories about how you started running again after college because your motorcycle broke down; now running seems to be your life. Did you really just fall into this?

Rodgers: It wasn't just that my motorcycle broke down. That happened and I *did* start running a mile back and forth to work.

But I've always just loved running. It was always more important to me than a lot of other things, like a job. Some people are motivated to be millionaires. . . well, I was motivated, to run. I think that that's helped me, because I don't think I have tremendous amounts of talent by any means. It's just that I like to run and I can be more consistent at it, you know?

T&FN: Someone said of you that you seem so normal on the outside, but are so obviously abnormal—because how can you run 170 miles a week and be normal, right?

Rodgers [laughs]: Yeah, I suppose that's true. I guess it's just that running to me is just very natural. . . to me, it's unnatural *not* to move. Not to run, or play soccer, or do aerobic dancing, or ballet.

I guess I have carried it to an extreme. There are lots of others. The boom has hit, the competition is getting better, and I'm by no means unusual.

T&FN: What do you think about the big upsurge in road racing and jogging?

Rodgers: I think it's fantastic. There are problems: money-making going on by some people whom I feel shouldn't be getting the money. But who am I to say?

T&FN: What do you see ahead for the road movement?

Rodgers: I think it's going to develop more in all areas of the United States. More road races; top level road races. But what I hope will happen is that we'll try and get a few more world-class 10-mile races instead of all those crazy marathons. There's far too many marathons, which is pretty obvious.

Ultimately, I think they're going to die down some, though I think running will continue at a high level.

T&FN: How long do you plan to keep Bible of the Sport

Steve Sutton/Duomo



The heavies: Frank Shorter and Lasse Viren are Olympic superheroes, but both have taken a back seat lately to Bill Rodgers, King of the Road.

running competitively?

Rodgers: I really don't know. It's probably the sort of thing where I'll get knocked out by an injury or something. I have plans to continue this time for as long as I can.

T&FN: When you dream dreams of athletic glory, what do you dream of?

Rodgers: Obviously, to get a medal in the Olympics is the ultimate achievement for an amateur. But there are other things that I think are meaningful. I'd like to run a really fast 10,000 meters. Maybe even a really good hour run. It sounds crazy, I know, but I think it would be really fantastic to get a lot of good distance runners on the track for an hour run.

T&FN: Your hour run record was a solo effort. Do you run better against people or by yourself?

Rodgers: I can run okay alone. It doesn't bother me that much, usually, to be alone in a race. If I'm right next to someone at the end of a marathon. . . I haven't been in that situation often. Usually by the end of a marathon, you start not caring, somehow [laughs].

It must be extremely exasperating. . . like I always think of Frank at Montreal. There's this picture of him, with a combination of pain and—I don't know—frustration, on his face. And there he is 180 yards behind Cierpinski, and not going to catch him, and oh boy, that's painful! That's a tough one.

T&FN: What do you think of Frank?

Rodgers: I respect him a great deal. And I like him, I like him a lot. I don't really know him that well. He's put a

tremendous amount into running. I look forward to racing against him as a rival. . . I don't concede anything to Frank anymore as a rival, except if it's under 10,000 meters. But from 10,000 meters and up, I'm no longer going to. . . in the old days, a year or two ago, I might have, but I'm not going to anymore. . .

T&FN: Anymore what?

Rodgers: I'm not conceding anything to anybody.

T&FN: Aha! A little competitive insight there?

Rodgers [sheepishly]: Yeah. Particularly in the marathon. If the Trials come around again, I will definitely. . . if it's going to be a race, it will be a race.

T&FN: Do you have any goals in the 10,000?

Rodgers: I think that I will try to aim for a 10,000 in Europe on the track this summer. I'll try to get some high mileage, and also some speedwork, and try to get into sub-28-minute shape, and then I'd like to run against Foster, and the Kenyans, and those other guys.

T&FN: You were a 9-minute 2-miler in college, and now you can run 3 times the distance at the same pace. Does it ever seem unreal to you?

Rodgers [chuckles]: Actually, I've been so busy, I never think in those terms. When I was in college, and even some days now, I think that I've never put a total effort into it. I think I've come close a number of times, like at New York in '76.

T&FN: Do you see a possibility of breaking Clayton's 2:08:34 world-best?

Rodgers: Yeah, I think it can be

broken. But I think it's a tough record, you know? I don't know if I could do it. It's obvious if it gets broken, though, that the record isn't going to go by much.

T&FN: Are we starting to reach a limit in the marathon?

Rodgers: Yeah, it seems so. I mean no one else has been under 2:09. Maybe this year, if the top runners can get together more often, it will go.

T&FN: At 30, do you think you've reached your peak yet?

Rodgers: [in a somewhat regretful tone]: Yeah, I think actually I have. I don't think I'm going to make a significant improvement in the future. Maybe a 2:09-flat, you know, or a 2:08:50. . .

T&FN: There isn't going to be a major breakthrough in marathon training? Super carbo-loading or something like that?

Rodgers: I don't think so, no. Even the 2:10s are hard to come by. We only get a couple a year.

T&FN: On another topic, you don't really wake up at 3:00 a.m. for breakfast, do you?

Rodgers: Sure. Yeah, I often do. Because I'd get up and run in the morning without eating, then I come back and have lunch, and then I run, and come back and have dinner. So breakfast would usually be about 3:00 in the morning, when you can eat a lot. I'd say I usually have about 2½ meals a day. What I might have in the morning would be a slice of pizza, and

some cookies, and drink a couple of glasses of milk, that sort of thing.

T&FN: In other words, you don't think diet has a great deal to do with your success?

Rodgers: No.

T&FN: Granted that most of your time is taken up by running and your business, do you have time for hobbies?

Rodgers: I read a lot. Go to movies. I like horror flicks. When I was in LA (for a race), they had a 3-day thing, and I was up until 1:00 in the morning watching them, and then I was back up the next morning. I don't watch the real terrible fake-o ones; I like the realistic ones.

T&FN: Here's an off-the-wall question: I don't know anything about Bill Rodgers—how would you describe him?

Rodgers: Hmmmm. A little bit schizophrenic. Sometimes I'm more low-key, and sometimes I'm very intense. I think I'm a lot more intense than other runners.

Definitely a person who loves running. Who definitely does *not* like pain. Which is why I always train well, so there is no pain to running.

Also a person who has more interests than that. I like to travel, and I've met a lot of really great people—that's important to me.

And a person who, I would say, wants to do a lot to help the sport be treated as it should be treated: I see a real dichotomy in

the way amateurs and professionals are perceived in this country. There's a lack of awareness by writers about who is the best gymnast in this country, who has real talent in wrestling, or women's basketball, and so on.

For example, I recently went on public TV, and they want to do Boston this year, and the producer said something like, "Well, Bill, we've always wanted to do it." That's a lie. . . that's a lie! They could have done it a while ago. They just lacked the motivation.

Now the *people* have gotten aware, it's grown, and the press has to catch up.

T&FN: What would Bill Rodgers be doing today if he weren't the world's best road racer?

Rodgers: I'd probably be teaching. I think I'd still be running, though. It's kind of inevitable. I believe that once you have started running, and you've enjoyed it, it's very difficult to get away from a sport you love.

I think I've been lucky to have done well. There is a lot of luck in order for a person to do very well in one particular year, as Lasse Viren does, or Shorter did. So that's why I don't think there is one particular "best" runner. He might be the best for a month or two, but then it goes back down. That's the way I always view it, and so I always try to stay up there. And I have a great time while I do it. *That's* the thing I have to emphasize. □

ANOTHER PACER WIN!

The Place: Dusseldorf, Germany
The Event: Men's Pole Vault
The Win: 18'4½", top World Cup honors

The Pacer name is synonymous with track and field success. Across the country and around the globe, top athletes depend on Pacer equipment for top performance in pole vaulting, discus, shot put, javelin, and high jump.

**Go with a sure winner.
The Pacer line from AMF Voit.**



Santa Ana, California 92704
Carson City, Nevada 89701.

HIGH SCHOOL TRACK 1978



Renaldo Nehemiah
1977 HS Athlete of the Year

Athletes of the year selection • 1977 HS All-American team • Complete roundup of 1977, outdoor & indoor • Outdoor national, age and class records • Indoor national records • 1977 performance lists, indoor & outdoor • All-time indoor and outdoor lists • Special HS women's coverage: 15-deep 1977 list (the first HS year's list ever!), review of 1977, and national HS records • Features and results on major '77 invitationals.

"A super review of the 1977 indoor and outdoor seasons, *Scholastic Coach*, January 1978.

\$2.00 from T&FN, Box 296, Los Altos, Ca. 94022
Add 50¢ postage. Calif. residents add 12¢ tax.