

FRANK SHORTER

by Tom Jordan

Maybe it's because when you run 15-20 miles a day, you haven't got much else to do except think about why you're out there, but marathoners always seem to have a lot more to say about their motivations, goals, and lifestyle than athletes in any other event, or sport, for that matter.

And if you could pick only one marathoner, who better to talk to than Frank Shorter? Not only is he articulate and intelligent, but he also has things to talk about.

Certainly his running career is noteworthy: Olympic marathon champion, second fastest US 10,000 man (27:51.4), 12:52.0 three-miler, four-time AAU cross country champion, No. 1 ranked in the marathon '72-'74, etc.

But Shorter has interests other than running. He's preparing to pass the Colorado Bar, having moved to Denver after graduating from Florida Law School. He enjoys good conversation, good company, and good beer. He's also a great person to interview as he has a habit of self-analysis which leads him off on interesting tangents when responding to questions.

As this interview started, however, Frank was engrossed in T&FN's Annual Edition, in which he was ranked No. 2 in the marathon behind Britain's Ian Thompson:

T&FN: You notice that we've ranked Thompson ahead of you; maybe he shouldn't be.

Shorter: Oh, no. No, he deserves to be ranked No. 1. He's won some good races in fast times.

T&FN: Rumor has it that he may not meet you until Montreal; at least he's apparently being counseled to wait until then by a lot of his countrymen. Are you looking forward to racing against him?

Shorter: I really haven't thought much about it. I think it would be an interesting race, as he's obviously a very good runner. But I haven't lost any sleep over it [tosses magazine aside].

T&FN: What was behind your move from Florida to Denver?

Shorter: My wife is in grad school there. This was sort of her chance. Finally after all my years of jumping around and running and being primarily athletic she gets to be where she wants to be, which I think is good.

T&FN: How do you like it?

Shorter: I like it there. I like training at altitude. I'm not a strength runner, but I am a "strain" runner, so I like the added strain on my training. In fact, I don't train much differently at altitude than I do at sea-level. I mean, my intervals are all at the same speed; I rest a little more, but basically I do the same things.

T&FN: Do you have any problems coming down from it?

Shorter: Not at Denver, because that's really not high enough that you have much of a problem. My best indoor season ever

[71], I was living in Boulder and that's what, 5600 feet, and that was the year I ran 8:26.6 and 13:10.6 on successive weekends.

T&FN: But you said something about feeling the effects when you came down for the AAU cross country last November?

Shorter: Well, then I was at 9000 feet, running up and down a hill not much less steep than this driveway out here [35° slope]. It'd be four miles down and four miles back and that was my route. You don't get much leg speed doing that. If I'd had a flat area and had been able to do some speed training, I probably would have done well; except that high up, I've found that it's almost too much.

T&FN: I was going to say, speed training at 9000 feet must be pretty tough.

Shorter: Actually, it was 9200 feet and I wasn't up there to train; I was up there to ski.

T&FN: Really. You don't worry about...?

Shorter: No, I've been skiing for years longer than I've been running. That's one of the reasons I wasn't good at Yale. I'd ski every weekend and I'd come back for a month at Christmas and at Spring Break and do nothing but ski. That sort of put a damper on my training.

T&FN: Sounds to me like you have the makings of a ski-bum.

Shorter: Well, I've sort of been a bum all my life. Skiing-running, it's all the same.

T&FN: But what about your Puritan Ethic you've referred to in the past?

Shorter: That's what that's all about [pointing to his law books]. If someone would pay me \$50,000 a year to run, you can be sure that I'd burn my notes.

T&FN: Back to running. How did Fukuoka [first in 2:11:32] go?

Shorter: I felt very bad. It was one of those days—you take 10 steps and you know you're in for a bad day. We went through the first 10 kilometers in 30:30 or something; the two previous years I'd been 29:40, so I was 50 seconds slower. 'Course in the end it showed me that maybe I shouldn't go out so fast, because I came back a lot faster.

But I was very stiff, and again, I think that I hadn't done enough speed training; although I'd run a four-mile time-trial at 4:25 pace four days before. So I was in good shape.

Still, I can never remember being as stiff and sore as I was in that race. The first

six miles, I was dropping back and running to catch up and dropping back... I remember that I kept thinking to myself, "God, I wonder who's going to win?" I kept looking at everyone else to see who looked best, you know, to try to figure out who might be the winner. Lesse looked about the best, but Manners looked incredible at the beginning there. God, those New Zealand guys are strong!

Anyway, it was an all-around bad race and I kept trying to put it away. After halfway, I said, "Aw hell, I might as well blow up while I'm ahead, and so I ran real hard. I think I ran 15:09 for the next five kilometers after the halfway mark. And Lesse was the only one to stay with me.

Still, I couldn't get away until about 35 kilometers, about three or four miles from the end. I just sort of looked over and said, "Well, try it again." And I moved away and he just didn't come; I mean no response at all. So then I knew it would be all right and that I would finish.

Lesse does have a tendency to blow up at the end, though, so I kind of knew that if I didn't blow up myself, that I'd be all right. But, man, I didn't like the race at all.

T&FN: But you came back a week later and ran another marathon in Hawaii (2:33:22 in fourth).

Shorter: What happened was that I'd promised that I'd go out there, because I'd done some things at Cooper's Institute [see February, p. 53] and they were supposed to have a study out there as well. Also, I thought there were two weeks between Fukuoka and the Hawaii race when I accepted.

It was significantly harder than the Fukuoka race. If it had been an easier race, I might still have been able to win it. But I knew 10 steps out that it was just a question of time before my hamstring, which had been cramping during Fukuoka, would go out on me. So, at about 16 miles—we were all running together pretty slowly, about 2:25 pace actually—it just went. That race was a race of attrition.

T&FN: Do you enjoy the pure act of running?

Shorter: Yeah. I think my problem is that I'm probably not as hyper-competitive as most of the other people that I run against. I think that's why Kenny Moore and I are such good friends. I mean, we like to win and we like to beat people, but I think my threshold is a little lower than most people's—where I say this is enough of this, this is where it stops. So I sometimes have it bad, because I would rather train more than run races. If I had my

druthers, I would probably run about half as many races as I do run.

T&FN: You run a lot of races though. You're always on the indoor circuit.

Shorter: Yeah. Yeah, well that's more economic than anything and also you have to realize that you have to run races to keep sharp; you can't just stagnate. But I don't like the indoor races, because comparatively, I'm just not as good at them. I can run 12:52 outdoors, but I don't think I can run 8:14. I think my line is somewhere around 2.8 miles. Two miles can get on me, because I absolutely have to be on top of it to run well. Like last week, what a bomb! I felt fine, but then all of a sudden, slow motion set in. It was really strange. I realized looking back that I hadn't done any speedwork and there was no reason I should be running fast. So the indoor season hinders me, in that I have to train a little differently for the distance.

T&FN: How much do you hurt in a 10,000-meter race? Is it a very gradual thing?

Shorter: It's not "hurt." You just try to keep yourself going. You reach a certain point where you just don't think you can do it anymore and you have to sort of talk yourself into going past that point. But it's not really pain; it's more a decision, "Well, am I going to do it, or am I not going to do it?"

That's the way I look at it. Do I really want it today? And if it's "yes" then I do try to win and if it's "no," I don't. In a way it's giving up. I think there's a point in every race where everyone decides whether or not they're going to try to win it. I think that happens to everybody.

T&FN: Most people can't even run one 5:00 mile and you're able to string together 26 of them. Does that ever boggle your mind?

Shorter: Yeah, I can't just sit here and decide that I'm going to put on my shoes and go out to run even 15 miles at 5:00 pace. You just have to be in the race situation. Getting pulled along is a big thing. I think that's where a lot of the confidence comes in. If you can be confident in a race, a mile, half-mile, or marathon, any race, let other people pull you along until that point where you decide you want to go, then you just have the definite advantage. But if you decide that you've got to get away, that's where the guy with good speed has the advantage,

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all the way up the line.

T&FN: Well, you have good speed don't you?

Shorter: I could probably run 53 maybe for the quarter-mile. It's all right, but...

T&FN: I read somewhere that you have your gold medal locked away in a safe deposit box? Any particular reason?

Shorter: No, it's just that I put it there about two weeks after I got it and I've just never taken it out.

T&FN: Then you're not a mantelpiece man?

Shorter: No, it just stays there. In fact I probably couldn't tell you what's on it except that there's a lady on one side. But other than that...

When I settle down, and have my trophy case, then maybe. Maybe I'm a little superstitious about that stuff. I don't want to set up a situation where you're giving emphasis to what you've done in the past. When you reach that point, you've sort of retired. I'd rather just keep doing it for a while.

T&FN: How's the law going?

Shorter: I'm studying for the bar right now. What a bummer! It's really terrible. I think that's what's weighing on me right now; there's just so much you have to know. The questions are so very general,

which makes things harder.

T&FN: Do you think you could have gained an equivalent amount of satisfaction from something else, besides running?

Shorter: I think so. If you do put the effort into another area and you get success in it, then the satisfaction is very personal.

What's sort of bothered me is that since I've been in both areas, running and law, the success in athletics sort of precludes success in academics as far as others are concerned. I think the academic part of our society does latently, perhaps sub-consciously, get back at a lot of athletes. Again the old "dumb jock" syndrome, but at a higher level.

It has bothered me, and I'm almost to the point where I have to act quickly, or I'm going to be shut out, legally. Like I was going around interviewing in the Palo Alto area and just zero! I think what bothered me the most was that I was so summarily dismissed. I got the feeling that they were taking my deciding to be an athlete for a while as evidence of my lack of intellectual capacity. Maybe I was taking too much

affront at this, but it got me a little pissed off.

But getting the reaction I did got me thinking—should I go another 18 months; go back for another Olympics? I'm going to really have to want to do it. That's sort of what this whole conversation has been building towards: if I decide that I want to go back and run another Olympics, then everything is going to have to be right and I'm really going to have to want to do it.

T&FN: You really haven't decided yet?

Shorter: No. No. Everyone says, "well, are you going back to another Olympics?" and the answer is a definite "maybe." Right now, it's probably "no."

T&FN: Really? Don't you think you'll be feeling some pressures? People saying "It's only another 18 months; stick it out." Like someone once told Don Kardong, "You've got the rest of your life to work..."

Shorter: Yeah, well someone like Don Kardong, I think he should, because he probably should have made the Olympic team the last time. He just didn't do the right things; I just wish that I had been his coach or something, kicking him in the ass. He's really a good talent.

I get these feelings about different runners. I had the feeling about Wohlhuter

when I first met him and saw him run. Kardong I have that same kind of feeling toward. They really have all the attributes to be very good runners. I think that if I met myself, I would not really think that I had those attributes, both physical and mental. I think my weakness is that I'm just not that big and strong. My size may help, okay, maybe for the marathon, but for the shorter races . . .

T&FN: *But anyone who can run 12:52 . . .*

Shorter: Yeah, I guess I'm just feeling a little negative because of the Olympic thing. I don't know. It's just not the same as before. In my instance, I really have to go back wanting to win, it's not just a question of making the team: I'd almost prefer that situation, because there is so much less pressure than there is now: If you go back, you're supposed to win. And you have to say, "Now hold on, I have to pursue this in an A-B-C-D fashion." It's not like I wake up that morning and just go run. I'm kind of in limbo now in that I don't know exactly where I'm going to be next year at this time.

T&FN: *Do you set immediate goals? Like running against Thompson, or Fukuoka next year?*

Shorter: No . . . No, I think that my trouble right now is that I'm really not looking forward to any of it. I think that right now I'm at a low point of enthusiasm.

The trouble is that you have to have so little in the way of outside stimuli and diversion to be able to really train the way you have to, and maybe one of my problems is that I've gotten so far along in another field that I haven't had the mental time for training. You can run 120-130 miles per week and really not train, and that's sort of what I've been doing. Maybe when I get settled down and the Bar gets through, then maybe I can really start to think about what is going to happen; what my decision about the Olympics will be.

T&FN: *Do you miss training partners?*

Shorter: Yeah, I do. But in a way, it was funny. Nobody in Florida trained with me. I don't think they liked the way I ran my intervals.

T&FN: *We've heard that you're a monster-man doing intervals.*

Shorter: Yeah, well, but I figure if I had me to train with, I'd train with me. Jack had the same sort of thing down there; no one would train with him. I said, "Hell, here's this guy, I'll train with him."

Also, I think the competitors and joggers are so far apart mentally. I'd say that about 80% of my running is done at speeds where anybody could keep up for at least 60% of the workout. If there were a bunch of joggers in Denver who wanted to come out and train with me everyday, I'd like nothing better. But you know, I don't want to talk times; I don't want to talk about Dr. Sheehan all the time. I want to talk politics, women; I want to get a little lewd, I want to have fun. Those goddam joggers, I shouldn't say joggers, the

non-competitors, say, are so serious. It's such a hobby with them they talk about nothing else. So if I could just find somebody who could run with me and have fun doing it without talking my ear off every day asking about the guy who ran ahead of me, that'd be fun.

T&FN: *Are you a track fan, at all?*

Shorter: I like to watch. And I know all the guys from having traveled around. And sometimes I sure as hell would rather just be sitting there watching the meet than having to get ready to run, I can tell you. Again, maybe I'm almost more of a fan than a competitor; I like being around it.

T&FN: *Maybe you ought to work for T&FN.*

Shorter: You get a Sante Fe office . . .

T&FN: *Is that where you want to end up, Sante Fe?*

Shorter: Oh, somewhere around there, probably Taos. I like to ski there a lot.

T&FN: *Do you like Taos? Because I remember all the horror stories [Frank intervened when a girl was being bothered and was harassed himself].*

Shorter: Naah, that was just one time. Let's see, one guy's dead of an overdose, the other guy is in prison for years and years, and the third guy split. These were three brothers. These three guys were nice guys: one night, about a month later, they decided that they didn't like their old man; they beat the crap out of him and tossed him out the front door of their house. That's the kind of guys they were, so they weren't your usual inhabitants of anywhere.

It's still a very visceral thing though; you can intellectualize it to death, but you run down roads where things happen and you still get goose bumps, there's nothing you can do about it.

But I really like the area; in fact I may just go down there tomorrow and do some skiing [looking at watch]. Hey, I've got to get some breakfast . . .

T&FN: *What do you have for breakfast before a race?*

Shorter: Pancakes, french toast. I don't eat very much compared to the other runners. I know my calorie intake is below 2000. When we used to go on trips, Jack would get all my meals on the plane and then usually half of what I couldn't eat at night. Jack Bacheler eats three times what I do.

T&FN: *Do you follow a carbohydrate-loading diet before a marathon?*

Shorter: I haven't; I may. Knock another three minutes off . . .

T&FN: *Do you have any real models in track?*

Shorter: I think you can get too far into it. I used to like Ron Clarke's attitude towards the whole thing. I get this aura of someone who did it because he liked to do it. What really impressed me was that, after retiring, he said he'd stop running except that he just couldn't stand to miss the Sunday runs where they'd go out for a 20

mile run through the bush. I said, "That's my kind of runner."

T&FN: *A little word association here. If I were to say Steve Prefontaine, what do you think of?*

Shorter: He's a good friend. I like to think of myself as a fairly gregarious person, and I like to think that I get along pretty well with the rest of the runners, and I get along with him, probably better than the others. I know that there is kind of an Oregon cult up in Eugene now, where they stick pins in Steve in the morning when they get up, and I can't see how they can be like that. Now maybe if I lived around him and had to train with him every day, it would be different; okay, maybe he's a little cocky, but I would be too if I could run the way he does in the races he does.

In a way, I wish he could just get it all together sometime and go to Europe and run 13:10; I'd love to see him go to the World Games and just say "Okay, there's nobody else on the track, Frank, just give me my splits," and then run his little buns off. And forget that someone might be on his tail to outkick him, because I think that's what bothers him when he goes to Europe is that he thinks that there's a new Kvalheim . . .

T&FN: *But he's run a 3:55 mile.*

Shorter: Right, I think if he had had Marty Liquori on his shoulder instead of me, I think he would have lost. I say that, he's a great friend of mine, but that's on thing he's got to get over. Because I wasn't sitting there in the 12:52 race saying, "he's a 3:55 miler, I've run 4:02, I'm not going to win;" I tried to win, I almost did . . . I think that if he can get over that . . .

T&FN: *You once said that you thought that you "fit" the marathon, both physically and mentally. What do you like to run?*

Shorter: I really don't know. I don't think aesthetically that any race is different . . . I kind of like the longer ones, now that I start to fit them into slots.

I like the race where you can really feel the attrition coming on, where you can feel that slow, creeping-up-on-you. Yeah, I like the longer ones, where you're out there and you really have time to think it all over.

T&FN: *You've mentioned Lesse and the New Zealanders. What's your opinion of your other competitors? Ron Hill, for example?*

Shorter: Ron Hill tries too hard, I think. Again, that might just be the difference in personalities. I can try as hard as I can, but always with a little reservation in case something happens and I don't win. I don't know, I just always get the impression that he's trying too hard. He not quite loose enough. But who am I criticize? Everybody's got his little neurotic hangups.

I'm just trying to help these guys to get better. I just hope they don't start taking my advice and start beating me. □