



BILLY MULLINS

by Jon Hendershott

It has been a year of triumph and tragedy for Billy Mullins. The No. 1 American 400 runner in 1978, hobbled by injury in '79, Mullins has roared back to the limelight with a vengeance this season.

He has led the world in the one-lapper since his inaugural 400 of the year, 45.34 in March. That he slashed to a PR 44.84 in bulling to victory in the Pepsi meet. Mullins has also shown fine short sprinting colors, no mean achievement when James Sanford is your teammate.

But all has not been positive. A controversy over junior college grades and credits has swirled around Mullins for months, diverting attention from his on-track exploits. Mullins is an easygoing man, but one who has been understandably bothered by the grades problem.

We talked with the softspoken Mullins just a day after he was declared ineligible, which eliminated him from at least the Pac-10 meet and probably the NCAA. He eventually aired some obviously pent-up feelings, but first he wanted to talk about the fine art of sprinting.

T&FN: Has it been beneficial, both for your quarter-miling and your sprinting overall, to have run against James Sanford all year, because he is the best sprinter in 16—June 1980

the world right now?

Mullins: It really has. I've gotten more competition from him in the 100 and 200 than I have from anyone else in the 400. This is an Olympic year and I thought there would be more competition in the 400, but I've led the world since I ran that 45.34 in the middle of March and nobody else ran that fast until May.

I hadn't been able to train for 2 weeks when I ran 45.03 and that hurt, but I was able to go out hard. Sprinting this year has helped me be able to go out fast in the 400. I can go out in 20-point and not have it bother me.

Since I haven't run that many quarters this year—especially compared to '78—I found that I wasn't very relaxed in the ones I was running. But running the sprints helps you relax; you get all tense in the sprints at the beginning, but after you run them awhile, you start to loosen up. In the quarter, you can stay loose because you have learned to relax in the shorter races.

T&FN: You have said before that you

felt sheer body strength was important in the 400, to enable you to muscle through it. Have you improved that way?

Mullins (laughs): All I did last summer was lift weights. I must have run a total of about 4M all summer. I did nothing but weight work.

I lost some weight: at the beginning of this year I was about 200lbs. I got down to around 180, but I'm back to about 185 now. My problem is, I love to eat. A bad habit, but I like to eat a lot of good food; but we don't have a training table so sometimes it's just the kind of thing of ducking into a liquor store for a Twinkie or stuff like that.

T&FN: When you're on the line, do you ever consider the opponents you have to face, because there were a number of world-class runners in the Pepsi race? Or do you just go out and run your own race?

Mullins: Well, a lot of the guys in the Pepsi race like to go out hard, too. Like Willie Smith likes to go out hard. So all I ever try to do is take them out as hard as I

can. Then it's a matter of whoever comes in best.

T&FN: *Are tactics per se important in the 400, or is it more a matter just of speed and endurance and being able to hold it as long as possible?*

Mullins: I think all of those things are important. There are some guys who like to come on at the end, but if you take them out hard and they lay back and let you go, then there is the possibility that they won't catch you. They might wait too long.

Somebody sees me go out real fast and they might think, 'He's going to burn out.' But I might *not* burn out and if that guy isn't up there with me, then he's not going to catch me. So it's kind of a gamble.

But I think that by going out fast, you have a better chance because if you wait, you might leave yourself too much to make up.

The thing is, most of the guys in the 400 today have the physical strength, so it just comes down to the mental strength. It's who can psyche himself up the best. It's the mind games.

I just psyche myself up. I still like to psyche myself up so much that sometimes I don't remember the first part of the race. Then when I get to the last straightaway, it's like I haven't even run it yet.

If you think about the whole race, you will get tired. It still bothers me to think about running that fast all the way around the track. It bothers me to look at a quarter before I run it.

T&FN: *Is there some trait in Billy Mullins that makes the 400 attractive to him?*

Mullins (laughs): I don't see any. I just like to run it, that's all. I just like to run all the sprints, really. I really think I like the 200 best of all, but I haven't had much chance to really concentrate on it. My 100s this year have been better than my 200s. Actually, that's been kind of a disappointment to me because I wanted to run some good 200s this year.

T&FN: *Of course, at USC there is a group of sprinters which is better than most nations can claim and also athletes such as Quarrie, Gilkes, Abrahams, Edwards and Carlos training there. Can you describe the atmosphere among the sprinters?*

Mullins: Well, you get a good workout, that's for sure. When you are training with people who are really good, then it doesn't bother you when you get in a race with other good sprinters.

I'm sure on a lot of teams the guys in the same event don't get along. But at USC the sprinters enjoy being around each other, they get along and enjoy working out together. Not just track, but culturally, too. And with that many top guys training together, you never can loaf in workouts.

The thing about this year is, I haven't done any real speedwork yet. I run 500s every day and jog a mile. I really haven't done any quarter work either. Bill Green's the same, too.

The Bible of the Sport

Another thing about SC is that the guys aren't trying to run each other into the ground. There is competitiveness among everybody, but it is a positive kind, the kind that makes you want to give your best in training, and get the most out of it.

But the guys don't talk each other down, run each other down. We kid around, so it isn't a tense, emotional kind of training.

T&FN: *At this point in your life, just how important is running? How seriously do you take it?*

Mullins: Well, I just take things as they come. That's the way life is; you have to take it day by day.

Running has been a big part of my life since early high school. There have been things I've wanted to do, but couldn't because of running. I'm really interested in architecture, but I couldn't pursue that because of running.

Out of high school, I really wanted to go to a trade school. I wanted to learn all kinds of different things. I really like to do things with my hands. I'd like to get into electronics and I'll probably try to get into that after I finish at USC.

T&FN: *Have all the problems about the grades and all that been a drag on you this year?*

Mullins: Sort of, but I don't let it get me down. Some people have more problems in life than I do. I know a guy who owns a store just around the corner and his wife was working and got held up and got shot.

So I looked at that and realized that is a lot bigger than my problem. There are a lot of people in the world with problems worse than mine. I try to look at things not only in terms of myself, but also in terms of what is happening in the rest of the world.

The thing that is so disappointing to me is that I'm just one guy. But there are so many things the media could publicize for the good. The media is so big that they could help other people; they could get information around, but they don't do it.

All you see in the paper today is this disaster or that one. Somebody got killed. People who commit crimes get more publicity than the people who really need it, the people who are hungry or starving or who need homes. That isn't printed and that has bothered me a lot.

I mean who cares if some guy kills somebody? He gets all the publicity and then somebody else is gonna want to go out and shoot somebody else just to get his name in the paper. It's ridiculous; the media has so much power to do good, but it doesn't use it.

Yet here I am, just some athlete and they put me on the front page. What do my problems have to do with the people out there in the world? It's not affecting them. Who cares? It's not any big news. Big deal.

I mean, some of the situations athletes

in the United States are forced into are crazy. Whatever school an athlete goes to after high school, that school has total control over the athlete's life.

That's not fair. If an athlete doesn't like the situation he's in, he can't leave without being penalized heavily. Or a coach might recruit you, then decide he wants a better job and leave. And the new coach who comes in might not even like you.

It's said that you get an education, but I know that for a lot of guys it's hard. Athletes would like to get into their classes a lot more, but they can't because they are gone so much. You can't get involved like the other students, so they end up just wanting to get a grade.

T&FN: *Well, when you're not running or going to school, what do you like to do?*

Mullins: I like to go out with my friends, but I also like to be by myself sometimes. I like to go up to the mountains.

I like art; I'm heavily into art and architectural books, purchasing pictures for my mother.

T&FN: *How would you compare the Billy Mullins who sprints on the track with Billy Mullins the person off the track?*

Mullins: They are very similar. I'm calm on the track and off the track I get along with people very easily. I don't have a different attitude just because I'm running. I've never changed the way I am just because I run.

I treat my friends just like I always have and they treat me the same. Otherwise, I couldn't be with my friends and they couldn't be with me if we all acted in a different way just because I happen to run. I've found that sometimes people who don't know me very well have a tendency to think I'm a certain type of person because I run. So I have to sit them down and tell 'em.

You do have to clarify things at times to certain people. People sometimes think that because you're an athlete, then everything you do is athletically-oriented. But that isn't true; when I'm off the track, I'm off the track. When I'm done with running, that's it.

T&FN: *But when you're on the track, what is the driving force that makes you want to run 400m faster than anyone else?*

Mullins: At first I just wanted to run, but now I want to run faster and faster. I want to run faster than 44.84; I want to run 44.50, then 44.00. Actually, I want the World Record—real bad. I can get it, and at sea level. If I can get somebody who goes out real hard... I might feel real bad afterward, I might come in dyin', but I want it. □

William James Mullins was born Feb. 1, 1958, in Los Angeles. 6-1/185. Progression (with World, U. S. Rankings in parentheses):

Year	Age	School	100	200	400
'75	17	Hamilton HS Jr	—	21.01	—
'76	18	" Sr	—	21.11	47.04†
'77	19	WLAJC Fr	10.41	20.80	46.44†
'78	20	USC So	10.3	20.71	45.03(2,1)
'79	21	" Jr	10.31	21.0w	46.48
'80	22	" Sr	10.31	20.63	44.84 (10.11w)