

JOE FALCON

by SIEG LINDSTROM

During his 1989 tour of the European Circuit, Joe Falcon—newly graduated from Arkansas and mindful that he had stood 5-6 since his frosh year in high school—became slightly more suspicious of foreign washing machines each time he used one.

"I started noticing that the washing machines were shrinking my jeans or something," he remembers. "All of a sudden they were getting short on me. I told my wife, 'Hey, I think I'm growing,' and she'd just laugh."

The Missouri native was growing, though, eventually adding two inches. The development pleased him, as he had always wanted to list himself at 5-8 in the Razorback media guide were it not for coach John McDonnell's practice of meticulously measuring his athletes himself.

At the same time, Falcon was continuing steady athletic growth that had seen him progress from a TAC Junior runner-up spot at 1500m in '84 through seven NCAA titles—in cross country, indoors and out—to a 3:51.07 3rd-place finish in Oslo's Dream Mile in '89.

The 24-year-old's growth spurt has stopped in 1990, but his athletic stature was enhanced by a 13:20.49 for 5000 at the Prefontaine meet and an easy-appearing TAC 1500 win. Then it was his return to the Dream Mile, where he broke the magic 3:50 barrier by 0.69 to defeat a stellar field which included Peter Elliott.

Falcon went on to win a kicker's race at the Goodwill Games and a rabbit-paced effort befouled by winds at the New York Games before he learned that troublesome breezes were to be the least of his troubles.

At his next race, the Van Damme Memorial, a rival's spike pierced his left Achilles sheath, cut-

ting short his season and eventually confining him to a walking cast.

We caught Falcon relaxing at his Springfield, Missouri, home with his wife, Karen. He has spent the fall recruiting distance runners for Southwestern Missouri and as of mid-October was running an hour a day guided by mentor Dave Denny, who also coached him as a prep.

Falcon has suffered setbacks before. He tripped in the '86 NCAA Cross Country race and the '89 NCAA 1500 final. Unexpectedly, he ran poorly in the '88 Trials 1500 (11th) and the '89 NCAA Indoor 3000 (13th).

He says he is ready, as he was on those occasions, to bounce back again:

T&FN: Besides "accidents can happen," what did the 1990 season teach you?

Falcon: It taught that my planning for the World Championships and Olympics is definitely going to change.

T&FN: In what way?

Falcon: Instead of running the indoor season, I'll train and get ready for the World Cross Country Championships.

Dave and I think that the training I'll do for that—all the base that I had put in last fall at this time—is what enabled me to have a good year last season. I had 100M a week through January; 12 weeks of it.

T&FN: What races have you planned?

Falcon: I'm looking at running three races and then the World Trials in Florida for my fourth. They'll be [European] cross country races. I'll only do a road race if I can't find a cross country.

T&FN: Would you classify your Oslo race as the precise point of a major breakthrough for you?

Falcon: A lot of people didn't realize that I'd also won in Stockholm and Lille. Stockholm could have had a field as good as the Dream Mile, excluding Peter [Elliott]. You had Kirochi, you had Di Napoli, you had Jens-Peter Herold. They are all going to be the guys in the next two years in the World Championships and the Olympics.

Beating them in a slow, sit-and-kick kind of race and then winning a fast race in Oslo, my confidence level was so high.

T&FN: How has your thinking about the future changed from, say, three years ago?

Falcon: I really thought I would have to run the 5000, coming from Arkansas, where, in all honesty, my first two years I wasn't good enough to run on a 4 x 1500 at a Texas Relays or Penn Relays.

T&FN: Winning the NCAA 10,000 as a third-year soph did sort of mark you as a distance runner.

Falcon: I didn't run the 1500 really until my junior year. The first time I ran it seriously, I ran 3:35. When I did that, I said, "I think the 1500 is definitely my event."

But then there comes the Olympic Trials and I get blasted over the last lap and my confidence just shoots back down and I'm like, "Well, I'm definitely not a 1500m runner."

What really turned it around was that this year I was supposed to run a race in the Penn Relays but I went up there and got sick and couldn't run.

Dave then had me just doing a lot of distance and all of my longer intervals,

Falcon's Training Aid

Joe Falcon's newest tool as he prepares for 1991 and beyond is the physiological-testing project of David Martin at Georgia State. Martin, with USOC funding and TAC support, has been aiding elite U.S. distance runners since 1981.

Project athletes—including noted milers Jim Spivey and Seb Coe (who paid his own expenses to take part)—have visited Martin during several phases of their training years.

"We look at their training logs," says Martin, "and look at their fitness, and look at how their training has changed their fitness over time. We want to help them refine their training."

Falcon—fresh off a string of victories at The Dream Mile, Goodwill and the New York Games—visited Martin's lab at the beginning of August for blood-chemistry profiling, strength testing, analysis of his running economy and treadmill work.

He learned that his VO₂ max tested at 77 ml/kg/min, that his heart rate slows after hard effort less quickly than most world-

class runners, and that his tolerance for lactic acid was among the highest his testers had seen. He also found out what an unyielding opponent the treadmill can be.

"I can remember when I went in there," he recalls. "Like all athletes, I said, 'What's the record on the treadmill?'"

Informed that setting a "record" required that he run on the gradually steepening treadmill at 6:00-mile pace for a minute or so after it tilted to an 11% grade, Falcon commenced his attempt to beat the machine.

"I can remember when I got to 10% and I got to a minute, I thought my legs were going to just jello on me," he says. "It wasn't something that built up; it just hit me. I literally almost passed out within the next 15 seconds and I grabbed onto the rail. But as it worked out I went to 10.5 or 10.6% or something like that."

The sensations of treadmill running aside, Falcon is eager to learn more: "I'm going back November 15, which will be good because I'll be at basically my worst shape I have ever been in. So we'll get a good idea of how far I can progress and then go from there." /SL/



ALLSPORT/Mike Powell

all in the grass. He came down and watched me do a session and he said, "You know, you're probably in the best shape I've ever seen you in."

I said, "Well, I have no idea what kind of shape I'm in."

He said, "Let's do a 1200 on the track," since I missed the Penn Relays.

T&FN: *How did it go?*

Falcon: Well, I went out on my own and ran 2:50-flat off of not having been on the track. Dave said, "Listen, if you can run 2:50-flat having not touched the track, there's no reason—once you start doing things—you can't run 2:46 or 2:47, and you don't have to be very smart in math to figure out how fast you can run in a mile if you can do that."

T&FN: *As recently as this summer you said you would move up to the 5000.*

Falcon: I'll admit it, I've been very bad. People will say, "What are you going to do?"

"I'm definitely running the 5," then the next year, "I'm definitely running the 15." I can't do that anymore; as Dave says, we need to say what we're going to do. Now let's plan and see what's best to do for that.

Without question, '91 and '92 it's the 1500. After that then, if we want to think things over we can. But this year's shown that Joe Falcon is as good as the next guy on the line. Now it's a matter of, one, who's the most confident, and, two, who can handle the pressure the best.

T&FN: *Have you learned a lot about tactics, racing in Europe?*

Falcon: Tremendously. I kind of have a belief now, and it's my own little thought, that the guy who has enough guts to wait until the very latest usually wins.

At the level we're at, whoever's at their top speed over the last 100 is normally going to win. In all my races that I won in Europe this year, I would just force myself to wait until the last 100 and go.

T&FN: *Is there one particular race that particularly exhilarates you to recall it?*

Falcon: In all honesty, probably the race that fired me up and still to this day means more than any other race was my senior year at Arkansas when I won the NCAA Cross Country Championships.

T&FN: *You had tripped while kicking in a close race with Aaron Ramirez the year before.*

Falcon: The year that I won the championships, a lot of people don't remember this, but I got a real bad flu bug, and was like 35th, and collapsed and fainted



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FALCON INTERVIEW — cont:

and ended up in the hospital three weeks before at the conference meet. I didn't run a step for like two weeks before the nationals.

I can remember saying to myself as we were driving out to Virginia, "I'm going to pick out the hardest part of the course and I'm just going to sprint as hard as I can at that point and just see what happens."

As it worked out, probably the only really big hill on the entire course was with about a mile and a half to go. I hung in there and hung in there, and right before I got about 20 feet from the top I just started sprinting as hard as I could all the way to the top. I turned the corner and sprinted for about 350m as hard as I could and in that course of time I opened up probably 15 seconds.

From that point on I have never enjoyed anything more: coasting all the way down the hill, hitting it with a half-mile to go, and all the fans just jumping up and down.

T&FN: *What were you thinking?*

Falcon: I really came to the conclusion, "This is what athletics is all about," because at that point in time there was no money involved, there was no scholarship involved. This was just my last time doing it. This was just Joe trying to do something that he always wanted to do.

Today, I still even get goose bumps about it. I have a picture of me crossing the finish line and sometimes I'll be coming up stairs and I'll see that and I'll just shake my head and say, "Golly." Because I shouldn't have won that race but I did.

T&FN: *Is your life as a full-time athlete easy or hard?*

Falcon: I get up and just say my prayers every day, because how many people could have a job like I'm fortunate enough to have? To be able to work and make a living at something you love as much as running. I mean, I never get bored of getting up in the morning and then lifting weights, and then resting and running again in the afternoon.

And down the road in a year or two when my wife and I do have children, what a great position I'll be in. When I was growing up, my dad was in the military and he was gone from 7:00 in the morning to 6:00 or 7:00 at night.

If I can put myself in a position to support myself and my wife and my family the next couple of years, and be able to stay home and raise the kids hand-in-hand with my wife, then that really makes the running even more special. □

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