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 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: 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...
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 foot back 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 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 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.

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

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: Historically, your success in championship races has been much greater than your success in rabbited 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 rabbited 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 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 be rabbiting. 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-