

Matthew Centrowitz

by Jeff Hollobaugh

At the press conference following Matthew Centrowitz's Olympic 1500 victory, there was little in his demeanor to suggest that the 26-year-old Oregon alum had achieved the pinnacle of the sport.

He was calm and controlled, much as he had raced. Yet he admitted to also being dazed by what had happened on that track. "As soon as I crossed the line I was still looking at the board like, 'Did someone go by me? Did I really just win?'"

To many U.S. fans, the 1500 gold matters more than any other. It was the Holy Grail, missing from American shores for 108 years, evading capture by every great American miler since Mel Sheppard.

Yet Centro—though he has never held an American Record—vanquished the world's best to bring the exalted medal home, adding to a pair of World Championships medals and sealing his

Pretty much every single day of the last 12 or 14 years I always just focused on the Olympics. Winning the ultimate, the gold medal.

If I came away with a silver—which is obviously a great accomplishment—I would have been walking away thinking, "All right, how do I get gold next time?" Now, getting gold, it's like, "What do I do next time? What's next?"

T&FN: In looking back at the past year, what were the key ingredients that helped put you into the right place to win that gold?

Centrowitz: Probably consistency. I was able to stay healthy for multiple seasons. I had a little ding going into this outdoor season. But overall, no stress fractures. I had a stress reaction but we were able to get a hold on it early.

We didn't really miss too much training and we crosstrained through that. But just consecutive months and years of hard training and consistency of good health really kind of culminated in victory.

T&FN: How has your coaching relationship with Alberto Salazar evolved over the past few years?

Centrowitz: I think Alberto has given me a little more say in my training, which I really liked the last couple of years. When I first joined the group, he would tell me what to do and obviously I would be in 100% support of that and felt that was the best.

But as our relationship has grown the last couple of years, he's kind of come to me and asked, "What do you think you should do?" This all came from last year when he didn't come to training camp with us because he was back in Portland dealing with all of the stuff about our group.

I was not on my own but he wasn't around 24/7 like he normally is. That was a lot of growth on my end that spring. I had to figure out a way to get a hold of my own training and take the bull by the horns, so to speak.

T&FN: Does your dad [Olympian Matt Centrowitz] play any role in your coaching?

Centrowitz: My dad is more in the supportive-father role. He definitely has stayed out of the coaching since probably my sophomore year in college. He kind of shared some of his

Centro In A Nutshell

Personal: Matthew Gerald Centrowitz was born October 18, 1989, in Beltsville, Maryland; 5-9/133 (175/61)

Schools: Broadneck HS (Annapolis, Maryland) '07; Oregon '11; now represents Nike Oregon Project

Coaches: Dana Dobbs (HS); Vin Lananna & Andy Powell (college); Alberto Salazar (pro)

PRs: 800—1:44.62 ('15); 1000—2:16.67 ('16); 1500—3:30.40 ('15); Mile—3:50.53 ('15); 3000—7:40.74i ('16); 5000—13:20.06 ('14)

Major Meets: 800—4)USi '13; 1500/Mile—2)USAJ, 6)NCi, 9h)NC '09; 5)NC '10; 1)NC, 1)US, 3)WC '11; 2)USi, 7)WCI, 2)OT, 4)OG '12; 8)USi, 1)US, 2)WC '13; 1)USi, 1)US, 8)WC '15; 1)USi, 1)WCI, 1)OT, 1)OG '16;

3000—12)USi '08; 12)NCi '09; 4)NCi '11; 5000—1)USAJ, 11)WJ '08;

XC—27)NC '09; 10)NC '10;

World/U.S. Rankings: 800: '15—x/6;

1500: '11—8/1; '12—5/1; '13—8/1; '14—x/2; '15—10/1; '16—?/?

claim as the most successful American ever in championship 1500s.

Now that he has wrapped up his post-Rio break and celebrated his 27th birthday, Centrowitz has come to terms with what his victory means to him as he explained to us after a post-season vacation trip:

T&FN: Did the time off help you to digest the immensity of your Rio performance?

Centrowitz: There are definitely some mornings where I wake up and I realize that I'm the Olympic champion and I kind of process what it means for me and what that has meant for my family, my coaches and everyone who has helped me along the way.

It's really hard to put it into words. When you enter the sport, that's obviously your lifetime dream and when you actually go out and accomplish it, you think, "What next? Did that really just happen?"



KIRBY LEE/IMAGE OF SPORT



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thoughts my freshman year of college and having two chefs in the kitchen, that didn't really work so well for me. And he stepped back. Since then we've had a really good relationship.

T&FN: *What is it that makes you look so at-ease in difficult race situations?*

Centrowitz: Ever since I've been running I've kind of had this relaxed form about myself. My arms are pretty relaxed, even when I'm working them. It's reflected in my training—I don't get out of my comfort zone too much.

That's something where Alberto has tried to push me over the years. Those guys like Galen and Mo grind a little bit more. I don't like to really go all out until the end of the workout.

T&FN: *What are you thinking in a race during the early stages where you're biding your time?*

Centrowitz: No matter what the pace is, I tell myself this is what I trained for, this is what I want. Just kind of, “Don't panic. There's a lot of race left.” Over the years I have realized that things might not go your way early on but you have plenty of time to adjust throughout the race.

I shot myself in the footback in college when I went from 0 to 100 because I panicked being in dead last with 500 to go. I told myself never again would I do that.

I always tell myself to stay relaxed, I do a lot of self-talk and I reinforce that no matter what the pace is, it's exactly what I want, it's exactly where I want to be, it's the pace I was expecting.

T&FN: *Have you done anything consciously to get better at tactics over the years?*

Centrowitz: The college system—and even high school racing—really set me up well for it. I truly believe that. I have been put into just about every race you could think possible, just learning from a young age how to race any type of race, even as slow as the one we saw at the Olympics. I've been in a 3:50 race before. A lot of these Africans, a tactical race for them is a 3:40.

T&FN: *As the race in Rio played out, was there any sense that it was going your way?*

Centrowitz: Honestly, not really. It's funny because a lot of people think a slow race played into my hands, and I was hoping for a faster race. I was hoping for like a 3:34 race, 3:33–3:36, like it usually has been in the past.

When it gets slow, you allow everyone in the field into the mix. Everyone's there, whether they made it on time or they're tired from the rounds, they're very much as likely to medal as anyone else.

When I found myself in the lead I told

myself to stay relaxed, but once I got to 600–500 out, I pretty much made sure that no one went by me. Look, at that point, you can't really allow people to go by and try re-passing them, you're just making more work for yourself. And that's why when [Ayanleh] Souleiman got around me – I didn't really want to fight him that much but I found myself having the inside lane open.

I said, “All right, we're 450 out, this needs to get going.” I made my move right then because I knew that that was my best shot at winning. I figured that when you're in that late stage of the race, you don't want anyone to go by. You

Mom Played A Role Too

With Matt Centrowitz having been a 2-time Olympian, plenty of media coverage over the summer revolved around the father & son aspect, especially with Matthew (he's not a “Junior”) displaying his “Like father like son” tattoo at the Trials.

However, the younger Centrowitz says, “My mom played just as big of a role in my success, in my early career, as my dad did. She raised me and she also had a running background. She was at 2:08 half-miler. It was definitely a team effort.”

Yet Beverly Centrowitz didn't make the trip to Rio, though she was in London 4 years earlier. “In London, she missed all the Olympic events that she usually enjoys watching: gymnastics and swimming. She was like, ‘You know what, that's it, in Rio I'm going to stay home.’ And we are all, ‘You sure? We can fly you down.’ And she's like, ‘No, it's not a money thing.’”

“I haven't asked her if she regretted missing it but I would imagine maybe if she could do it all over she might come down.”

After he was done with the ceremonies and the press conferences, Matthew called. “She said she had a really good feeling about it all day. She was in a good state of mind. She wasn't too nervous, and I'm just sitting there like, ‘I'm glad one of us wasn't.’ [laughs]

“I even got the chance to watch her—someone filmed her while she was watching the race and she was all over the place, so I call BS on her being really relaxed.”

want the momentum all to yourself.

T&FN: *What would you say to those diehard cranks out there who insist your gold was tarnished because the pace wasn't, as they say, “honest”?*

Centrowitz: I wouldn't say anything to them [laughs]. At the end of the day there's no asterisk next to your name because the time was slow, you know? I'm already in the exclusive club of Olympic champions and legends and guys that I've looked up to in the sport. So yeah, it doesn't make any difference to me about the time.

On that day, it's all about place, as everyone in that field knows. I would've even taken a 4:10 win. When I look back at the race years down the road, I'll be more proud about the way I ran it, being able to control it from the front and not letting anyone around me that last lap. That to me is a proud accomplishment.

Centrowitz — continued

T&FN: What was Salazar's reaction?

Centrowitz: For all the 5 years I've had him as coach have never seen him so ecstatic and so happy for me. It was really, really neat to see how excited he was, even to hold my medal, and all the things that he was saying about how he was going to continue coaching me until I was done with my career.

T&FN: Now that you have every competitive runner's ultimate dream hanging around your neck, is there anything in the sport that you are still hungry for?

Centrowitz: Records, for sure. I think at this point now I want to go after American Records and just put myself high on those all-time lists, whether it's U.S. or the all-time world list.

I know that there's been talk of whether I am the greatest American miler of all time, or where I stand on the list, but with PRs and faster times and American records I can really solidify my legacy in U.S. middle-distance running. That's kind of something that I am looking forward to.

T&FN: Fitness-wise, was the American Record in reach for you this past season?

Centrowitz: Oh, absolutely. But the only race after the Olympics was Brussels and that actually ended up being pretty slow, a 3:31 race. Had I been in the right race I definitely think I would've been capable of doing something pretty fast, certainly under the American Record.

Last year was just about the World Indoor Championships and the Olympics. It was about placing. And now we will put little bit more emphasis on running fast

T&FN: Historically, your success in championship races has been much greater than your success in rabbitied Diamond League meets. Is there something about chasing rabbits that doesn't fit in well with your competitive spirit?

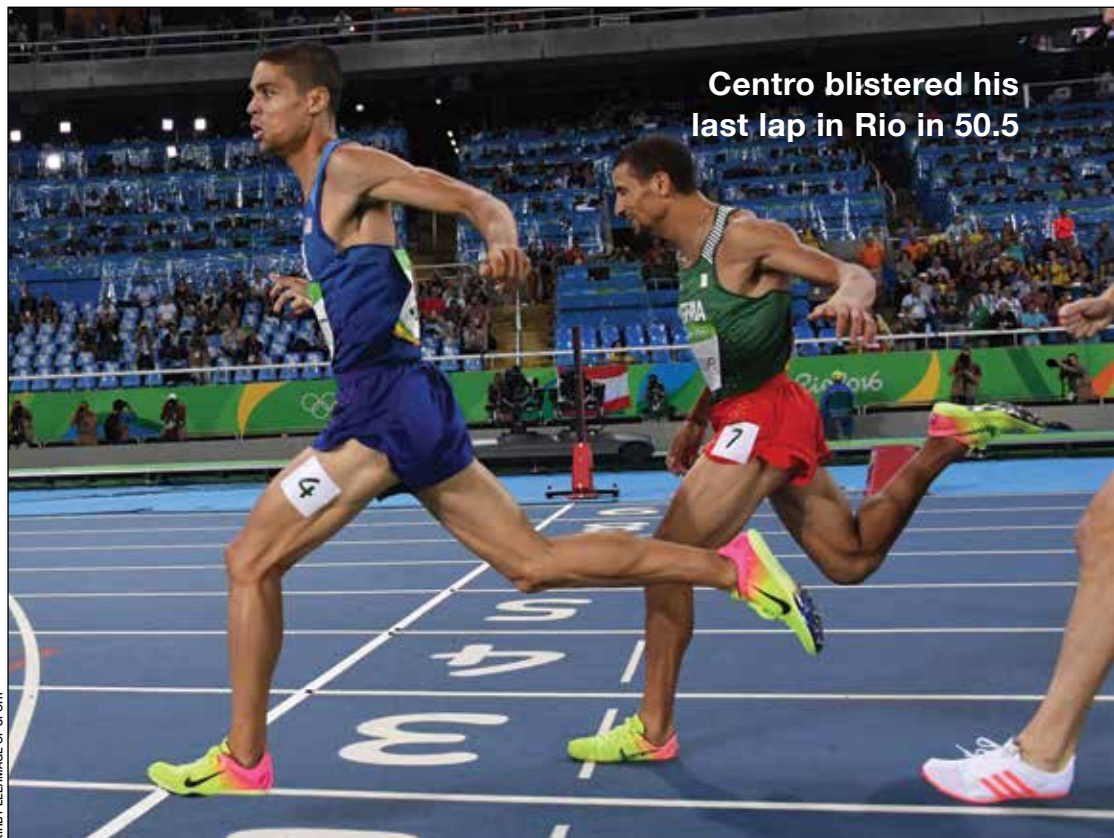
Centrowitz: I think there's a lot of things that go into it. First and foremost, I've always been a racer, a competitor. Even in high school I was never really good at chasing fast times. I just really like to compete, and I've carried

that mentality throughout my whole career. I definitely enjoy championship racing more than rabbitied races and time-trial races, and so that's first and foremost.

But I have definitely put some focus over the years on running fast, so that's not an excuse. We don't just train for one specific race. We train to run fast in case those type of races pop

be rabbitied. It's definitely a different mindset and it's a different feel. It's just something that I'm going to continue to adapt to.

I don't know if it's a maturity thing too. I just turned 27 and am definitely at the prime of my 1500 career, but who is to say I cannot keep PRing into my 30s? Nick Willis has kind of shown that. I've had a nice steady progres-



Centro blistered his last lap in Rio in 50.5

KIRBY LEE/IMAGE OF SPORT

up at the World Championships or Olympics.

Had the Olympic final been under 3:30, there's no doubt in my mind that I would've been capable of running that. I think I would've done whatever it took to win on that day. Going into it I wasn't worried about the splits. If they had gone out there and rattled 55s and 56s, I would've been just tucked right in like I normally do in any championship race.

When you have time-trial racing, you go into it knowing that there are guys that are going to

run faster than me and I think this year and the next couple of years I'm ready to make that leap to running sub-3:30.

T&FN: Any interest in seriously exploring the 5000 like your father did or is the 1500/mile too rewarding right now to consider making the move?

Centrowitz: I'd be lying if I said my coaches and I haven't been talking about the 5K. When, we just don't know. Obviously next year with the World Championships I probably will stay in the 15. But I think you'll see me running a few more 5Ks each season and kind of make my way toward the jump so that I will have a good sense and good feel for that event.

T&FN: How long do you want to keep going with the sport?

Centrowitz: That's a tough one to say. I definitely don't want to be competing when I'm past my peak and not making teams and kind of just doing it. I want to end on a positive note and on top. But as long as I enjoy getting out the door and enjoy the competing and the training aspects, I'd like to keep doing it until I'm 34. That would be a great number in my head with the possibility of LA hosting the Olympics. □

It Was A Long Road From HS

As a prep, Centro, captured 5 State titles and won the NBN 2M by negative-splitting an 8:41.55. He took 2nd in the 1500 at USATF Juniors and won Pan-Am Junior gold. He miled 4:03.40.

Yet even from that fast start, he often felt frustration in the 9 years it took him to go from the prep ranks to the top of the Olympic podium.

Here's the advice a wiser Centro would give if he somehow ran into his high school self:

"I would just tell him to be patient. At a young age, it's really easy to look up to some of these guys, post-collegiate guys and even guys

in college, and you want to be there now, you want to get there now.

"You can overdo it in training. You tend to not listen to your body or you try to emulate what some guys ahead of you are doing, but I would say just be patient.

"You can really make a long career out of the sport if you time it right, if you follow the right progression for you and if you listen to your body.

"In distance running and middle distance running, a lot of patience is involved in the training and obviously, the racing as well. Too many times you just see kids being impatient in the running world."