

## T&FN INTERVIEW

# Evan Jager

by Don Kopriva

**M**aking the most of his brief steeplechase career, Evan Jager debuted in the splash-and-dash race at 8:26.14 in '12, set an American Record of 8:06.41 in just his fourth final ever, lowered that to 8:04.71 in final No. 12, and then to 8:00.45 in No. 15.

It was that No. 15 that really opened eyes, as he came close to joining the sub-8:00 club—and beating the No. 1 World Ranker—even though he fell while leading at the final barrier in Paris in July.

A 3-time All-America in the mile/2M as a prep, he had one successful year at Wisconsin before heading west to join coach Jerry Schumacher in Oregon and run for cash.

His early pro career found him making Team USA in the 5000 in '09, but was then derailed when he broke a navicular bone in his right foot in '10

of the sport caused me to think about getting a college athletic scholarship.

Because I enjoyed it so much, I probably just wanted to do that the rest of my life but I didn't know what that meant because I definitely did not follow the sport at all. I was pretty much set on being a professional soccer player until I found running. I just assumed that if you could be a pro soccer player you could be a professional runner.

**T&FN:** As you look back on your decision to leave Wisconsin and run professionally under Jerry, was it a difficult one?

**Jager:** It was extremely tough making the decision. Initially it sounded so cool and it had been a dream of mine for so long to run professionally that immediately I told myself that that was what I was going to do and didn't really think about it. But after I had some time to realize what it would mean I took a step back and really weighed my options and talked to some people.

It took me a good month of going back and forth between staying at Wisconsin and moving out to Portland, because I would be giving up so much in terms of collegiate running, leaving behind that experience, being a little bit closer to home and losing all the guys on the team at Wisconsin. Those were hard things to give up.

I wanted to run under Jerry's coaching after college, so that was my plan if things went well, and I wanted to be the best runner I could be.

**T&FN:** You had great success quickly as a pro with the 5K, making the World team, but the steeple has really changed everything for you. How did that come about?

**Jager:** We all landed on it about the same time. I don't think Jerry or Pascal had brought it up before I came to them with the idea, although they had been talking to each other about it. It kind of came at a little bit of a weird time because it was less than a year removed from my surgery [July '10] and it was in spring of 2011 when we had this conversation.

I honestly couldn't tell you what sparked it, but Jerry said since I wasn't yet running pain-free yet from surgery, he didn't think it was a smart thing to do. Being able to jump and land is huge.

We decided that if I was able to resume training in the fall after the 2011 season and be training and running pain-free we'd give it a shot and start doing some steeple drills and going over barriers. If I took to it well, then



### Jager In A Nutshell

**•Personal:** Evan Reese Jager ("jay" as in the bird) was born March 8, 1989, in Algonquin, Illinois; 6-2/145 (1.88/66)

**PRs:** 800—1:50.10i ('10); 1500—3:32.97 ('15); Mile—3:53.33 ('14); Steeple—8:00.45 AR ('15); 3000—7:35.16 ('12); 5000—13:02.40 ('13) (8, x A).

**Schools:** Jacobs HS (Algonquin) '07; Wisconsin 2007–08; now represents the Bowerman TC

**Coaches:** Jason Borhart, Kevin Christian, Rob Piercy (HS); Jerry Schumacher (Wisconsin); Schumacher, Pascal Dobert (professional)

**Major Meets:** 1500—8)NC, 1)USJr, 8)WJr '08; 12)US '11. Steeple—1)OT, 6)OG '12; 1)US, 5)WC '13; 1)US '14; 1)US, 6)WC '15. 5000—3)US, 11)WC '09

**World/U.S. Rankings:** 1500—x/7 '09; ?? '15. Steeple—10/1 '12; 10/1 '13; 2/1 '14; ?? '15. 5000—x/5 '09; x/5 '13; x/7 '14.

and needed most of '11 to recover from surgery.

But '12 brought a new year and a new event, and with it, status as one of the best in the world in his new discipline. And with a 3:32.97 in the 1500 this year, evidence of pure speed that few other steeplers can match has been added to the mix.

We caught up with Jager as he wound down from a 2015 campaign that brought mixed emotions and prepared for the Olympic year to come:

**T&FN:** When did you begin running?

**Jager:** I started with cross country in 7th grade. I grew up playing soccer and I realized I could run up and down the field the entire game and never feel that tired, so I kind of was intrigued with distance running and thought it sounded cool and knew that I was looking forward to doing it.

**T&FN:** When did you realize that you could be really good at this running thing?

**Jager:** It was my sophomore year when I really thought I might have a chance at being pretty good, but I'm not sure I knew what that meant. At that time, my level of understanding

we'd give steeple training a try.

By October, I started doing steeple drills. I took to it really fast and felt comfortable doing it after just two weeks of going over barriers. It just got easier the more I practiced and it seemed more natural. I looked on it as being so much fun, and trying something new, just having so much potential in front of me that

JIRO MICHIZUKI/IMAGE OF SPORT

**“When I started running the steeple, I wanted it to be taken seriously as an event and not looked at as one that guys would go to if they were not fast enough for the 15 or good enough for the 5K”**



was untapped and unknown.

**T&FN:** *With your build and speed and distance running ability, are you a man who's perfect for the steeple?*

**Jager:** I look at myself as a distance runner who is better at the steeple than any other event, but immediately after deciding to go to it, I didn't want to be looked at as just a

steeplechaser. I want to be one of the best all-around distance runners in the U.S. I know how I feel about it but I want to prove to everyone else that I can run fast times over the flat distances.

I've been looking toward sub-13:00 for a long time now but I don't get too many opportunities to run a fast 5K. Obviously, I'm looking at sub-8.

**T&FN:** *Fewer than 3 months after your first steeple, you were the American Record holder in the event, on the Olympic team and then 6<sup>th</sup> in the Olympics. Did it kind of boggle your mind a bit?*

**Jager:** Yeah, a little bit. I think it was just really exciting. I think what really shocked me was being one of the favorites going into the Trials that year. I kind of went into that season hoping to be one of the top guys in the steeple and if everything went well possibly being the No. 1 guy.

I definitely did not expect to be 6<sup>th</sup> in the Olympics. I don't know if I had really even thought past the Trials.

When you have a race and things go well, you set your expectations a little higher, and you kind of just build naturally throughout the course of the season. Expectations and goals change, so it's not like an all-in-one-moment kind of thing, more kind of slowly getting there.

**T&FN:** *You've often mentioned having fun, taking joy in running.*

**Jager:** I think that it's helped me to have as much success as I've had. My entire career, my life, just enjoying what I do every single day makes it so much easier. I have a great time going out with the guys for a run, just chatting. There are very few parts of this that I treat like a job.

I definitely work for everything, but the running aspect of the job itself is just so much fun to me that it makes it really easy to keep going. It's helped me a ton over my career.

Some of the best feelings I've ever had have been after great races but at the same time being in mid-season and late-season and being on top of your game, in great fitness and being able to handle any workout that Jerry can throw at you and feel good doing it is an awesome feeling.

**T&FN:** *Since your 2010 surgery, how have you stayed injury-free?*

**Jager:** I think it's a lot of things. I've been able to stay on top of physios pretty regularly, at least once or twice a week, pretty much every week. I've gotten into a good routine, knowing what I need after workouts as far as recovery goes. We've had an extremely consistent—consistently good—program to help take care of the body and keeping the entire body strong.

After the surgery year my high weeks of mileage have been pretty much between 80 and 90, mostly 85–90 miles a week for the last 4–5 years. I've found what works for me.

In that first year of the steeple, I was trying to hit 85 miles and everything went so well for me that year that I've tried not to change too much. It's a lot of work but my body handles it really well and I've been confident in not pushing the envelope too much. I'm just trying to improve fitness by staying healthy and getting in consistent work.

I just let the mad scientist that is Jerry do his thing and come up with the workouts and try to do whatever he tells me to do.

**T&FN:** *How has your relationship with Jerry changed as you've gone from age 18 to 26?*

**Jager:** There's more of a discussion now when it comes to training than when I first came out here. I knew so little about training and what it meant to be a professional runner that I wouldn't have wanted that discussion.

I trusted Jerry to get me to be the best athlete I could. Now, after 7 years, I have that understanding, and more importantly, what works for me, so the last couple years there's

## Paris Changed Everything

Already a podium threat when the year began, Evan Jager found himself in a new league after his almost-sub-8:00 race in Paris. That was a game changer.

“It wasn't the fall that affected me,” he explains. “If anything, I was a little too fit too early on and it was difficult for me to maintain that from the Portland Track Festival all the way through the World Champs; a little too long of a stretch. That could have been one problem.

“It wasn't the fall that did anything negative to me, but it completely changed everything about the steeple in a matter of seconds. Had things gone normally and I had finished my normal 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> position in that race, like 5–7 seconds back of Jairus Birech, I probably would have gone into Worlds being on the outside looking in and having zero pressure.

“It changed my mindframe from having a good shot to medal to being one of the favorites, and that I could possibly win the race, and I should medal. Things changed on such a large scale that I guess I just wasn't ready for that. There was a lot to deal with—and that was a good thing—you want to be in that situation.

“I don't think there is any one thing that made me have a bad race in Beijing.

“One, I started thinking differently about the race, how I could do, and two, I was just kind of running on fumes.”

## Jager — continued

been much more discussion, not a one-sided conversation.

**T&FN:** *Has your tolerance for tough workouts changed? Are you at the point yet at almost 27 where things maybe hurt a little more?*

**Jager:** I might be getting there. Thankfully, I've stayed incredibly injury-free—not to jinx myself—since my surgery. Obviously, a few little things crop up over the course of a year—an Achilles thing, a calf thing, a hamstring thing—but I've been able to manage everything for the most part without taking too much time off, maybe a couple days at a time here and there.

If I've noticed anything, it's just that I'm generally getting stronger.

I can handle a lot more strength work and running without it beating my body up too much.

The first few years out here I could do the same amount of work but it was a lot harder and took a greater toll on my body. The only thing now is that I wake up in the morning a little stiffer, my ankles and feet.

**T&FN:** *What's the strongest part of your race?*

**Jager:** One of my greatest assets against my competitors is my ability to hurdle without changing pace too much, kind of taking the hurdle in stride and continuing my running after the hurdle. I try not to let it change the pace too much. Also, I'd say my ability to handle a fast pace early on and still stay within myself through the middle and later stages of the race.

I really realized that this year, that while a fast pace may not be super comfortable early on, I can afford to do that and still run a fast time as opposed to going out a little bit slower and then chill throughout the race. In Paris, without the fall, it was the best race of my career.

### Coping With That WC 6<sup>th</sup>

Like most athletes, Evan Jager has had his share of disappointing results. How does he deal with that?

"Sometimes I'm pretty good, sometimes pretty bad," he says. "I definitely let a bad race where I didn't run up to expectations bug me for a while.

"I let bad workouts bug me for 1–2 days, especially when I know the season is getting down to crunch-time and a big race is coming up. If I underperform in a workout I let it bug me in a way that motivates me.

"I wouldn't say it makes me question myself, it just gets me a little irritated that I couldn't do my job on that day and gives me a little bit of a kick in the butt.

"There are some races that I've let bother me a little too long. This summer, the World Champs didn't go the way that I had hoped and that took

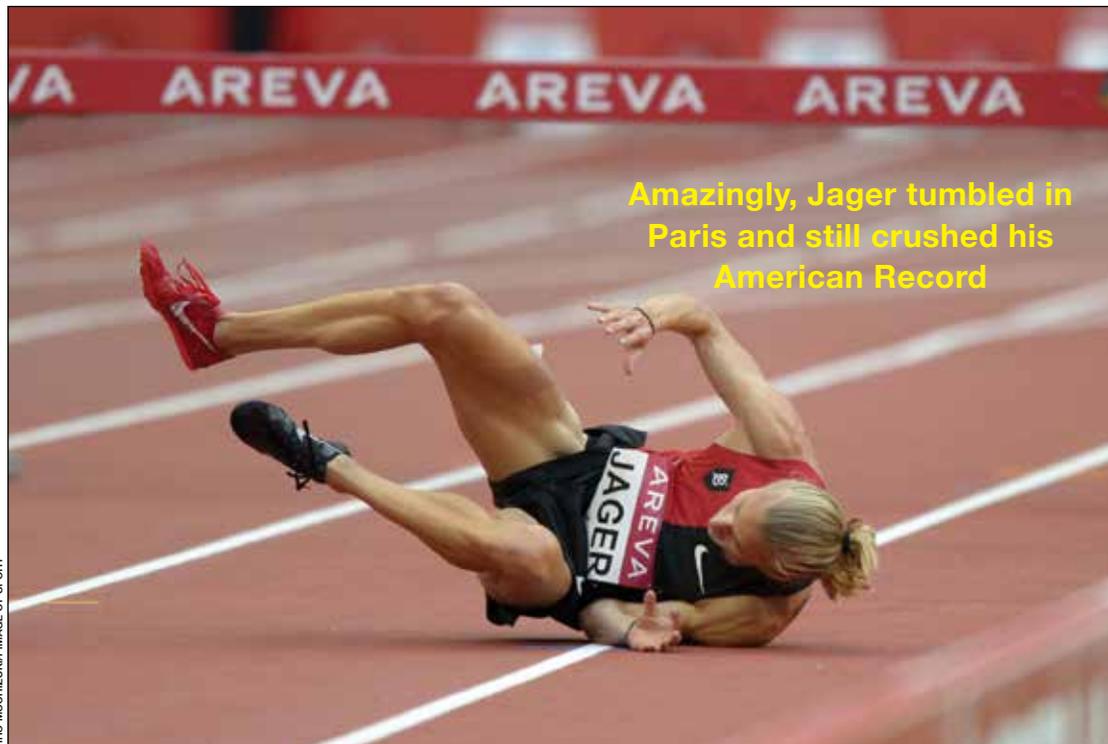
**T&FN:** *Even with that fast pace, you felt comfortable?*

**Jager:** I took over the lead with 900 to go and felt good. I put everything I had into the last water jump and I just felt it suck the life right out of me when I landed. I got to the last

I could still break 8.

**T&FN:** *Do you think your success has raised the profile of U.S. steeplechasing?*

**Jager:** When I started running the steeple, I wanted it to be taken seriously as an event and not looked at as one that guys would go



Amazingly, Jager tumbled in Paris and still crushed his American Record

barrier and was just extremely gassed, but I just couldn't get my trail leg over it. I didn't have enough energy or strength to keep myself from falling.

**T&FN:** *When you went down...?*

**Jager:** I was paying attention to the clock the last lap, and I realized where I was at. I saw it with 100m to go and saw something like 7:41 and thought that I was going to smash 8:00. As soon as I fell, the only thing going through my head was that I had to get up because maybe

to if they were not fast enough for the 15 or good enough for the 5K. It's a really fun event and that's one of the reasons I've stuck with it. I'd like some of the raw talent from high school to get into it. It would be cool to have a resurgence in the steeplechase and to get it up to where the 15 and 5K are on the world stage.

**T&FN:** *Have you become a student of your event, a tactician?*

**Jager:** I try to run it as if it's on the flat. Tactics are a little different when it comes to championship racing just because the barriers do pose such a big problem, so I've looked at how the Kenyans go at championship-style racing and I know how each one of them would ideally prefer to race.

Kicking the last 300m of a race over barriers is much more difficult than the last 300 of a flat race.

**T&FN:** *How long do you want to keep going?*

**Jager:** I would love to do this as long as I possibly can. Running at 31 doesn't seem like that much of a stretch but at 35, well, it would probably be fun to run that long. It would be a good goal to run until 2024.

I've mentioned a marathon to Jerry and he kind of laughed it off but I think I could run a couple marathons at the end of my career. It'd be fun, though not the training, but the race itself would be a fun challenge. □