

CRAIG VIRGIN

By Tom Jordan

"Come spend a weekend with me," he invited. "You can't really get a feel for who I am unless you see me in my environment, and what my lifestyle is like."

So, for 3 days in mid-April, T&FN observed the extraordinary life led by Craig Virgin, World Cross Country champion and arguably the best all-round distance runner in America.

The weekend's frenetic pace began on a Saturday in Champaign, Ill., where Craig was to kick off his outdoor track season with a 5000 in the Illini Classic. Before dawn on Monday, his schedule would include a radio talk show, a TV interview, a flight to Rolla, Mo. for a road race, more interviews, a flight back to his home outside of Lebanon, Ill. (pop. 5000), visits to the offices of his new public relations-marketing firm, Front Runner Inc., morning runs, innumerable phone calls, and brief moments of calm and reflection.

The radio show is first, and the questions run heavily on the Olympic boycott, especially about Craig's widely quoted statement that "the USOC sold the athletes down the river for a bag of gold." Virgin picks his way carefully through the questions, for his stand has caused him to receive the first hate-mail of his life. "If you love the Russians so much," reads one, "why don't you go there to live?"

T&FN: What's your reaction to this kind of thing?

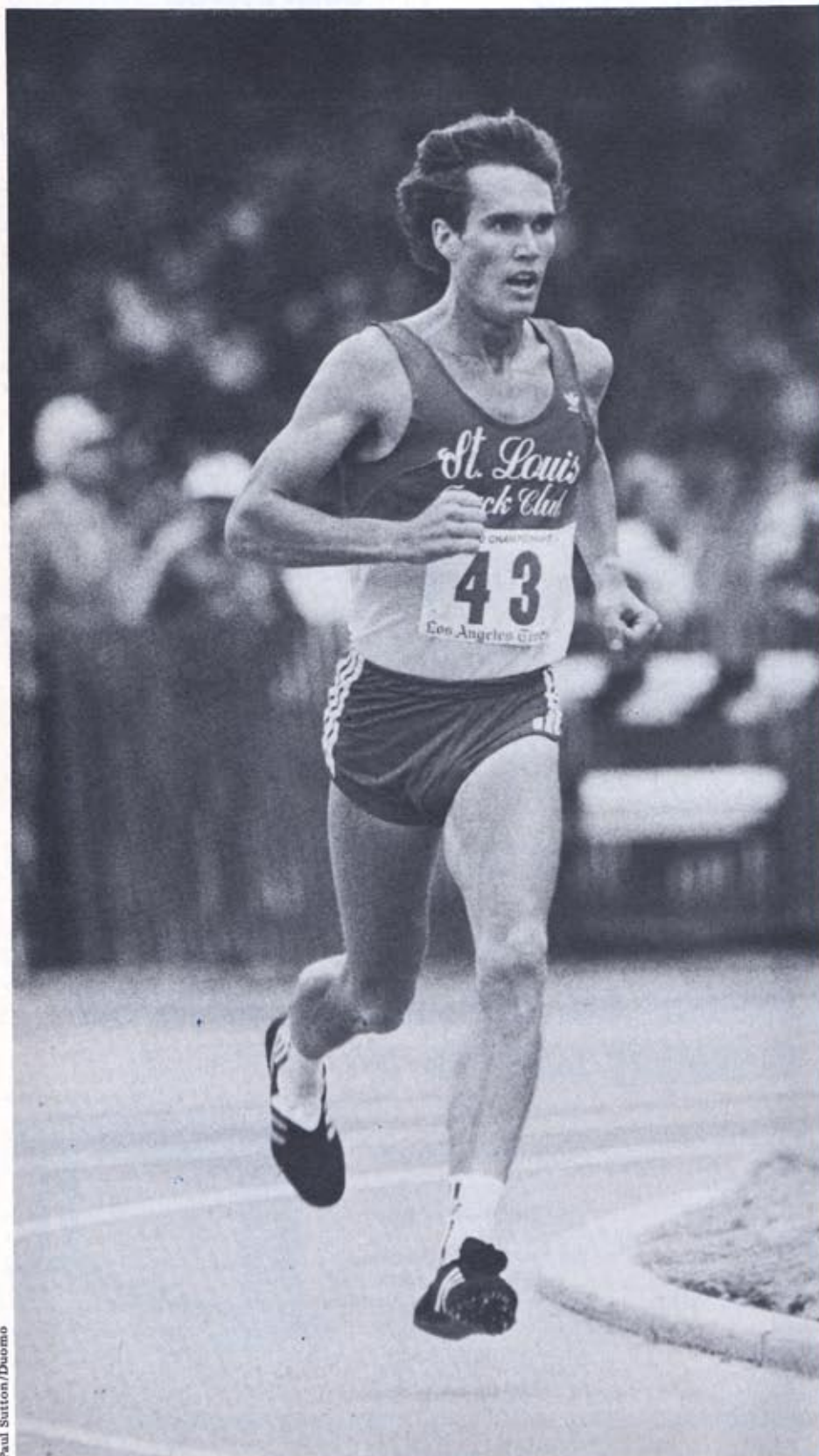
Virgin: Congress disagrees every day with the President, and they're not considered unpatriotic. I think that President Carter committed himself to an action which he now feels he must back up or lose prestige, and let's face it, this is an election year. What bothers me is that he didn't even look at the compromise suggested by the Athletes Advisory Council of the USOC, which would have had the athletes get in, compete, get out, without allowing the Russians to use the nationalism.

I believe in the value the Olympics has for mankind, and I don't want to see it go down the tubes because of this political question. I mean, the Russians have been doing this for 50 years. Just because this is before the Olympics, does that make it any less forgivable than what they did to Hungary or Czechoslovakia?

T&FN: It's not just a case where you're losing out on a medal and the fame that goes with it?

Virgin: I've seen the situation change in this country. I've gotten a lot of exposure due to road racing, which might not have been possible before. Back in 1972, hell, to be recognized you almost had to be in the Olympics, had to win a medal. Now, with the millions who are

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Paul Sutton/Duomo

competing in running, you can be a hero to those people without having won a gold medal. Bill Rodgers has proven that to be possible.

There's no doubt that if you come through, it will make you a household commodity. However, as far as I was concerned, I considered myself a contender for a medal for the first time this time around. I wanted that shot. I was disappointed in my performance in '76 and wanted to come back.

Even if I wanted to so-called "cash in my chips" and appear on a Wheaties box, my goal was to do well and then to try and achieve more, for there are higher goals to reach. I will stay eligible through '84, because whether there will be a Games or not, I will be in my best form, having my peak performances.

T&FN: *Hypothetical Olympic 10,000 final. Nobody's boycotted, everyone's in shape, everyone's there. How do you see the final?*

Virgin: Oh God, you guys are famous for this. After seeing Viren at the San Blas half-marathon, he would be a factor in the final. Two Africans, Henry Rono and Miruts Yifter, would be factors. I would say one of the British runners; Mick McLeod if he's healthy, though Brendan Foster has the experience and doesn't over-race. Vainio, I don't know enough about him. One of the Japanese, Seko or the Sou brothers, might be a factor. I would be a factor in the race, I know I would be.

T&FN: *You weren't picking yourself to win?*

Virgin: No, but I was picking myself to be in the top four. . .

What the hell; to tell you the truth, I've never gone into anything thinking I would get less than 1st, because if you do, that's when you normally lose. Self-image has a great deal to do with your racing ability.

If you're going to be successful, you have to believe in yourself, and I'd just as soon believe in myself as anybody else. I've known myself for 24 years, and I've made mistakes; I've had failures and I've had successes. And I'd bet on myself.

The evening is cool and slightly windy. After literally hours of talking and renewing acquaintances at his alma mater, Virgin is warming up for his race, shooting for the low 13:30s. The crowd is sparse and unenthusiastic, and Craig wonders later if it is in reaction to his boycott statements. Old friends have told him he should "cool it." The race itself is a solo 13:43.5 effort, uninspiring for an athlete who runs on emotion.

Afterwards, sister Sheree, 23, waits patiently for him as he runs his warmdown miles and talks with fans. Craig's parents and younger brother Brent haven't made this trip, as his mother is recovering from an illness.

The warmdown finally over, a few parting quotes for the newsmen, and it is into Craig's company car, a '78 Lincoln Continental, for the dash to the Auditorium on campus to catch sister Vicki's performance in a musical revue contest
The Bible of the Sport

among the student living groups. Finally, at midnight, Virgin's clock has wound down, and after saying goodbye to his sisters, he heads for a friend's house to get his average 7 hours.

Up at 8:00, Virgin is feeling the effects of the hard day before. The 5-mile morning run is about 6:30 pace.

Virgin: I can run road races year round. But I can't hop into a track race without doing the speedwork that is necessary. It's very possible to get a little lazy if you road race too much.

Some people won't like this description, but most road races you can win much easier than you can a track race. A good high-caliber track race requires 100% of your concentration, ability and effort. Sometimes in a road race, you can just respond and still pull it out of the fire. That's why I'll never give up track, because a track race requires something of everything.

Some people ask, "What's your favorite distance, the 10,000?" Not really, because even though I'm very good at it, 25 laps is very boring on the track. I would prefer the mile. It doesn't demand as much as the 10k does.

T&FN: *What's your overall opinion of the running boom?*

Virgin: Some people have carried it to an extreme. It's not a religion, it won't save your marriage, and it's not necessarily a new lease on life, and it's not for everyone.

What's good about it is that, physically, people do get to know their bodies again, and to get to know their limits, and then they can push against those limits. They gain a self-confidence which carries over into other aspects of their life.

T&FN: *Who do you think was the best road racer in the world last year?*

Virgin: That's not an easy one to answer, because who knows what Henry Rono or "Shifter" Yifter could have done.

T&FN: *Shifter Yifter?! Well, how about in the United States, then?*

Virgin: In the U.S., I would say that I would vote for myself, because of my range of distances, significant times at different distances, and I ran at a high level from January through August.

T&FN: *Do you enjoy life more when you're on stage. . .?*

Virgin: "Focus of attention," is that what you were going to say? Well, to give you an analogy, I have a hard time writing speeches anymore. I wait until I'm there, and all of a sudden my mind functions best, when the pressure is there.

In other words, I need the stimulus of being in a very dangerous, exciting, controversial situation to really bring out the best of me. The same in racing: every race is a threat, every race is a challenge to see how I'm going to react under stress situations.

The Piper Cherokee 180 is jouncing and dancing its way through the thermals, enroute from Rolla to Lebanon, two small towns, with pronunciations molded by their inhabitants into

Raula and Lubinun. Virgin is at the controls, his first-ever experience at handling a plane, and only a tightness in his shoulders indicates tension.

The pilot, a show-me Missourian named Del Day, had flown his passengers from Champaign to Rolla for its first annual Fun Run, dispensing flying tips and pointing out sights of interest along the way. As the plane slipped past the confluence of the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers, he waxed philosophic: "Why do I fly? I fly because it saves time, and it is so much safer than mixing it up with those dummies down on the road."

Once on the ground, there was the inevitable interview with the local TV station, with Craig answering more boycott questions, then a workout effort 15-minute 5000 in the fun run, followed by two hours of autograph-signing and question-answering.

Now, late in the day, Virgin pilots the plane by downtown St. Louis and makes a pass over his house 20 minutes later, the first time he has seen it from the air. He is, for a short time, home again.

Virgin's room in the basement of his family's 100-year-old brick farmhouse is jammed with clothes, all carrying the adidas trademark. Virgin is a consultant for adidas, one of his increasing numbers of business enterprises. He is clothed from head to toe in the product, and spends a good deal of his business hours planning the promotion of the company's products.

A visit to the offices of Front Runner Inc. on the second floor of a building on Lebanon's main street quickly dispell any thoughts that his business is simply a front for receiving appearance money for his races. The five-room complex has been tastefully redone in earthtones, and the place has an inviting, if at times frantic, ambience to it. Hanging plants, trophies, and a stereo system provide a backdrop to the constantly ringing telephone.

T&FN: *What is Front Runner Inc.?*

Virgin: It spans the gap between my athletics and my business, and the name is indicative of both. To me, business and athletics are intertwined. I didn't want to be an athlete who just survived on under-the-table money. So I looked at what was happening and decided it would be better to have a legitimate business which was involved in athletics, so that my athletics would not be a direct sacrifice of my business career.

When people ask me what Front Runner Inc is, I say it's a consulting firm, because it is. It's an umbrella organization for marketing, racing, product lines, community activities, and service organizations.

I see so many parallels between athletics and business: competition, preparation, the timing, the bold moves, the planning, the tactics, the execution. . . very similar. I feel very fortunate to have the background in athletics to help with my business.

T&FN: *Why are you an overachiever?*

Virgin: I've never been satisfied with mediocrity. What's there to be gained by just being a part of a whole large group?

I've learned one other thing: it's not how hard you work, but how you work hard. I've never had as much training as some people but the training I did have was really good for what I needed. Sometimes

it takes more than just training; you have to be able to do it in the clutch.

T&FN: *Is your lifestyle a "healthy" one?*

Virgin: In all honesty, I'm trying to do too many things right now. I'm pushing myself awfully hard. Sometimes I feel like I've already had a workout before I get to the workout. It requires intense concentration and nervous energy to get it done under all conditions. I'm fighting a kind of lingering cold which may have resulted in a sinus infection right now.

One thing I'm having to cope with is that as soon as you get to a certain point where—what do you want to call it? Celebrity status, or whatever—then you start to get opportunities, and you can't say "yes" to every one that comes along, no matter how you might want to.

I feel that I have to promote my sport, because I feel it is going to benefit not only myself but the rest of the runners. Running is not going to grow unless the people at the top put something back into it.

T&FN: *What's the biggest misconception people have about Craig Virgin?*

Virgin: Some people come in and try to paint a picture of a Midwestern, middle-American farmboy, fresh off the farm, hayseed still in his ear. Actually, I haven't done much farmwork in 2 years. There's a part of me that still belongs to the country. There's a conflict in me between the corporate, high-society-type things, and as well, I like the farm-type, simple types of things. I like to be able to step from one world to the next.

Some things people read represent me as a farm boy, and yes, I am a farm boy, and I'm also a businessman and enjoy the New York atmosphere as well as I like to sit in Lebanon at the Country Kitchen and just talk with people over coffee.

T&FN: *What about your personal life?*

Virgin: Well, the problem is that for the last 6 months I've been so involved in my running and my business, my personal life has taken a beating, so to speak. I've made some sacrifices, sometimes willing, sometimes unwilling. My family hasn't seen me much in the last year.

It has cost me in personal relationships; as far as the man-woman relationships are concerned, one very important one. It hurts more at some times than at others. It catches up with you when things aren't going well, or you have a moment to catch your breath and reflect on "Am I happy or not?"

It's very hard to achieve all the goals, everywhere at once, and to keep everybody happy. It's very hard to establish a relationship when you meet someone and you're gone the next day.

What can I say? You just survive it the best way you can. And I don't want to give *The Bible of the Sport*

up the other facets of my life.

T&FN: *A former teammate of yours has called you "incredibly selfish." What's your reaction to that?*

Virgin: Incredibly selfish... oh, I guess I'm very much oriented toward my goals and I have things that I'm striving to achieve, somehow, someway, sometime. I

"Running Is Not Going To Grow Unless The People At The Top Put Something Back Into It."

think to be able to keep your energy focused on achieving some sort of goal, you have to be a little bit selfish. Just like it seems to me that a champion is sometimes riding a thin line between being confident and sure of yourself, and being overconfident, abusive and obnoxious.

I operate best when people are either for me or against me. I don't do well in an arena of apathy. I'm motivated by emotional feelings; I need some sort of stimulus. That's why I can thrive on controversial-type issues. It brings up a certain amount of adrenaline. That's also why I like those moments of truth at the starting line, because when the pressure is on, some people are going to fold. I like those times, because that's what separates the men from the boys.

The next morning, after 6 hours of sleep, Virgin is up for his ritual as-he-feels 4-miler. The loop around the tan-colored farmland is a quiet one, with only a cast of hawks for company. The fields, too wet still for planting, are empty. Breakfast, shower, and into his turbo-charged Fiat X1/9, an auto of high performance, if dubious mechanical reliability. Virgin, who would like to race cars someday, attaches the radar detector to the rearview mirror for the ride to Belleville, 30M away. Craig has just joined the Optimist Club there, and he is late.

Slowing to the speed limit through Lebanon, Virgin waves at the policeman in the patrol car parked by the side of the road, father of one of his high school teammates.

Once on the interstate, he accelerates quickly, and punches in the Doobies on the stereo. A few miles later, the engine begins to miss and Craig pulls over for a quick inspection. One of the spark plug leads has come off, and he uses his knife to pry it into place. Virgin's hands shake slightly, a by-product of his hyperactivity.

At the Optimist's luncheon, he answers the Olympic boycott questions, and explains that he has bypassed the Boston Marathon that day because he had trained to run the Olympic Trials

marathon instead, and that you don't just jump into a marathon without preparation. He says that he will probably skip the Trials marathon now, and just run the track Trials.

T&FN: *There's talk of "open" road racing now. Would you go for the money?*

Virgin: If I could still compete in the Olympics. But if open running is to survive, it's going to have to have pretty sizable purses, some name individuals that people can relate to and either love or hate—don't have to love them, they can hate them.

T&FN: *You wouldn't have anybody in mind, would you?*

Virgin (grinning slyly): Not at this point. I'm looking at it as packaging a product. You can't have the Old Era runners packaging open running. You have to have the New Era runners who are as much businessmen as athletes, and showmen as well as athletes.

T&FN: *What do you mean Old and New Era runners?*

Virgin: Okay, if I had to pick a dividing line, the runners who had their top performances before 1976. I think it has been in the last 4 to 6 years that running has really evolved, has grown faster—the magazines, the media, the personalities have evolved. And I think the motivation of the Old Era runners was more pure and simple. Maybe they weren't content—but they appeared to be—with being in t-shirt, jeans and training flats, being a professional student for a number of years, and not thinking of running as anything that would help them in the rest of their life.

I don't think the competition has changed. It's just that the New Era runner has more sides; he's more multi-faceted than the Old Era runner. He's definitely more business-minded and more public relations and promotions-minded.

T&FN: *That's pretty candid stuff, and a lot of people aren't going to like it. One thing about your statements, I notice that you never claim you've been misquoted.*

Virgin: Well, some people could get really hyper and apprehensive, and I just try to flow along. I can shape the information that I give you. If you didn't know me, I could present any image to you that I wanted. But the best act I have is just to be me. □

Craig Steven Virgin (5-10/145) was born August 2, 1955 in Belleville, Illinois. Graduated from Lebanon, Illinois HS (coached by Hank Feldt) in 1973 and the University of Illinois (coached by Gary Wieneke) in 1977. Competed for Athletics West in 1978, now runs for the St. Louis TC. Set High School Record (8:40.9) 2M in 1973, 10,000 American Record (27:39.4) in 1979. Made '76 Olympic team in 10,000 (6th in his heat). His progression, with U.S. Rankings in parentheses (other bests—800 1:53.8, mile 4:03.2, marathon 2:14:40):

Year	Age	2M	5000	10,000
1971	15/16	8:57.4		
1972	16/17	8:52.0	14:14.6	
1973	17/18	8:40.9	13:58.2	
1974	18/19		13:57.8y	28:10.8y
1975	19/20	8:38.4	13:35.2 (6)	27:48.8y (7)
1976	20/21	8:25.3	13:35.3 (8)	27:59.4 (3)
1977	21/22	8:35.6i	13:42.1 (3)	28:22.5 (2)
1978	22/23	7:52.0m	13:25.4 (3)	27:57.2 (1)
1979	23/24	8:22.0	13:23.3 (3)	27:39.4 (1)